

(7 Churches) Smyrna, Faithful in Sufferings?

by Mark Greening

The sermon explores the faithfulness of the church in Smyrna amidst persecution, highlighting Jesus' promises and presence in their suffering.

Duration: 35:11

Scripture: Revelation 2:8

Topics: "Faithfulness in Suffering", "The Richness of Faith"

Description

Mark Greening emphasizes the significance of the last words of Jesus and their relevance to the church today, particularly focusing on the church of Smyrna, which faced persecution and poverty yet remained faithful. He highlights that true richness comes from faith in Christ rather than material wealth, and encourages believers to be steadfast in their faith despite trials, as Jesus walks among His churches and knows their struggles. Greening reminds the congregation that Jesus offers a crown of life to those who endure suffering for His name, urging them to reflect on their love for Christ and their commitment to the church.

Transcript

Famous last words. Last words spoken by a loved one before their death are often a window into their soul. Michelangelo, the famous painter and sculptor, on his dying bed said these words, I die in the faith of Jesus Christ and in the firm hope of a better life.

Dwight L. Moody, the famous preacher, evangelist, and founder of Moody Bible Institute, said as he lay on his deathbed, he said, can this be death? Why is it better than living? Earth is receding, heaven is opening, this is my coronation day. Jesus spoke last words to us as well, because last words are often held dear by those of us who hear them, and he spoke last words. We just read some of them to his disciples just before Passover, which is celebrated as communion now.

Although he said some words to John regarding taking care of Mary, those were really his last words. But prior to that, the last words he spoke were about his death, his resurrection, talking about his blood and body being broken. But there's recorded for us another set of last words from Jesus, not to his disciples, but to us as the church in the book of Revelation.

These words should be of utmost importance to us because they come with a promise. We read in Revelation 1 a few months ago when I talked about the church of Ephesus, we read these words, blessed

is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written, because the time is near. You'll remember that in Revelation 1, John had been exiled by Domitian to the isle of Patmos for refusing to bow down and worship Domitian as Lord.

While he was there on the Lord's day, we read, that's on Sunday, the day that Jesus rose, he had a vision, and in that vision he saw seven golden lampstands and seven stars. The golden lampstands referred to and represented seven churches in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey, and he saw seven stars which represented seven messengers to the church. Today we would call those pastors, so the people who the Lord burdened every week to share a message with a congregation on Sunday, they were called the stars.

And Jesus himself, the son of God, in all of his magnificence and glory and beauty, walks among the candlesticks. He walks among the churches. Jesus said, where two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them.

Do you believe that? He's here this morning. He walks among us. He walks among sweet corners.

He walks among other churches. Jesus is here. And this vision that John saw tells us something about Jesus.

It tells us that Jesus's main focus on this earth is his church. How are my people doing? How are they maturing? How are they growing in love and Christlikeness? And this is how we know as Christians we are maturing in the Lord. You know what? We become more concerned than we ever have about the church, about the people around us.

How's this brother doing? How's that sister doing? Who can I pray for more? Who can I help financially? Who can I help by doing something with them? Who can I help by encouraging them? Who can I help by offering hospitality and fellowship? You see, as we mature, we become like Jesus. Isn't that the goal? And when we become like Jesus, we're concerned more about the church. When Jesus returns, he's returning for his church.

He's not interested at all in how the stock market is doing. He's not interested in how the central bankers are colluding as we speak about interest rates and mortgage rates that are coming up. He's not interested in what the UN and the WHO and the World Economic Forum are doing in order to gain more and more world control.

He's interested in his church and saving her and establishing his kingdom for a thousand years on this earth. It was interesting as we read through these seven churches of Revelation that never once is their size mentioned. We don't know how big they were.

We don't know if there were tens. We don't know if there were hundreds. Probably not a thousand maybe.

But size never mattered to the Lord. Not any of the details that we would consider important in choosing a church does Jesus even mention. He doesn't mention the style of music.

He doesn't mention whether there was kids or teens or young adults programs. He doesn't talk about the demographics of the church. He doesn't talk about the eschatological views held by the leadership or whether the pastor is relevant and wears jeans and converse sneakers when he's preaching.

Jesus's concern has been, is, and always will be for his church and for her pure devotion to him. And because of this he says to the last church he addresses the church of Laodicea which we'll get to in 2025. So those whom I love I rebuke and discipline so be earnest and repent.

And so Jesus is always speaking the truth in love which is refreshing to us in a day and age of political correctness which by the way is a euphemism for old-fashioned incorrectness. Psalm 141 verse 5 says, let a righteous man strike me. It's a kindness.

Let him rebuke me. It's oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.

Proverbs 27 6 says, wounds from a friend are more trustworthy than kisses from an enemy. It's like when we go to the doctors. We don't say, okay doc after the appointment I just want to hear the good news.

I want to hear about the parts of my body that are doing really good today. Don't give me the bad news. I don't want any negativity here today.

Don't give me that. No. We want him to speak the truth in love.

If we've got problems, if we, if the doctor thinks we have cancer, we want to know about it. At least check it out, right? And barring God's healing we want to have some kind of treatments. I know someone not long ago they were going to their doctor and every, true, true story, every time they went the doctor said you've got to make this lifestyle change because that what you are doing is affecting you physically in all of these other areas and you have all these other meds because of this one area in your life.

And this person sold the doctor. I want to hear that every time I come in. Went in one last time.

Doctor said the same thing. She fired the doctor and got a new one. Now if that new doctor is worth his salt, he'll be telling her the same thing.

We need to hear the truth in love. Now Jesus is a gentleman. He speaks the truth in love and helps us to change and become more like him in our actions, emotions, thoughts, and speech.

The last time I preached we read Revelation 1 and part of Revelation 2 where Jesus had a specially tailored message for all seven churches. We started by looking at the church of Ephesus and today we're going to be looking at the second church spoken of and that's the church of Smyrna. We saw that Ephesus was a church with good teaching and doctrine but it was a church where the people had left, not lost.

A lot of times we say as Christians, oh they lost their first love. No, we never lose our first love. We leave our first love if we had love for the Lord in the first place.

That's what we do. And they were just going through the motions. They honored the Lord with their lips but their hearts were far from him as scripture says in the Old Testament.

So the Lord had to remind them of the three R's of Christianity and that is remember, repent, and return. Remember how much you used to love me and what you used to do for me when you loved me. You know you spent time prayer and reading my word and fellowshiping and you know you were doing things for me.

Remember that, repent, and go back and do that. Those are the three R's. Now the temptation is to look at these seven churches and say, I wonder which one of these seven churches is CCF? Or we think, I wonder you know those other churches that I attended in the past, where would they fit in that continuum? Which one most resembled them? Or we might even say, I wonder which one resembles me? But you know what, when Jesus gave this message to the seven churches, every one of those seven churches were to read each other's letters because it applies to every single one of us.

Through time, over the past 2,000 years, all seven churches apply to all the churches that have ever existed and every Christian that has ever existed. And if we're honest with ourselves, when we look at the seven churches, we can see as we look back on our Christian lives that every one of those churches somewhere applies to us. Just about everything, right? Of the seven churches, only two churches were not brought up on the carpet about something.

One was the church of Philadelphia and the other is the church of Smyrna, the second church, which is what we're going to be looking at this morning. So Judith, if you could put up the slides, verse 8. We're going to read through and I'm going to comment as we go just through these four verses. By the way, this is the shortest message to any of the churches.

There's only four verses, but in the Greek it's got the least amount of words to any church. It's the shortest one. Verse 8, to the angel or the pastor of the church in Smyrna write.

Now let me just comment on saying Smyrna is actually still in existence today under the name of Izmir. It's in Turkey. It's on one of the coastal areas up from the Mediterranean.

And it was the most beautiful city in Asia Minor at that time. As a matter of fact, one historian wrote that the closest thing to paradise on earth was living in Smyrna. Ancient coin inscriptions describe Smyrna as the first of Asia in size and beauty.

And another coin on earth had this inscription, the ornament of Asia. During the time of Christ, Smyrna was chosen as the city where a temple would be built for Tiberius Caesar, where he would be worshiped. About 50 years after the time of Christ, a new Caesar, a new emperor came onto the scene by the name of Domitian.

As I mentioned, he was probably the one who exiled John around AD 95 to the isle of Patmos. And Domitian made a decree that the emperor was God. And so this temple that Tiberius Caesar built in Smyrna, which was originally to worship him, Domitian turned around and said, this is now my temple.

And once a year you citizens are to go. It's mandatory. You are to go to my temple.

You are to burn a pinch of incense, bow down to my statue, and declare these words, Caesar is Lord. You then got a letter, a certificate that you were to keep with you and your person at all times, stating that you bowed to Caesar. Because at any point in time, you could be stopped on the road.

You could be stopped and interrogated in your business, in your home, anywhere. And if you did not produce this certificate, they considered you an insurrectionist, a cultist, a divisive person, or worse still, someone belonging to a fringe minority with unacceptable views. And they could send you to the stadium, or they'd throw you to the lions.

But in this case, in the context of our story this morning, they were going to just imprison these Christians if they didn't have it. This is what was causing tension between church and state in Smyrna. Christians, we know that there is only one Lord, and we will never bow to Caesar.

And we say, as Peter said, when commanded not to speak God's word in Acts 4.19, judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sake to obey you rather than God. And that's a rhetorical question. We should never bow to the government, to leaders, to anyone, our bosses, to anyone who tells us to bow to Caesar and neglect or deny Jesus Christ.

We should never do it. These are the words of Him who was first and the last, who died and came to life again. And so here's where the problem began for the church in Smyrna.

These Christians acknowledge like us that Jesus is God. He always was. He always is.

He always will be. And that He died for our sins and came to life again. And this is our manifesto as Christians.

And if any one of these things is not true, then we don't have a faith. We might as well go home right now. Let's all get up, go home, eat some potato salad, and watch a hockey game.

Right? If that's not, isn't that what Paul said to the Corinthians? He said, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. And in verse 19 he goes on, and we're to be pitied more than all men. Why would we come to church? Why would we give our money? Why would we deny ourselves the pleasures of this world if Jesus didn't die for our sins and rise from the dead? What a waste of a life, folks.

And I trust that all of us are here this morning not because we feel compelled to come by parents or a wife or a husband, but because we know whom we have believed. Verse 9, next slide, I know, I know. Every one of these seven letters to the seven churches starts with the words, I know.

There's nothing going on in your life. There is nothing that has gone on in your life. There's nothing that keeps you awake at night, worries you, concerns you.

And Jesus says to you, I know. He knows all about our problems, and He provides for us a principle or a promise in His Word to deal with our situation so that we can abide by and obey the command that says, fear not. We often think of the Ten Commandments, their Ten Commandments.

There are many other commandments in Scripture, brothers and sisters. One of them, many times, if you want to do a search on the internet, just search for the words, fear not. Have I not commanded you? Fear not.

I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. There are two words in the Greek that deal with poverty in the New Testament. One of them means you hardly have anything left over, and the other word for poverty means that you have nothing at all.

Jesus used this second term to describe them. They had nothing at all. You don't have money.

You don't have many possessions, but you're rich. You're rich in heaven where moth and rust does not corrupt and thieves do not break through and steal, Jesus said in Matthew. What would you rather have? All the riches in the world and a few more years without Jesus or have Jesus and eternal riches? And we can have very little financially or in terms of possessions, but we can be rich in God's sight.

Let me read for you something in James chapter 2 verse 5. Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of this world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who loved Him? But you have insulted the poor. He's talking to the church. It wasn't that people outside the church that were insulting the poor.

It was the church itself, just like the church does today, not here. But if any of you have listened to podcasts or YouTube or other preachers, you know what I mean. If you had greater faith, you would drive a Cadillac like me.

You would have your own private jet. Oh, but you can just send your seed money to, you know, e-transfer too. You give me some seed money and God's going to bless you.

He's going to give it back to you in spades. Jesus says, I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you're rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews that are not, but a synagogue of Satan.

I just want to comment back on that point. There is nothing wrong with being of humble means and struggling. Now, if we're being foolish and we're out there gambling our money away, the Lord has some principles in scripture that deal with that.

But to be of humble means is not an indictment. I've met many wealthy Christians over the years, some extremely wealthy, and they mistakenly assume that godliness is a means to financial gains. That's another scripture verse.

They think that they're wealthy because they're more spiritual. And I want to tell you this, the most spiritual people consistently I've met over the years are the poor widows, the people who need to call on the Lord every day for their next meal, their next paycheck, their next bill to be paid. These people have to depend on God.

But the more we have, what did the psalmist say? Make me not rich nor poor. If I'm rich, I'll forget about you. If I'm poor, I'll curse you.

But there's a happy median when we can have little finances and we can have great faith and trust the Lord. So I only say that because we don't want to fall into the category of looking down and despising someone who may not have as much money as we think they ought to have. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Now these Christians in Smyrna were being slandered by the Jews and so the pieces start to fit together into this story. These Christians were not ashamed of the gospel and they spoke boldly about the truth that there is only one God, not Caesar, and that he rose from the dead. And this riled the Jews because they did not believe that Messiah had come yet, let alone rise from the dead.

And so it's not a far stretch to assume that those Jews who were slandering these Christians to the authorities were doing so in order to rat them out and telling the authorities that they didn't have their government authorized documents and that they had not bowed to Caesar. And because of this, the authorities very possibly were deployed to this church to check things out. Slide number 10, verse number 10.

Do not be afraid of 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. It wasn't the Jews that had imprisoned these Christians.

They didn't have the authorities, the authority to do that. It was government officials, it would have been the police, it would have been possibly soldiers who were in the town at that time. But the Lord doesn't mention any one of these as the guilty party.

Instead he cuts to the chase and says it was Satan who was behind these arrests and imprisonments. And that's what we read in Ephesians chapter 6, where we read, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, people around us, the governments around us, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly realms. We don't fight against Justin Trudeau, or more likely the prime minister's office.

We don't fight against the liberal government. We don't fight against officials who are power hungry. We fight against the enemy.

The Bible says the whole world is under the control of the evil one except for those who are God's children. Should it surprise us that the world who is not saved are not marching to the beat all over the world? Every country, every leader to the beat of the same drum. Have you ever seen this before? The whole world is under the control of the evil one.

And right back here in Samaria he says it's not just these people, it's Satan himself working through these people. Do not be afraid, he says, of 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.

Well can you imagine inviting someone to church and say, why don't you come to CCF this Sunday? There's a real funny looking guy preaching. Why don't you come to our church? Well if we come to your church what can we expect? Oh well, let's see the authorities really hate us and a lot of the religious leaders are saying nasty things about us. But you know the worship and the preaching is great and you know the rest of us there who haven't been thrown in jail, they're really friendly.

You might get thrown in jail for two weeks but hey, you'll be happy. Jesus says, be faithful even to the point of death and I'll give you the crown of life. You see you can't, you can't grow a big church in a big ministry by speaking the truth in love very often these days.

People according to scripture want to hear their ears tickled. Be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life. What is the crown of life? The crown of life is eternal life.

This life we are living right now is like a shadow. It's a vapor. It's a mist.

Think about it. Everything we've had, that we have right now, everything that we've worked for or will own, one day will be left behind us when we die. You never see a hearse pulling a u-haul.

80 years from now should the Lord tarry not one of you listening to my voice today, the youngest of you, whoever you are. 80 years, you will not think about, be worried about anything that bothers you and bugs you today, that keeps you awake at night. You will not even think about that 80 years from now if you live that long.

Colossians 2 17 says, these things are a reality of the things that were to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ. This life is a shadow, a vapor.

But eternal life, that's reality. And that reality, scripture says, is found in Christ. 1 John chapter 5 11 we read, and this is the testimony.

God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

In other words, if we have Jesus, if we are born again, we will spend eternity in heaven. You know, every time I drive past one of those billboards, you know, the ones that say it's got milk, you know, you've seen those, got milk, you've seen that. I feel like taking a paintbrush and a big black bucket of paint and crossing off milk and writing Jesus.

God Jesus. He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son does not have eternal life.

Now here's the rub. If we do not have Jesus, we still have eternal life. But that life will be eternal separation from God in a place called hell.

Matthew 13 49 says, this is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hearing a message like this, we ought to ask ourselves the ultimate question.

One split second after I die, where will I spend eternity? You know, some people who are not going to heaven think they are. And some people who are going to heaven struggle with doubts that they're not going there. So how can we know whether we will be given this crown of life that Jesus talks about here? I love this passage in James 1 12.

Let me read it for you. It says, blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. As you sit here this morning, ask yourselves this question.

Do I love Jesus? Or have I ever felt love for Jesus? I'm not asking this morning whether or not we feel the most love for Jesus today that we've ever felt in our lives because in our Christian life, as in the church of Ephesus, our love ebbs and flows. When Jesus talked to the church at Ephesus, he says you've left your first love. He didn't say y'all go out and get saved at a revival meeting.

He didn't say that. He says all I'm asking you to do is you used to love me. You don't love me as much anymore.

Just return to that first love. At least they had love. That's why I didn't tell them to have to go to get saved again.

In 1st John 3, John was dealing with this. People weren't a hundred percent sure. You know you read 1st John.

It's brutal. It's a test. Am I truly saved? Am I just religious? Am I just going to church for the sake of to please the person beside me? Why am I doing this? And so John says okay, here is the test.

If you don't love your brother whom you do see, how can you love God whom you don't see? That's in another passage. But John says if you love your brothers, you'll love God. If you love God, you'll love your brothers.

Let me read what he says here after teaching them this. He says this then. What? Your love for others and your love for God and your love for God means you love others.

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence whenever our hearts condemn us. In other words, we're true Christians and we're wondering if we're really going to go to heaven because we have these doubts. The enemy puts doubts in our heads and the Lord says, just a sec.

Who do you love? Do you love me? Do you love me? Have you ever felt love in your heart for me? Jesus says. Love because while you were still a sinner, I died for you. We love him because he first loved us.

That's what my word says. Do you love me? Do you have any love for me ever? And then if we're not sure we have the right love for Jesus, then he says, okay, what about these people at CCF? They're the closest Christians that you probably know. Do you love them? Do you have love for anybody here? That's how we set our hearts at rest whenever our hearts condemn us.

That's how we know that we have this crown of life. Next slide, verse 11. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death, which is eternal hell. Our brother mentioned this, I think a couple weeks ago, that if you're born once, you'll die twice. But if you're born twice, you'll only die once.

If you're born once and you're not born again, you're going to die because all of us die. And then the Bible talks about eternal death, the second death. That's what it talks about.

The second death is eternity in hell. But if we're born once physically, which obviously we are here, and we are born again, we come to that place in our lives where we say, Jesus, you are Lord. Not me, not Caesar, not my pleasures, not money, not my career, not my education, not my boyfriend, not my girlfriend, not my desires, not my lusts, not my pleasures, not my goals, none of these things, not my home, not my retirement, none of these things.

Jesus, you are Lord. When we are born again, one day when we die, we will live forever with the Lord. And this is the description of a true Christian.

We are overcomers. We're not perfect, but we are being perfected. I want to ask the question, if you say you're a Christian here this morning, can you honestly say that there is a difference in your life from the time that you prayed or said you gave your life or came forward? Has there been a change in your life or are you still living the same life that you lived before you became a Christian or allegedly so? You see, if we truly know the Lord, we can't have the Holy Spirit of God in us and continue living an unholy, selfish life.

And if you say to yourself honestly, you know, I've never changed. I don't know what Mark's talking about. I don't know about these other testimonies that people say, how it's been so amazing since they've come to Christ, how he's taken away their guilt and their shame and their sin and helped them get over and overcome sin.

You know what I mean? The sin which so easily besets, Paul talks about. That sin that so easily besets. But we are overcomers from Christ because it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

And when we're free by Christ, we're free indeed. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. But if you haven't changed and you're comfortable living in your sin, then you have every reason this morning to be the most concerned person in this world.

Jesus loves you and he stands here this morning amongst us as one of the candlesticks. And he doesn't stand next to you this morning to condemn you for your sins because he was condemned for your sins on that cross. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And we can either sit here or stand here this morning with Jesus by our side and by faith accept God's condemnation of our sins through Jesus on the cross. Or we can stand one day without Jesus before God in eternity and plead our case. And we'll have no advocate to plead our case for.

And we will spend eternity in hell. Depart from me, he will say, I never knew you. Romans 5:8 that we quoted this morning as we went into communion.

But God demonstrates his love for us in this while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. John 15:13 greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends. And the Lord Jesus came not to condemn, scripture says, but to save.

There is one who one day will condemn. But right now Jesus is here and he looks at each one of us and he does not condemn you. He pleads with you.

Here I am. Revelation chapter 3. I stand at your door and knock. If any man hears my voice and open the door, I will come into him and dine with him, have fellowship with him and he with me.

He calls to you. The Bible says everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. He loves you so much.

Could you love a person like that? Could you love a Peter Miller who has the rope and noose was going around your neck and getting ready to be tightened, came and gave that pardon and Jesus will give every one of you a pardon right this morning if you will accept him. You just have to ask and believe by faith he'll save you. What a wonderful savior we have.

Romans 10:9 that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved for it is with the heart that you believe and are justified and it's with your mouth that you confess and are saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Is there anything you are living for this morning that is worth forfeiting eternity for? Let's pray.

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