

Getting Our Attitude To Suffering Right

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[0 : 00] I do have the luxury of not wearing a mask for all of you. Everyone else has to wear a mask, so I can't complain. Before we come and look at Revelation chapter 2, let's pray together and ask for God's help.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would give us minds that are open to your word. We pray that you would steal any anxieties and worries, other things that are going on in our lives that might distract us.

We pray that you would be able to understand the legitimate things. Thank you, that you are a God who cares for us in all of our needs. We pray that we understand that now in your word and that you would really speak to us and build us up and encourage us this morning.

We are looking at the next letter in our series of Revelation. The letter says Smyrna, so if we could turn there in our Bibles, it's also coming up on the screen. It's verses 8 to 11. I'm going to read from verse 8.

Jesus is writing through John and he says, And to the angel of the church and Smyrna, write, 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.

[1 : 21] Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison that you may be tested, and for 10 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. Well, we're now almost two years since the start of a pandemic, at least the start of the pandemic in the UK, and analysts have been looking back and seeing what changes have happened over the past two years.

I don't know whether you noticed in the news it was saying that the rich have got richer. People like Jeff Bezos, the boss of Amazon, his wealth has grown exponentially, and he's benefited from the pandemic, while many other people have suffered.

Supermarkets like Tesco have also experienced growth, those kind of key areas. But one statistic that hasn't hit the news is that over the pandemic, persecution of Christians in the world has increased, and increased notably.

I was looking at the website Open Doors, and it was saying how the pandemic has become an excuse for governments to refuse aid to certain groups, maybe marginalised groups in society.

[2 : 40] It's become an excuse for authoritarian governments to step up surveillance and to step up their pressure of people to conform to certain weights, and militants all around the world have exploited the crisis.

Open Doors actually now estimate in 2021 that as levels of persecution have increased, now more than 340 million Christians, that's one in eight Christians, are experiencing persecution, high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

And just to bring that home a bit more, there's also been a 60% increase, and the number of Christians killed for their faith. So just last year, 4,761 men and women lost their lives for the sake of Christ.

And that's more than 9 out of 10 were in Africa, and if just to put those figures in perspective, that's about a quarter of the population of Lewis, losing their lives for trusting in Christ in the last year.

I'd encourage you to go on Open Doors and we can read the personal stories of people who have lost their jobs, who've been marginalised from the community, churches that have been closed, who have been destroyed, put on it, and increased pressure, believe a scattering going underground.

[4 : 00] We see out there, we see the horrors of persecution, but it's not just out there. In the UK, Christianity does enjoy special privileges of us being a post-Christian nation, but I do know, and you'll probably still know, people suffering for their faith.

Just in the past few years, I know a woman who's forced to eat food in her car because of the relentless abuse she had from colleagues in the workplace. And of a student who's sitting down to their first lecture was told that belief in God is completely ridiculous.

And of a girl who was forced to change her identity after she'd been able to Christian. This is in the UK and had to flee from her home. It isn't just out there, it's also in the UK, and that's even before we get to the range of experiences that I don't know of, but I've been probably experienced by people in this room and who those who are listening online with regards to suffering for our faith. What do we do when we hear these statistics around the world? How do we react when we hear the stories, when we read them on the news, when we hear them from a loved one who is suffering in this way?

How do we cope when it's us? These are all questions that force us to make us need to go back to the basics and force us to ask the question, what is our attitude towards suffering, particularly suffering for our faith, that's the focus, towards persecution?

[5 : 34] What should it be? And we've got the Church's letter to Smyrna to help us. You'll see that as we read the passage, they face particular challenges of persecution, high levels of persecution.

However, we'll see that Christ encourages them, calling them to trust Him, equipping them to understand and face persecution. So my hope is that as we go through the letter, we'll be able to do the same thing.

There's three ways I think this letter will help and apply to us because we'll all be in different positions with regards to what we've experienced or read. This letter will help us personally, it will help us to face suffering in the present for us and for those we love.

Hopefully this letter will also help us prayerfully to pray and support those we know who are suffering for their faith, to pray intelligibly, in an informed way, for suffering around the world. Hopefully then also it'll help us to prepare for a future where we might not enjoy the same kind of privileges in the UK, or even if some of you go around the world to seek to witness for your faith in other countries where we don't have the same freedoms.

[6 : 44] It'll help us to prepare for those times of suffering for our faith. Those are three ways in which hopefully this will apply. So can I just ask you, as we go through this, let's be praying that, and asking, how does this strengthen me in the present?

How does this help me to pray? How does this help me to prepare? What truths does it equip me with for the future? Jesus' letter to Smyrna is almost like a heaven's eye view on persecution. It's a pulling back of the veil and looking at different perspectives of what is happening. And we're going to take each of those perspectives in turn. I've got our points there.

And as we look at each heavenly perspective, we're going to see how Jesus encourages them with one aspect of his identity in that way. So first perspective then, we fight on the front line, trusting in Christ who has conquered.

Will you read verses 9 and 10 again with me? Jesus says, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you're rich. And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

[7 : 52] Do you not fear what you're about to suffer? Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for 10 days you'll have tribulation.

Now just for a bit of context, Smyrna is located on the western side of Turkey. I can't do that with my hands. And I'm no expert, but from what I've read in Smyrna, there was quite a big imperial cult there, so a pressure for people to join in with this emperor worship that was going on.

And for a while, so the Jewish community were always exempt from having to do this. They were respected in a special way by the Roman authorities. And for a while, the Christians were considered just a sect of the Jewish community.

But it seems that over time, the Jews had maybe turned against them, and maybe were motivated to inform on them. And so the situation you've got in Smyrna is that both the Jews and the Roman authorities are joining together to oppress the Christians.

But the first thing I want us to notice, even before we get to this physical oppression, is the way that Jesus describes it. Do you see the language that he uses? He says, I know your tribulation, but he's

not just speaking merely on a human level, although that's important.

[9 : 06] He says, he speaks of the Jews as a synagogue of Satan. And he says that the devil's about to throw some of you into prison. And the point that he's trying to make, the point for us is that persecution at its root is something that is spiritual, it's something that it does come from the evil one.

Now let me just be clear about what is not being said. Jesus isn't being anti-Semitic. You might remember how in the Gospels Peter was rebuked when he said to Jesus, when he didn't want Jesus to go to the cross, and Jesus said, get behind me Satan.

Jesus said that because the Bible speaks of all opposition to God, to Jesus as king, as of the devil, because whether we're willing or not, anyone who opposes God is aligning themselves, willingly or not, with the Satan's agenda, you might say.

So the Jews are singled out, not because of discrimination, but there's a tragic irony. These were the people who were supposed to be God's chosen people. They had the scriptures over the centuries.

They longed for God's king to come who would set them free, who would lead them to a greater knowledge of God. But now they're the ones who've rejected that king and who've rejected his church, and so they're being spoken of as not God's people, but as actually aligning themselves with Satan's agenda.

[10 : 35] Now that might sound severe, but what Jesus wants the church in Smyrna to understand, and for us to understand, really part of one of the main lessons here is that as Christians, we're on the front line of a cosmic struggle.

The Christian life isn't just fought on this plane of chatting to one another, of being in this world. There is a spiritual element to the Christian life, and revelation like the whole of the Bible is trying to remind us of that.

We're part of this bigger conflict between God and Satan. It's not an armorassle between equals, we know that. But for example, Paul reminds the Ephesians.

He says, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The Bible is telling us that when Christians trust in Jesus, they join in this cosmic struggle. Ever since Satan's rebellion against God, there's been this cosmic struggle.

[11 : 43] Satan's seeking to usurp God's authority, his kingship, seeking to destroy. And actually, when God hasn't just lashed that to unravel, has he?

In the person of Jesus Christ, we know Jesus has come in. He's usurped Satan's domain. In Luke, he's described as the strong man who comes to, described as the one who's come to bind the strong man, bind the devil, and to free captors from him.

As Christians, we join in that cosmic struggle, you might say, as we trust in Jesus. We align ourselves with God and against Satan.

Why am I saying all this? Well, depending on our background, we may not be inclined to talk about this Christian life as one of spiritual warfare. It's easy to think of our personal struggle sometimes as just something that happens in isolation.

That has nothing to do with the rest of what is happening, or the rest of God's dealings with this world. But when we choose to live for Christ, whether we realize it or not, we are taking a stand.

[12 : 53] We are planting a flag in the ground. We are engaging in spiritual warfare. Even simple, insignificant things we might not think of. When a parent reads the Bible with their child before bed, that's engaging in spiritual warfare.

That's saying, this is what side I'm on. This is the truth of God that I am proclaiming, rather than the lies of this world. When we chat to a friend about what we've learned at church, we're engaging in spiritual warfare.

When we choose not to respond in anger, when we resist temptation, when we choose not to sin, we're engaging in spiritual warfare in all those seemingly ordinary things.

All those things are sticking out of our head above the parapet, if you like. If you've read any of Paul's letters, like the letters to the Ephesians, you'll see that. In one breath, he talks about in chapters 4 and 5 about how we live as a Christian and things like.

You're not grumbling and disagreeing with one another and throwing off sin. Then in chapter 6, he straight away starts talking about spiritual warfare.

[14:07] That's because they are two sides of the same coin. They're one and the same thing. As you go through the letters in Revelation, we'll notice that. Part of the point in Smyrna, Pergamum, all of these churches is that the struggles that are happening aren't just engaged, they aren't just struggles that are in the 2D.

There are three dimensions. The struggles of the church are part of Christ's conquest, to take back conquest over the physical and the spiritual realm.

The church is part of a bigger conflict, that's the point. Now, I don't know whether that was an eye-opening truth for the Christians in Smyrna, but it's important for them and for us as well.

But the great encouragement that we have to remember, even as we acknowledge that we're part of this bigger conflict, is that Christ has conquered. Otherwise, this would just be a depressing letter, wouldn't it?

Christ says, in the very beginning, he says the words of the first and the last. When Jesus describes himself as that, he's speaking of his supremacy.

[15:17] He's speaking of himself as the Creator, the one who has been and who always will be. The language is actually taken straight from Isaiah chapter 44, stuck on the screen, where God says, thus says, the Lord the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts.

I am the first and I am the last. Besides me, there is no God. And in the context, Isaiah is urging the people not to be afraid of enemy invaders, not to start trusting in idols, but to trust in God instead. God is the first and the last. There's no human power that can rival him. There's no spiritual power that can rival him. So Jesus is reminding the church of this. But as they face persecution, Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is the most powerful, even if all the legions of the Roman army, all the pressure of the politics. Jesus is more powerful. He's the first and the last.

And that's the truth that should help the church to remain faithful, to not compromise, to not buckle, even when they're facing pressure, to not feel that everything's over.

[16:24] In light of Christ's victory rather, the Christian can see that spiritual warfare is, it's not a battle of wondering who's going to win. This is the mopping up campaign. You know, after, in World War II, after the allies had invaded and after a series of significant victories, eventually victory was inevitable. It was just pockets of resistance that still needed to be, they still needed to have battles against. But victory was inevitable. It was a mopping up campaign.

And that's the point here. Jesus has won. We're engaged in a mopping up campaign as we live this Christian life, as we fight on every level, seeking to live for him, seeking to not compromise.

And I think when we see suffering for Christian against this big backdrop, that gives us three encouragements. We see that it gives us great dignity, great incentive and great hope.

Great dignity because when I suffer for the Gospel, when you suffer for the Gospel, we suffer side by side with our Saviour. So the kid that gets teased for his faith, the teenager that's put on the spot and then marginalised by his friends, he's being mocked side by side with his Saviour.

There's great dignity there, isn't there? I think there's also great incentive because we're not just struggling for ourselves. So the person who's told at work, you can't speak of Christ, or you can't have Christianity shouldn't come into the workplace.

[17:55] And when they say no, when they refuse, they're not just doing that for their own agenda. But they're doing that to advance Christ's victory that he's already won on the cross. There's great incentive and dignity as we speak for Christ.

And also there's great hope. You think of countries where churches have been forced out of their buildings, where the past has been thrown in prison, and it looks maybe to everyone outside that the church is on the losing side, that this is just something that's eventually going to crumble and go away.

But victory has been won. Victory is assured. Christ has conquered. That's the truth we need to remember. It emits persecution as we pray for others and as we are equipped for the future.

So that's our first point. We fight on the front line. Second though, we experience suffering, trusting in Christ who is sovereign. The first heavenly perspective is reminding us we're in part of a cosmic conflict.

The second reminds us of the value of suffering as a Christian. I think we see that just at the start of verse 9, don't we? Jesus says, I know your tribulation and your poverty.

[19 : 10] It seems that for the church in Smyrna, being a Christian had a financial cost. So another thing that I read was there's quite a few powerful trade guilds. And if you decided that actually you didn't want to take part of those sacrifices anymore, you might be excluded from these guilds, not be able to trade in the marketplace, could lead to abject poverty and rejection from the community.

Think of it maybe in modern terms of the person who at their workplace doesn't want to support a particular agenda or celebrate a certain lifestyle and is so vilified and called bigoted, maybe even loses their job.

It's a similar thing really. Nothing has changed in many ways. But Jesus says to them, I know your tribulation and your poverty. Don't you love that? The king of creation is also the one who walks among the lampstands.

He knows his people intimately. He knows their struggles intimately. And he cares. It reminds me how in acts when Saul, before he becomes a Christian, is going around persecuting and throwing people into prison and Jesus appears to him on that road to Damascus, doesn't he?

What are Jesus's words? He says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Jesus takes the struggles, the suffering of his church in his name personally.

[20 : 35] Jesus also wants the Christians to surrender though, to not just know that he cares and he sees, but to see the true reality to their suffering. They may be facing poverty for trusting in him, but he says, notice it, he says, but you're rich.

Spiritually, looking from heaven's perspective as it were, we draw back the veil. And from a heavenly perspective, the church is rich. They're spiritual billionaires. When we trust in Jesus, we sign a multi-million dollar contract, if you like, where Jesus takes that bottomless debt of our sin against God and he pays that in full on the cross.

And in return, he transfers all the riches of his grace into our bank account. That's why he can talk about it as rich. We're rich because we're made righteous and morally perfect in God's sight.

We're rich because we're adopted, we're heirs with Christ in his kingdom, into the new creation. We have that inheritance of a perfect world with Christ.

We're rich. We're also rich as we're made like Christ. And we see this a bit in verse 10. If you notice, I haven't been scrolling past these, have I? There we go.

[21 : 51] He says, do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested. Let me just be clear about one thing. The cause of persecution, as we've already established, is the devil.

But one truth that we learn here and elsewhere in the Bible, the Bible insists that while God isn't the cause, God is still totally sovereign. He's still in charge, even in the midst of suffering, even in the midst of persecution.

It's not an easy truth to understand, but it's something that the Bible insists for our encouragement. And that's that he even uses these things to strengthen his people.

And that's what it means by that word testing, that you may be tested. The language isn't of a pass or fail test. Rather a test which proves something is genuine. Think of those cowboy films where, I don't know, the guy ties up his horse and he flicks the little boy a coin and he bites it.

Oops, he bites it to check if it's real gold. It's a check of it's genuine. Well, God uses trials to show if we're genuine, to show that real Christian faith coming through.

[23 : 04] It's like we read in 1 Peter in the last reading, 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 is tested by fire, will be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And that doesn't mean persecution is pleasant. Persecution is horrible. No one wishes it. It fills us with bewilderment and anger and agony and it should.

Our natural response is probably not to see the good that's happening in the moment. In many ways that's okay. We're human. We're not able to think and consider everything.

Part of the reason we're thinking about this now is to help us in the future when stuff feels overwhelming. But actually, often in reflection, Christians can look back and even friends can look at someone who's suffering at the time and see the way that God is refining their faith.

See the way that actually it's causing them to have a deeper and deeper knowledge of God and hold of him, a richness that only comes out and blossoms in that time of trial.

[24 : 21] Let me just give you an example that I read on the Open Doors website about a Chinese pastor called Wang Ming Dao. So Wang Ming Dao was finally released from prison in 1980 and he'd at that point spent 23 years behind bars.

He was 80 at that point for a frail, blind and all but deaf. Amazingly, he caused these years his honeymoon with Jesus. And let me just read what the director of Open Doors wrote about his interview with him.

He says at first he was devastated to be in the cell, wishing to write, to publish, preach and even make records with his fine singing voice. But all this was taken from him and he said, I had to learn to love Christ.

He explained it this way, persecution is not great in itself, but it's what it does that brings a benefit. And its benefit is to strip away life's distractions so that it's just you and Christ and nothing else.

The nurturing of that relationship then becomes the priority. That's why a cell works so well.

[25 : 33] And most of us will probably never ever go to prison for our faith. It might happen to some of us if we do go overseas and seek to witness for Christ there. But we need to be ready for those times, whether in helping others or praying for others or being prepared for ourselves.

We still need to grapple with the truth that God can be sovereign and in control even in the midst of persecution. He even uses it to display, to ripen the riches of his grace in us, to make the Christian blossom in there as they display the glory of Christ and its their suffering.

Jesus gives this reminder of his sovereignty to encourage the church at that time. I love that he doesn't stop there though, we see in verse 10 he says that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

10 days, and that should probably not be taken metaphorically, more the point is that there is an end to tribulation. When there's hardship, when a Christian face is suffering for their faith, that's not going to just keep going on.

Jesus will one day return, he will put a stop to evil, he will usher in a new creation. One of my favorite things about the book of Revelation is it's so honest about what the Christian life is like.

[26 : 54] But it still determined, it still unashamedly reminds us that there is an end, Christ has conquered, Christ will return, he will usher in that new creation, he will make all things new.

Satan's overthrow is inevitable. The Lamb has been slain, he is on the throne, he is the king. And that brings us really to our final point, we face death but we trust in Christ who died and came to life, that Lamb who has been slain, who is on the throne.

There's a very real shadow of death hanging over Smyrna but there is this life, this light of life that Jesus is seeking to shine on it. He says be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

He who is in here let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. Unless Christ returns we will all die one day.

You might say that's the first death, the second death though comes at judgment, that judgment of hell that does face everyone who does reject Christ, who doesn't have faith in Christ.

[28 : 02] But the encouragement for Smyrna is that while staying faithful might result in death, in that physical first death they will not be hurt by the second death. Rather they'll have that crown of life, their opponents may throw them in prison, they may torture them, they may kill them.

But that's the worst they can do, they will not be hurt by the second death. The irony is almost that for the faithful death is just simply the door that opens the way to that life, to the victor's crown of life with Christ.

It's a crown that symbolizes a victory with him, rule over his kingdom, conquering with Christ. Never again to feel that, the pain of death.

In the case we're not sure that Jesus delivers that, he reminds us that he is the one who died and came to life, even just back in verse 8. He says the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I just love that in all these letters Jesus says about himself and his identity, the very thing that the church needs to hear.

He's the one who died and came to life. If we're worried, if we're worried that Jesus can't deliver on that promise of life he's made, he says just look at my resurrection. There's the proof.

[29 : 21] Just as he died and came to life, so all in Christ who died for him will also be raised with him. Most of us won't be called to a literal death, we know that.

But we will still face opposition of Christians, we will still be on the front line trusting in Jesus. I think one thing that's helpful, because when we look at this verse we might see the faithful unto death. We think well that's probably never going to be me and probably never going to die for my faith. But I think what's helpful, the reminder to Corinthians where Paul says he speaks to himself as being given over to death daily for the sake of the gospel.

We might not have to give up our lives for Christ. The life of living for Jesus should still be dying to self. An unrelentened pursuit of Jesus should be denying self, taking up our cross and following him.

So even the question might be maybe more helpful for us than will we die for Jesus, which might sound grand and think of someone who's working North Korea.

[30 : 31] The more challenging question for us maybe is will we live for him? Will we be faithful in life? And just as we close, there's a great verse in Revelation 12, I think that illustrates this faithfulness.

John writes, I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ have come. And the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

And they, the faithful saints that is, have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they love not their lives, even unto death.

So brothers and sisters, will that be said of us? In all that we faiths, will it be said that he or she or they, they loved not their lives, even unto death?

Will it be said of our lives in terms of our priorities? What we choose to do, what we choose not to do, what we make the focus of our life? What we put on our horizon and aim for?

[31 : 38] Will it be said of our perspectives, how we view this world, have we speak of life? That we love not our lives, even unto death? Jesus is the first and the last and the living one.

He is conquered. So let that be our encouragement, our reminder to be faithful in life and in death. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you that Christ has risen. Thank you for that wonderful encouragement that is surely as Christ has been raised. We will be raised with him if we are trusting in him. Lord, we pray that you would help us to be faithful in all things.

Lord, we don't know what we are going to face in the future. I don't know what people are facing right now. Lord, we pray that they would know the encouragement and the comfort of the sovereign, all-powerful and risen Christ with them at this time.

May that be what helps us to keep going, to keep living for you, to keep pushing forward, being faithful. In death and in life. We pray and ask for your help in that by your spirit. In Jesus' name, amen.

[32 : 54] We are going to close with our final Psalm, Psalm 46, verse 1-6. Let's stand and sing as the music begins.

We will not fear fear. No man can scar in jealousy.

No water, no man can rule. We will not fear. No man can sweat as we take out the shore.

Our river flows to spring divine, the spring the over-gone, the holy place in which the Lord rules.

The sky that is the home. Our days when there is no remace, the spirit will not heal. Our God will not let me fall down.

[35 : 17] To be an ever-shield.

The nations are in this array, the kingdoms choose the fear.

God speaks and God raise mighty voice, the whole earth bless with fear.

The final word is to be closed.

Amen.