

Never Afraid!

by Jim Cymbala

Jim Cymbala's sermon 'Never Afraid!' encourages believers to find strength and richness in faith amidst persecution and suffering.

Duration: 31:45

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Revelation 2:8

Topics: "Fear"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher addresses the issue of American Christianity and its focus on material wealth and prosperity. He emphasizes that our net worth and possessions are temporary and can be taken away in an instant. The preacher urges the audience to consider their true riches towards God and the importance of being faithful to Jesus, even in the face of death. He highlights the sovereignty and power of God, stating that even Satan's attacks can be turned around for good. The sermon is based on the book of Revelation, specifically chapter 2, and encourages listeners to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Transcript

We're going to open God's Word now for a little season. This is one of the hardest messages you can preach. Not because it's not clear what the passage says, but this is so removed from what most of us are used to.

This clashes with a lot of stuff that we've been taught growing up. Christianity was invaded probably in the 60s by a certain emphasis about faith and prosperity and what victory means, that I've just struggled and prayed and said, God, how can I preach this in a way that will connect with you, be meaningful to you and me? But it's a huge jump to try to say, God, what are you saying to me? For this letter ends with he that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. I'm doing a series from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

And the part we're in now at the very beginning is chapter 2, after John, who also wrote the Gospel of John, and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, he was one of the disciples. He's an apostle. He is on an island called Patmos because he's being punished, exiled, because he's a Christian.

You got to go back now in the Roman Empire, the main religion, there were lots of religions that were permitted, but the main religion was worship of the emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus, who was the

emperor when Jesus was born. He was the first one to be deified and to be worshiped. Then it became required.

That was a test of loyalty to the empire. You're a citizen. You have to bow to the idol of the emperor.

This, of course, got Christians in trouble. Judaism was a permitted religion. Christianity was, for a little while, when it was considered, wrongly, a sect, a break-off from Judaism.

But once people understood what Christians were worshiping and that they wouldn't bow to anyone else, the persecution and the heat was turned up. Jesus, in this book of Revelation, chapters two and three, writes seven letters to seven churches. The last two weeks, we looked at the first letter to a church in Ephesus that we know a little bit about because the apostle Paul founded that church.

And in the book of Acts, we can read what went on in Ephesus. The rest of these churches, we don't know who founded them, how they were founded, and much about them. The second church, Smyrna, is, with one other church, the only two out of the seven that has no criticisms made of it by Jesus.

We remember last week, we learned about Ephesus. Had a lot of good things happening, but they had lost their first love. This church is one of the few that has no rebuke, nothing negative said about it.

Smyrna, the city, was about 35, 40 miles north of Ephesus. And it vied with Ephesus as the grandest city in what they called in the Bible then, Asia, which we now call Turkey. It had a huge port.

It was prosperous. But because it had been destroyed in about 500 BC, before Christ was born, and then rebuilt, it was built with a plan, one of the few cities back then that was built with kind of, we would call it urban planning. It had an amphitheater that seated 20,000 people.

He had a medical school. Who knows what they were teaching back then in medical school. It was known as one of the most beautiful cities in the Roman Empire.

It had a large Jewish population. And in that city, the worship of Caesar, because they were so friendly with Rome, really was strong. That was the test of being a good citizen.

Do you honor Caesar as God? We don't care what else you do, but you honor Caesar as God. Christians, of course, would not do that. This is what made for all the trouble.

See, that sounds so strange to us. But if you lived in Pakistan right now, if you lived in Saudi Arabia, or if you somehow in North Korea or mainland China, to different varying degrees, you would understand Christianity in a totally different way than you now know it. Jesus writes, he's walking among the seven golden lampstands, which are churches.

He's writing to the angel or the messenger of the church. We covered that. I don't want to belabor it.

So here's the letter to the church in Smyrna. Let's look at it. Chapter two, verse eight.

To the angel or the messenger or the pastor, the bishop of the church in Smyrna. Right. These are the words of him who is the first and the last.

That means before anything else was, Jesus was. He will have the last word. He is sovereign.

He is in control. They needed to know that because we're going to read some difficult things now. And what we'll do is we'll just read and review the letter and what was going on.

And then we'll try to gather maybe two things to help us today. These are the words of him who is the first and the last, or the alpha and the omega also is used sometimes, who died and came to life again. Jesus died on the cross, was buried in a tomb, but he came to life again.

They needed to be reminded of that as we're going to be learning. I know, and all the letters he writes, he starts with I know. In other words, I know everything.

You don't think anyone else understands, but I know. Whether it's good or bad, I know. I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich.

I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews, God's chosen people, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. So let's just look at that. I know your afflictions.

That word means pressure to the point of breaking, not light, it's a heavy word. Jesus is saying, I know what's going on and that you are being afflicted, troubled, persecuted to the point of breaking down, I know that. I also know your poverty.

Here was the church that has no negative things said about it, and they were poor as church mice. There's two words in the Greek for poor. There's poor, having nothing superfluous, just having what you need, and that's all.

And then there's another word, having nothing at all. That's the word that Jesus uses. It seems as if the persecution they went through, the assaults on their property, had taken everything from them.

First, it might have meant they just lost their jobs. Maybe it meant they lost their social contacts, but it went stronger now. Things were stirred up and they would attack the Christians and they would steal all their goods from them, plunder them.

Hebrews chapter 10 mentions about that, that Christians would sometimes experience losing everything just because they were Christians. And to us, that's like, what are you talking about? That's another world. What are you talking about? No, if you're a Christian, you drive a bigger car because you just speak the word of faith and you get the Mercedes instead of that old Chevy.

This is totally foreign, of course, to the New Testament. And anyone who talks like that is just wasting your time. You shouldn't listen to anyone who teaches those things because here's a great church and they not only had nothing superfluous, they were dead broke and yet they were rich.

See, they were rich spiritually. You can be poor in this world's goods, but Jesus says, no, you're not poor, you're rich. And you can have a lot of money and be dead broke with God.

You could be earning six figures and be in the nicest house in Long Island or whatever, and yet God looks at you and says, you know, you're just busted. Let's go back to the verses because we just want to get the picture of this church. I know those slander, the lies that are told about you who say they are Jews, this is and are not, but our synagogue is Satan.

And this is the situation there was this Jewish community which persecuted the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts many times in Smyrna. They would, to take the heat off of them, assault the Christians, tell

the Roman authorities about the Christians. You see those people? They won't bow to Caesar.

They won't bow. What? They won't bow. Yeah, check them out.

They won't bow. They would stir up trouble for the Christians and they were calling themselves, we're God's chosen people, the Jews. And now Jesus says, they are not Jews.

That synagogue does not belong to God. It belongs to Satan. And they were in this city faced with opposition, not only from the authorities, the Roman authorities, but now the Jewish community was stirring up trouble for them and causing further persecution.

History tells us that 50 years after this letter was written, a very famous Christian, one of the church fathers, as they're called in church history, called Polycarp, P-O-L-Y-C-A-R-P. He was martyred in Smyrna and it was all provoked by the Jewish community who, even though it was the Sabbath, gathered the wood so that he could be burnt to death. And then when his ashes wanted to be kept by the Christians, would not permit it.

So there was real hostility against them at that moment. Jesus said, I know what you're going through and I know your poverty, but don't worry, you're rich. And I know the persecution, the slander, the lies that are told about you by those in the synagogue who think they belong to God, but they really belong to Satan.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Do not be afraid about what you're about to suffer. You see, that just takes our breath away.

No, pray that you'll get out. No, the word is in the present tense. It means this, stop being afraid of what you're about to suffer.

See, to us, that causes silence because you and I don't even know that kind of Christianity. We don't hear any preacher say that. And don't say it's a misguided apostle Paul, as some of the faith teachers say, that, oh, when Paul says certain things, he didn't have the revelation that we have, which, of course, is close to sacrilege.

But this is Jesus speaking. Stop being afraid about anything and about what you're about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days.

That 10 days is probably not literal, but in a book that has a lot of symbolic numbers, it means a time that is temporary and will have an end. Some commentators say, no, it actually means some outburst that lasted 10 days of 24 hours each. Other commentators say, no, this book has all kinds of numbers that are symbolic.

And 10 is giving an indication, listen, you're gonna get through it. Don't be afraid because it's only gonna last 10 days. It's gonna have an end.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

I told you this was hard. You see how quiet it is? Because what I'm speaking is from the Bible, but to us, it's like Greek. What are you talking about? But if I could take you some places, even that I've been in the world, I saw a man in Bangladesh who was shot in the face and the bullet ricocheted all around and he

didn't die, but his face was a mess because he led some woman to Christ, a Muslim woman to Christ in a village in Bangladesh.

And after he healed, he went right back. See, to us, that's like, what are we afraid of? We're afraid of someone looking at us and saying, what, I don't wanna hear about you, Jesus. Oh, I'm sorry.

Oh, I'm sorry. To us, it's a bad day. Or our relatives say, hey, what do you become, holy rollers? Why on New Year's Eve do you have to be in church? To us, that's like, oh, I'm going through persecution.

My titi Chino will not talk to me anymore. Am I right? Come on, let's be real. So this is why I've been praying.

Now, what can we learn from this? Because this is another world. We're such, excuse the expression, we're such babies. We're so soft.

We're so American. We're an American Christianity. We're marketing Jesus like, serve Jesus, you'll drive a bigger car and have a bigger house.

Come on, Vanna White, come out and show what you win now if you serve Jesus. Am I right or wrong? This language, what are you talking about? Who would wanna be a Christian if you read that? So let's see what we can gather here as lessons for us. Number one, there is this question of net worth.

What do you really have? In terms of value, what do you own? This letter tells us that what you own physically, what you have in the bank, what car you drive in a millisecond, it's gone. And now you're just left with what riches you have toward God. That's all.

When I travel around the country and I meet pastors at pastors conferences and I'm invited to speak, a lot of the conversations go like this. They'll go, you know, pastor, you gotta meet some of the people in my church. I got some bank presidents.

I got an athlete. Yeah, he just signed a contract. 13 million a year goes to my church.

You know what I'm saying? We have some of the wealthy, most influential people in the community. That is so typical. And yet Jesus said, I know you're broke, but I commend you because you have the real riches.

Oh, a pastor just complained to me fairly well known. Years ago, he took over a church and he found out all the deacons he inherited. They hardly came to church.

They hardly read their Bible. He wasn't sure some of them were even Christians. Why were they chosen as deacons? Because they're big time money people.

And that's the way most people think today. What church? What's big? Is it big? Big building? People with money, influential. Woo, that church is happening.

And Jesus now just blows that out of the water in a second and says, no, here's one of the greatest churches. I have no word negative about it. And they're dead broke.

Never glorify wealth because you can be wealthy and totally lost. You can be wealthy and totally be meaner than a hornet, right? At the same time, don't glorify poverty because you can be poor and meaner

than a hornet. Come on, give me amen here.

Come on. A lot of us are like, yeah, they're rich. And the poor can be nasty too.

But when you have, what were their riches? What were their riches? They had faith. They were consecrated. They were all out for Jesus.

They were ready to go down for Christ. He said, oh, you're really rich. May I just interject this here? This is so hard for me to say, but it has to be said.

Do you notice how cavalierly they just assume everyone would understand that to be a Christian meant you'll die for him. That's all. You just die for him.

Why? He died for you. Why wouldn't you die for him? See, that's totally gone. Am I correct? Nobody thinks that way here today.

But I was in Hong Kong ministering to six, seven hundred mainland Chinese pastors three, four years ago, half of whom had been in prison for Christ. I felt unworthy, as I told you, to open my mouth and even read a passage. And I heard them singing a song in Mandarin and my translator was sitting next to me on the side.

I can see myself and I'm watching them all sing and they're lifting their hands and they're closing their eyes and they're weeping. And it was like Jesus was maybe five feet above them and they're rocking back and forth and singing to him. And the melody hit me like this song, give it all to Jesus, bring it all to Jesus.

And I said to him, hey, brother, he was from Northern California. Great translator, very brilliant man, Chinese. He said, I said, what's that song? What are they singing? He went, wait.

Yeah, that song, pastor says, Jesus, we worship you. And because you died for us, we will now die for you. For you suffered for us.

How could we not suffer for you? Would that be right? You suffered for us, but now we're not gonna suffer for you. I wonder how many churches in America would be singing that on a Sunday morning. No, Christianity to us is protect me from anything uncomfortable so I can live the American dream.

Am I wrong or right? Here they had their property confiscated and we're like, if God is really with you, you'll get the promotion. And they were like, I really served Jesus, I got the demotion. I lost my job.

Now we're all for thanking God for his blessings. But do you see the time warp that's going on here? They just took it cavalierly that back in those days to serve Jesus meant not what church you go to. I go to the tab when I can.

It was then I followed Jesus. And if I have to, if they make me bow to Caesar, I won't do it. And if it costs me my job or my life, so be it, he died for me.

Why wouldn't I wanna die for him? No wonder the church was pure back then. Who in the world would join the Christian church if it knew it cost you your life? That's a good question. What does pastor Simba really have as a net spiritual worth? How about you? What consecration, what faith, what ability to suffer for Christ? Your money, your property, gone.

And I have learned this, the best thing you can leave your children is not money. It's an example of loving Jesus. That's the real value you can give them.

I know so many people, relatives and near relatives, good friends. They've had all the money and you know what they left their kids? An apartment and a car and something in their will. And guess what? Their children are imploding, self-destructing.

So what good is all the money? They'll spend it, some of them on foolish things. But I know other people who never had much, but they left something for their children. Oh, more precious than silver or gold.

Can we put our hands together and say amen? And secondly, do you see here, amid this picture of persecution, because this is the persecuted church, do you see this mystery? Jesus is saying, Satan, the accuser, that's where it means adversary accuser, is gonna cast some of you into prison for 10 days. Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life. Or the victor's crown.

Whoever is victorious, I will give them the crown of life. That was the wreath, not the royal crown. That word is not used, the diadem word.

This is the crown that you want, so that if you ran the hundred yard dash and you ran and you won, they would put here's the winner and they would give that little wreath that you and I, some of us are familiar with. Notice this, Satan is gonna do it and God permits it. That blows most of our theology out of the water.

Although the Bible says resist the devil and he'll flee for you, God can even use the devil's attack to bring glory to his name. What Satan meant for evil, praise God, God works it around for good. Can we say amen to that? Satan is using it as a test, a word there that's used to tempt us to deny.

Satan was using it to try to get the people to give up their faith. That's what Satan was at. And God said, I'll permit it because I'm gonna get glory out of it and you're gonna be made stronger and one day, 2,000 years from now, a minister in Brooklyn's gonna be talking about you and it'll encourage people in their faith.

So what Satan meant for evil, Satan's gonna do it and I'm permitting him to do it. Be faithful even to the point of death. This is language far from us but it's such an interesting thought is that God is so sovereign and great, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

He is so powerful that even Satan's attacks, he can turn around and work it for good. Help us and bring glory to his name. The main thing we see here is that God's working out something a lot deeper than you and I living a comfortable life.

And that's for us that are born in America or come from the Western world and come here from the Caribbean or in Italy, basically it's the same. Brazil, I would say it's the same. Australia, it's the same.

Is the goal is have a great life, have everything you want materially and then that's it. And if it happens to you, be thanking God because he gave it to you and we should thank God. But that's not what, you think God's main purpose is for you and I to live a good life on earth? Do you think that's what he's thinking about? That's the last thing he's thinking about.

He's thinking about drawing people to Christ. He's talking about preserving a people who love him more than anything. He's got another whole agenda and most of us are just a quarter of an inch deep in our

theology.

So blessings come, it looks good, praise God, praise God. Problems come, nah, where's God when you want them? So mad at God. This letter tells us there's a deeper theology than American materialism.

You know this girl that I met in California and that we're supporting now, you're supporting, who's embedded now in the Middle East preaching for Christ. Amarin is her name. I told my wife the other day, I don't know any famous politicians for the most part.

I never met any president. I've been invited to meet a couple. I've turned down that opportunity.

People that the world calls great, they're not great. Amarin's great. Who God calls great is great.

And some people could be a billionaire or a famous politician. They can be vulgar, rude, horrible, but the world flocks to them. Movie stars, athletes.

Yeah, but did you hear what that athlete did? He beat his girlfriend half to death. Well, you know, no one's perfect. There are some great people.

When you meet one, cling to them, encourage them, love them. Because this church in Smyrna, we wouldn't be running to attend, not in that city. Like I was saying, how many would be tour bus leaving in two hours for Smyrna? Everybody wants to go to Smyrna.

It's only a five hour drive. Come and be persecuted and possibly killed for Jesus Christ. All aboard, everyone on there now.

Lastly, whoever is victorious, they will not be hurt at all by the second death. As a minister of the gospel, I gotta tell you about that in closing. Because whoever's victorious will never experience anything of the second death.

Notice, to the victorious. Who are the victorious? Perfect people? Nope, there's no perfect people. The victorious are the ones who keep on hanging on to Jesus no matter what.

They keep trusting, they're punched, they're knocked down. Yeah, they're actually knocked down, but they get up again and say, no, I'm still gonna serve him. Then they're doing good and then the bottom falls out and then they get up again and say, you know what, I'm still gonna serve Jesus.

And they're persecuted and they're laughed at and they still just hanging, sometimes by a thread, but they keep hanging on to Jesus. To the victorious, you'll never be hurt, Jesus said by the second death. Well, what's the first death? First death is when you die.

That we're all gonna experience unless Christ comes. That's the separation of your spirit from your body, your soul from your body. That's the death, that's death.

It's appointed unto everyone to die once and then the judgment. And when you're a Christian and you've hung on to Jesus and you're victorious, notice there's a battle going on here. Jesus is encouraging them, don't give up, don't quit.

Don't deny me. Hang on because to the victorious, you won't be hurt by the second death. I'll not only give you the crown of life, you won't know the second death.

Well, if the first death is separation of my soul from my body, what's the second death? That's the separation of your soul from God for all eternity. The same Jesus who died on the cross and said, Father, forgive them. He's now telling us as an encouragement, keep hanging on to me and you will not be hurt by the second death.

Later on in this book, it discusses a lake of fire, which is the second death. Away, punishment, rejected Christ, wouldn't trust God, wanted your own way. You're gonna have a little church sometimes on the side, but basically Christ was not the center.

He wasn't the numero uno in su vida, in your life. And Jesus said, no, but to anyone who's victorious, the second death will not hurt you because when you belong to me, my blood has washed away all your sins. And when you die, you only die once.

Listen to what someone once said. When you're born twice, you only die once. When you're born once, you die twice.

Review that. When you're born just once, just biological birth, you could die twice. You can die biologically, and now you could die eternally, the second death.

The indication seems to be in scripture that the second death away from God speaks of two things, total darkness and total aloneness. Total darkness, no light because God is the light, and total aloneness, not for a year or for a hundred years or a thousand years. That's why what's happening right now is the most important thing in New York City because eternal destinies can be settled here.

If you're born once, you can die twice. But if you're born twice, how are you born twice? You're born biologically, and then you're born again. How many are born again? You love Jesus.

Lift your hand up high. We're born twice. Then we only die once.

We only die once. We might die physically, but we'll never taste the second death. We'll never know darkness.

Where we're going, it's gonna be light. Come on, can we say amen to that? Where we're going, we're gonna have fellowship with other people. We're not gonna be alone.

We're gonna be with the Lord and with his people. Could you close your eyes with me? God, help me to close this the way I should. Please, God.

No one moving. To the victors. Yeah, the choir sings the victor's crown.

Jesus is the great victor. But now in Revelation, it keeps saying to those that are victorious, I will give this, I will give that. They will never taste anything of the second death.

If you're serving the Lord, but your own kind of persecution and pressure has come. I don't wanna even mention it in the same sentence with what Smyrna was going through. But this is the word of God.

I can't jump over it because it doesn't sound comfortable to a lot of us. Keep fighting. Don't give up.

Keep fighting. Keep believing. Keep trusting.

Cling to Jesus. If you've been knocked down, get up. Get up in the name of Christ, get up.

Oh, but pastor, I've fallen 100 times. Then get up 101st, get up. The perseverance of the victors is made up of 10,000 new beginnings.

You can have a new beginning today. But if you say pastor, I don't know about what Smyrna went through, but in my own life, the attacks of the devil, to stop believing, to give up, to quit, to give into the flesh, to give into the world, to give into the devil, it's a battle going on. And I need God to strengthen me.

All these hundreds of choir members, they will pray for you right now. Just stand where you're sitting. Just stand up if you want them to pray for you.

And just say, pray for me because I wanna be victorious. I don't wanna fight for a little while and then get knocked down and knocked out. I wanna keep fighting and I need strength.

Just stand up where you're sitting. Listen, to those that are victorious, you'll never know anything about the second death. You won't know darkness, you'll know light.

You won't know about being alone for billions of years. You'll be with the saints, the Christians in joyful celebration. This is, as they say in Spanish, muy serio.

This is the most serious thing. Everything else is child's play. Everything else is get an eraser, I made a mistake.

But this one, you cannot make a mistake on. You gotta be with Jesus. You gotta be with Jesus.

Thank you for your word, Jesus. You are the first and the last, the beginning and the end. You are the one who died, but you've risen from the dead and you're alive now forevermore.

I thank you that you know everything we go through and that you're full of mercy. Help us to be rich in you. We thank you for material blessings, but we wanna be rich with you today, Lord.

Give us strength, tenacity, endurance, patience, faithfulness to keep on keeping on. Keep on trusting no matter what. If they could in Smyrna, we can do it in Brooklyn.

We can do it in Brooklyn. We can do it today. We love you.

Look forward to when we can be with you forever. We ask all of this in Jesus' name. And everyone said.

Everybody stand. Give about five people a hug. Say I love you with the love of the Lord.

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