

# Faithful unto death

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 21 February 2018

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[ 0 : 00 ] Good, well, very warm welcome to our service this afternoon. My name is Paul Brennan, one of the ministers here at the Tron Church. You're probably thinking, it's a lot of navy you're wearing, Paul. And you'd be right. My son threw up me as I was leaving the house.

I had to quickly change my clothes, so I've got a complete navy outfit today. So, there we go. Good, well, we're in Revelation. So, we turn to Revelation chapter 2, and we'll be reading verses 8 to 11 in just a moment.

And you'll find that if you're using one of the church Bibles, that's page 1028. As we turn, as we begin, let's pray to our Heavenly Father, shall we? Let's pray. Almighty God, who, through your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, has overcome death and opened up unto us the gate of everlasting life, we humbly beseech you that, as by thy special grace preventing us, thou dost put into our minds good desires.

So, by your continual help, may we bring those same desires to good effect. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen. Well, Revelation chapter 2, and reading from verse 8, it's the letter to the church in Smyrna. So, chapter 2, verse 8.

[ 1 : 42 ] And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write this, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. Amen. This is God's words. The year is AD 154.

[ 2 : 52 ] The prisoner is a man named Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. The Roman proconsul who had imprisoned him urged his prisoner in this way, swear, and I will set you at liberty.

Reproach Christ. Well, what would Polycarp do? He was a man in his late 80s at this point, and he would have been probably in his late 20s when the revelation from John arrived in Smyrna.

Polycarp, in all likelihood, would have heard the words of Revelation chapter 2 read out in the church. Perhaps he even read it out himself. Words from the Lord Jesus that urged the church there in Smyrna to be faithful unto death.

And I'll give you the crown of life. With these words of the Lord Jesus, no doubt etched into his mind, Polycarp answered the Roman proconsul with these words.

Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my king and savior? With that refusal to approach Christ, Polycarp was executed.

[ 4 : 14 ] He was burnt. Having been faithful to the end and being certain of the promised crown of life from his Lord. Now, Polycarp was a real and living example, not only of the reality of Christian suffering, but also the fruit of this letter to the church in Smyrna.

He lived out these words almost 60 years after first receiving them. He obeyed the word of his savior. He was faithful unto death. So what was it that enabled Polycarp and countless others before and after to remain faithful unto death, to remain faithful in the face of fierce opposition and suffering?

Was he superhuman? Was he predisposed to bravery? It is tempting, isn't it, to put folk like Polycarp on a pedestal such that mere mortals like you and I can't possibly hope to emulate him.

Well, that sort of faithfulness is beyond me, you might think. But that is a wrong inference to draw. Some of the bravest Christians I know and have met are very ordinary looking indeed.

They're very ordinary people. Not the sort of folk that you'd naturally think would be brave and courageous. And it can be easy to forget, can't it, as folk who've grown up in unprecedented peace and stability for many centuries in a culture that is dominated and directed by Christian values, it can be easy to forget that suffering is normal for Christians and has been through the millennia.

[ 5 : 58 ] Jesus calls his church to take up its cross, doesn't it? Suffering comes sooner or later to those who identify with Christ, our Lord and Savior, who himself suffered to the point of death.

And he calls those who follow him to that same pattern. So what is it that enables ordinary Christians, people like you and me, to be faithful unto death?

Well, let's allow this letter to the church in Smyrna to speak to us, to teach us and train us to the end that we would be faithful unto death. So two points.

First, Jesus knows the suffering of his church, verse 9. Jesus knows. He knows the suffering his church endures.

He knows the nature of their suffering. And the very fact that Jesus knows brings comfort to those who suffer, doesn't it? He knows. He sees. He sees everything.

[ 7 : 00 ] But he sees not just what is visible and experienced by the church there in Smyrna. He sees more. And what he sees brings true perspective to the church there.

He sees their poverty, yes, but in reality, they're rich. He sees the slander, but he sees the real source behind the slander.

So three things he sees here. Three marks of the suffering there. First, tribulation. There in verse 9. I know your tribulation. Jesus sees their affliction.

And the word here refers to all sorts of trouble and hardships that the church there in Smyrna would have been suffering. Which would have been plentiful. It was a city hostile to Christians, particularly because of its strong allegiance to Rome.

It was the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of the goddess Roma. Probably 200 years before this was written. It then built a second temple in honor of the emperor Tiberius.

[ 8 : 06 ] Strong links to Rome. To the imperial cult. And that would have made life particularly difficult. for the church there in Smyrna. But not just that.

There was a huge Jewish population. And as we'll see in a moment, it was actively hostile to the Christian church in Smyrna. Jesus sees their tribulation.

But he also sees their poverty. Now their poverty is likely due to the general hostility they encountered in the city. The very fact they were Christians and known as such would have made participation in the various trade guilds that were the hub of economic life in the city very difficult indeed.

They would have been excluded from those. And one commentator makes the point that people living in Smyrna could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult.

So if you want to get on in life in Smyrna you had to go along with it. You had to go along with the whole worship of the Roman emperor. And so these Christians they find themselves cut off from the key networks in the city's economy consigned to crushing poverty barely able to make ends meet.

[ 9 : 24 ] That's the nature of that word poverty there. Barely able to make it. Their businesses if they had them would lose credibility as their Christian faith became more widely known.

And so these dear Christians in Smyrna they knew great material poverty. But the Lord Jesus sees that. He knows that but he knows more.

Notice the parenthesis there in verse 9. But you are rich. But you are rich. Jesus sees the greater reality and he tells them they may seem poor and they certainly are from a material point of view but in another sense they are very rich indeed.

Quite the contrast to the church in Laodicea. Just look across the page to chapter 3 verse 17 where we see these words about the church in Laodicea. For you say that is the church in Laodicea you say I am rich I've prospered and I need nothing not realizing that you are wretched pitiable poor blind and naked.

There is a wealth that is of no value at all and there is a wealth often hidden from the eyes of the world a wealth that can't be seen on your bank statement a wealth that really counts and the church in Smyrna had that.

[ 10 : 53 ] That is the church they had in which Laodicea lacked. Economic privation of the order known to the Smyrna and Christians is not something we in the West have experienced yet really is it?

To be poor as a direct result of being a Christian that thought is alien to us isn't it? But for how long will that be the case?

We can foresee certain jobs and positions certain careers may not be open to Christians for very much longer because of particular views they hold and refuse to compromise on.

And when those days come have these words etched into your minds yes we may be poor in the world's eyes but in Jesus' eyes we are rich.

But it's not just tribulations and poverty the church in Smyrna has also been slandered. Look what it says at the end of verse 9 the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.

[ 12 : 02 ] The source of the slander is from those who identify as Jews but Jesus shows their true colors. Regardless of their heritage they had become through their fierce opposition and slander of the church they had become a synagogue carrying out the bidding of the great enemy himself Satan.

And the exact nature of the slander we're not told. But certainly in the case of Polycarp which I mentioned at the beginning it was Jewish enemies who denounced Polycarp to the Roman authorities.

So the slander was coming from the Jewish quarter. And slander is a great weapon isn't it? In Satan's arsenal.

It intimidates it demeans it destroys reputation and it sticks. People love to believe slander don't they? Just think about all the accusations flying around in the media in recent months.

Now some of course are true and terrible. but many without any consideration for any evidence have been presumed guilty. A career has been ended. Slander.

[ 13 : 12 ] And Satan knows the effectiveness of slander to destroy a church as witness to discourage Christians. But know that Jesus sees the truth. He saw right through those so-called Jews.

He saw their true motivation. He saw their true leader. He saw it then and he sees it today. When you are slandered because of your faith, because of your unwillingness to deny Christ, know what and who really lies behind that attack.

And know too that Satan, although a powerful enemy, is a defeated enemy. That is one of the great realities of the book of Revelation isn't it? As we work our way through.

Satan's been defeated. Christ is victorious. I remember back in my student days, I was on the Christian Union Committee, the CU, and at the time, we had agreed to do an interview with the student's newspaper.

It was a foolish thing to accept. We did it anyway. And I was told there was going to be a wide-ranging interview about all sorts of things, about faith, about different groups in the university. And about one minute into the interview, I realized it had been a bit of a setup.

[ 14 : 30 ] I realized there was some sort of agenda behind it all. I was questioned quite vigorously on the Bible's teaching, on the role of women, how we voted, new committees, as a CU, all these sorts of things.

And when the article was published, it was front page, distributed all across the university, and the title on the front page was, CU in Hell. Now, it was quite a catchy title, but the article was a pretty one-sided affair.

And it was all about my interview. So it wasn't to do with any other societies at all. It was all about the CU and what I said. And it was very one-sided. They took everything I said out of context.

And my words were misrepresented. And all I was doing was explaining Orthodox Christianity. Now, it was slander but it was pretty ham-fisted.

Anyone reading it objectively could see that it was nonsense. But it was uncomfortable. It was unpleasant. It gave the CU a bad name. Hours of meeting with the student union followed.

[ 15 : 36 ] It was a big distraction. But I've got no doubt who was really behind that. Slander is one of the enemy's great weapons. Well, such was the nature of the suffering of the church in Smyrna.

Tribulation, poverty, slander. That is the pattern for all who will follow Christ and we should expect it. If not now, then perhaps someday.

For Polycarp, it was six decades down the line. But he absorbed the teaching of verse 9. And so should we. We know that Jesus knows and that he sees more than we can merely observe. He sees what's really going on. There is a reality behind the reality we can merely observe. But Jesus doesn't just observe the suffering of his church.

He equips him to face it. That's our second point. Jesus strengthens his church for the suffering to come. Verses 10 and 11. Now Jesus is very frank here, isn't he?

[16:47] There is no sugar coating. He doesn't gloss over things. No, Jesus is realistic and honest about what he calls his people to. He's realistic and honest about the costliness of following him.

Yes, his church has suffered already but he says do not fear what you are about to suffer. Two things are on the horizon for some of the Smyrna Christians.

First is prison. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

Who's really behind it? Well, again, Jesus reveals the reality. It's the devil who is behind these imprisonments. But even as that's the case, this is not beyond the scope of God's sovereignty. There is a purpose behind it, verse 10, so that you may be tested. When under trial the genuineness of faith is exposed, it's tested.

[17:57] The Apostle Peter in his first letter wrote this, in this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christ. It is in the heat of trial that our faith will be fully tested and will shine forth, not before then. I don't know about you, but I sometimes imagine particular scenarios in life, and I think I just wouldn't cope with that.

But the Lord doesn't equip us for theoretical situations, but actual ones. In those moments when trials and sufferings do come, that is when the testing comes.

And so we pray that God would strengthen us for those moments, that we would not fear, but rather be trusting him. Jesus reveals the real person behind what is to come.

It's the devil. He reveals the purpose, but he also reveals that it's not in perpetuity. Rather, it's a limited suffering. Note what he says there in the middle of verse 10.

[19:21] For 10 days you will have tribulation. Now whether that's 10 literal days or to be taken symbolically, whatever way you read that, it is a limited time.

Limited because either they'll be released or because they'll be killed. Death is the second thing that is on the horizon for some of those Christians there in Smyrna.

Look on to the end of verse 10. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. This is the second imperative given to the church, the second instruction given to the church there in Smyrna.

The first was do not fear and the second is be faithful unto death. And as with all the commands from the Lord there is a great promise attached be faithful and I will give you the crown of life.

The reward for enduring death is life, everlasting life, life with God in the new creation. The believers were not to look at the suffering to come so that they trembled with fear but rather they were to look through their suffering to come and beyond to the Lord who promised to deliver them.

[20:45] The one who conquers end of verse 11 will not be hurt by the second dare. That is to say though they may endure terrible suffering and even death in this world they will not be touched by the far more terrible everlasting judgment that will surely come on the day when God judges all the fact that guarantees that promise is that the Lord Jesus who makes this promise is the one in verse 8 who is the first and the last who died and came to life.

Jesus has overcome death. He rose again. He lives forever. And that very fact in addition to the words of life he promises here would and does bring great comfort to his suffering church.

Jesus not only knows the suffering of his church but he suffered with them. He faced tribulation poverty slander he faced death but death could not hold him.

And so the Lord Jesus he tenderly encourages his church in the face in the face of terrible trials do not fear what is to come be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus knows the suffering of his church but Jesus equips his church for what is to come. Two implications to close two observations first there's always more going on than we can see that's something we've bumped into again and again in this passage we see things going on from a human point of view there's poverty and slander there's imprisonment there's death but Jesus gives

us another perspective each time yes you're poor but in reality you're rich yes you're being slandered by these people but really it's Satan who's behind it and I've defeated him yes you'll be put in prison but really it's the devil who's done that yes you may die but Jesus will give you everlasting life isn't that something to get firmly screwed into our minds there's always more going on than we can see

[ 23 : 21 ] Jesus sees the big picture he's in control of it all so trust him second implication Jesus hasn't lost control if and when we suffer Jesus hasn't lost control because there's always more going on than we can see persecution does not mean that Jesus has lost control of the situation that is the very thing Jesus calls us to isn't it he says whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple suffering for the Christian is part of Christian life to suffer for Christ that is part and part of what he calls his people to who but the Lord Jesus who knows all and has a control of all he says to you he says to his church then and today fear not fear not be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life that is how ordinary people like you and me can face terrible trials and suffering polycarp had these things screwed into his minds so let's pray that the Lord would do so with us let's pray father you know how timid and frail and anxious and fearful we are but lord you know more than we can see and you have provided a way for your people to stand firm as we stand firm in the

Lord Jesus Christ so help us to look to him the one who has defeated death the one who died and came to life help us to listen to him to listen to his words and so would you help us please help us to not fear but to be faithful unto death and so claim the crown of everlasting life help us to that end for we ask it in Jesus name amen over that we phones are ■ ■■- Aaron becue aber believable