

(The Lord and His Church) 5. the Suffering Church

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of faithfulness in suffering, poverty, and slander, assuring believers of God's promises amidst tribulation.

Scripture: Isaiah 49:15, Matthew 24:22, Luke 21:26, Acts 4:31, Romans 8:28, Philippians 1:12, James 1:15, 1 Peter 2:12, Revelation 2:8, Revelation 13:16

Topics: "Suffering Church", "Faithful Endurance"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the church in Smyrna facing tribulation, poverty, and slander, highlighting the importance of seeing the Lord as the One in control and the need for faithful endurance in the midst of trials. He emphasizes that tribulation is part of God's will for His wholehearted children and that God allows His best to face suffering. Poonen also discusses the poverty of the saints, contrasting earthly wealth with heavenly riches, and the need for believers to use their resources for God's kingdom. Additionally, he addresses the slander faced by God's faithful children and the freedom from fear that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit. Lastly, he explores the concept of suffering according to God's plan, encouraging believers to be faithful even unto death to receive the crown of life and escape the second death.

Transcript

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say 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 cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until 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. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'" (Revelation 2:8-11).

Tribulation

The Lord describes Himself here as the First and the Last, the One Who has overcome death. A church that is facing opposition and persecution needs to see the Lord as the One Who is in control of all events from the beginning to the end and as One Who has conquered man's greatest enemy - death.

The Lord has no charges at all against this church.

It was a church facing tribulation, poverty and slander.

Tribulation is a recurring theme in the book of Revelation - and notice that it is faced by the most faithful among God's children, and not by compromisers. In the first chapter of Revelation, we saw John undergoing tribulation. Here we see a faithful church undergoing the same. It is a church against which the Lord does not have a single charge, that is being persecuted. The worldly, compromising churches have an easy time.

All this is meant to remind us that tribulation is a part of God's perfect will for His wholehearted children. So when we ourselves are faced with the great tribulation one day, we need not think that some strange thing has befallen us. We will be treading the same pathway that God's faithful children have trodden through the centuries.

God allows the very best among His children to face tribulation. It was so in the first century. It has been so throughout these 20 centuries of church-history. And it will be so even at the end of time.

The best of God's children, the most faithful among them, the elite commando-troops of the Lord's army will be the ones who will be here on earth to stand as witnesses for Him in the days of the Antichrist. Every General sends his best troops to where the battle is raging the thickest. The Lord does the same too. It will be a great privilege and honour to be among those troops of the Lord.

God will certainly not take the overcomers away to heaven at a time when He needs their testimony on earth the most. He has never done that in the past and He will not do that in the future either.

The Lord's elite troops who stand up to the Antichrist in the days of the great tribulation are referred to in the book of Revelation as those "who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17). They will refuse to bow down to the Antichrist or to receive his mark on their bodies. Many of them will therefore have to lay down their lives for their faith (Revelation 13:7, 8, 15-17). Thus they will join that select company of martyrs of all time who "did not love their lives even to death" (Revelation 12:11).

None of us naturally have the courage to face death for the Lord. But if God has called us to seal our witness with our blood, then we can rest assured that He will give us special grace for that when such a time comes. It was through such a special supply of grace that every Christian martyr faced death fearlessly in the past. And what God did for them He will do for us too - even for the weakest and the most cowardly among us. All we have to do is tell Him that we want to be faithful to Him at any cost. If we have the willingness, God will give us the boldness.

Poverty

The saints in the church at Smyrna were poor. Poverty is another thing that God's faithful children have faced throughout church-history.

Many Old Testament saints were rich. God had promised earthly wealth as a reward for obedience in Old Testament times, because Israel was called to possess an earthly kingdom.

But Jesus inaugurated a new covenant and brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. Now the wealth we are promised is heavenly, not earthly. That was why Jesus Himself and the apostles were all poor.

Today, there are many who are teaching that becoming wealthy is a sign of God's blessing on His children. This doctrine was first invented by preachers in the West, who used it to justify their becoming wealthy from the tithes of God's people! Christian businessmen then latched on to it as a convenient doctrine to justify their own amassing of wealth. Covetous preachers everywhere have found it to be a convenient doctrine for them as well!!

The poverty of Jesus and of the apostles should suffice to show that all such preachers have been thoroughly deceived by their own covetousness.

The believers at Smyrna were faithful to the Lord in the midst of great trials, and they were poor. The believers at Laodicea, on the other hand, were thoroughly dead, and they were materially rich. What does this prove? The answer is plain for anyone to see.

"God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith....God has chosen the foolish things of the world....God has chosen the weak things of the world....God has chosen the things that are not....that no man should boast before God."

(James 2:5; 1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

God has made no mistake in choosing His children.

God has promised to provide all our material needs, if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness first (Matthew 6:33; Philippians 4:19).

We have seen evidence of this again and again in the churches in India, where believers who were living in abject poverty and who were heavily in debt, have been blessed financially by their heavenly Father, when they honoured Him in their lives. This is a miracle in a country like India, where there is no government-funded social security system and where unemployment is high and bureaucratic corruption rampant. But we have also seen that such believers have not become wealthy. God has met their needs. But He hasn't made them rich.

We have also seen that where believers have pursued after wealth, they have destroyed themselves spiritually (1 Timothy 6:9, 10).

What should a believer do if he is already wealthy - as a result of inherited family wealth or some other reason? He should obey God's Word:

Recognise first of all, that ALL that he has belongs to the Lord (Study the following Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 10:26; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Luke 14:33; John 17:10);

Obey the Lord's command to use his wealth for the spread of the gospel, thus seeking first the kingdom of God with his money ("Use your money to make friends for eternity" - Luke 16:9 - paraphrase);

Obey God's command to share his wealth with other needy believers (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

If he follows these three steps, he won't be able to stay wealthy for long. But he will become a spiritual man, for God rewards us spiritually exactly according to our faithfulness with material things (Luke 16:11).

Many are spiritually poor, because they have been unfaithful with "the mammon of unrighteousness" that God entrusted them with, and tested them with.

God has not promised us material wealth in the New Testament. But He told the church in Smyrna, "...but you are rich" (verse 9). They were rich in God's eyes, because they had been faithful in their trials and thus partaken of the Divine nature. This is the true eternal wealth that God gives us in the new covenant.

Slander

The church in Smyrna faced the "blasphemy of those who say they are Jews" (verse 9).

Slander is another thing that all of God's faithful children have to face. Notice here that the slander and opposition that this church was facing was from those who called themselves God's people - "those who say they are Jews, but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (verse 9).

Those Jews were religious people, who studied their Bibles (Genesis to Malachi). Yet the Lord called them "a synagogue of Satan", because they were hypocrites. That was why they persecuted the true disciples of Jesus.

Many a synagogue that was started by God-fearing Jews degenerated into a synagogue of Satan over a period of time. In the same way, many churches that were started by God-fearing believers, have also degenerated into "churches of Satan", in God's eyes, today.

Opposition for the true disciples of Jesus today, comes not just from heathen religions (which is understandable), but also from "those who say they are Christians, but who are not, but are a church of Satan".

Today if we said that a so-called Christian "church" was "a church of Satan", many would accuse us of being un-Christlike. But they forget that it was Jesus Himself Who rebuked Peter, saying "Get behind Me, Satan" (Matthew 16:23); and that it was Jesus Who called this group of religious people "a synagogue of Satan". He would use exactly the same strong language today to rebuke "churches" that have drifted from their calling.

Jesus warned His disciples,

"They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father, or Me." (John 16:2, 3).

What He said then that the people in a synagogue would do to His disciples, was in later centuries done by "churches" too. In the middle ages, God-fearing disciples of Jesus were killed by Roman Catholic inquisitionists.

This hatred of the disciples of Jesus will reach its peak during the time of the Antichrist and the Babylonian "world church". We must be prepared to face it when it comes. That is why we must not be afraid of the little slander and opposition that we face from so-called Christians these days.

We must never be afraid of being slandered - for Jesus Himself was maligned. He was called a gluttonous man, a false teacher, a blasphemer, an insane man, a demon-possessed man, and one who had Satanic power (Luke 7:34; John 7:12; Matthew 26:65; Mark 3:21, 22; John 8:48).

He told His disciples, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul (a Jewish title for Satan, the prince of demons), how much more the members of his household!" (Matthew 10:24, 25).

Peter exhorts us saying,

"Keep your behaviour excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." (1 Peter 2:12).

God's promise to us is,

"No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. And their vindication is from Me." (Isaiah 54:17).

So we need not fear slander. The Lord Himself will vindicate us at the right time. Until then we can afford to keep quiet and ignore what ungodly people say about us.

Freedom from Fear

The Lord then tells the church at Smyrna not to fear (verse 10). "Don't be afraid" was a word that fell from Jesus' lips frequently when He was on earth. And it is the same word that He speaks now to a church that is facing suffering for His Name's sake. Perhaps it is the one word from the Lord's mouth that all of us need to hear the most in these days.

There is a spirit of fear all over the world today and it is gripping people more and more powerfully. Jesus warned us that it would be so in the last days (Luke 21:26). But He also told His disciples that they should not be affected by this spirit of fear. The sad thing is that most believers are not free from this spirit. Many believers are enslaved by the fear of what will happen in the future, fear of men, fear of sickness, fear of death and various other types of fears.

Fear is one of Satan's master-weapons, with which he enslaves many believers. It is this spirit of fear that prevents many believers from boldly testifying for the Lord in the meetings of the church and from being bold witnesses for the Lord in their places of work. Many believers confuse timidity with humility and thus Satan deceives them.

It was fear that prevented Peter from boldly testifying about the Lord to the servant-girl who questioned him in the high-priest's palace. But when Peter was baptised in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, that fear was driven away. He could then testify about the Lord boldly to anyone.

Later, when he and the other apostles were tempted to be afraid again, they prayed and they were filled with Holy Spirit again, and the spirit of fear was driven away from them once more (Acts 4:31).

This then is the answer: We must be filled with the Holy Spirit again and again.

God doesn't want you to be enslaved to the spirit of fear that prevents you from opening your mouth and being a witness for Christ among your friends and relatives and in your place of work. He wants to fill you with His Holy Spirit and to make you bold. All you have to do is to acknowledge that you are a coward and

ask God to fill you with His Spirit so that you can be His bold witness. Those who hunger and thirst will be filled.

We will be tempted to fear far more in the days to come. So let's use every opportunity that we have now to overcome fear of every kind.

Suffering According to God's Plan

God does not protect His faithful children from suffering. He knows that suffering is necessary for our spiritual growth. And so the church in Smyrna was not spared suffering. But the Lord encouraged them saying, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." (verse 10).

The Lord warned them that Satan was going to cast some of them into prison. God has given Satan the power to cast believers into prison unjustly. But we must remember that Satan can't do anything to us without first getting God's permission. And even if we are cast into prison, it will only be in order to test us (verse 10). God uses even imprisonment to fulfil His purposes.

Paul said, "My circumstances (in prison) have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Philippians 1:12-14). God used Paul's imprisonment to fulfil a number of purposes:

to sanctify Paul;

to convert a number of Paul's jailers;

to give Paul an opportunity to write his epistles; and

to encourage many other believers to preach fearlessly.

Truly our God is able to turn the tables on Satan in such a way that everything (including imprisonment) works only for the fulfilment of the Divine purposes (Romans 8:28; Psalm 76:10).

How long we spend in prison is also determined by the Lord. "You will have tribulation ten days", the Lord tells them (verse 10). It is our Heavenly Father Who decides the length of time that His children have to undergo tribulation.

Even in the days of the great tribulation, Jesus said that "for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short." (Matthew 24:22). "God remembered Noah" when the flood was on the earth (Genesis 8:1). And He wont forget His elect when they are encompassed by the great tribulation on earth. "I will not forget you....I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands", is His Word to us (Isaiah 49:15, 16).

It is a great comfort for us to know this. And we must remember it in the days to come, when we have to suffer for the Lord's sake. He will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability. He has His Hand on the control knob and He will turn down the pressure (that we are facing) when the right time comes.

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life", is the Lord's exhortation (verse 10). We should be willing even to die if necessary, in order to stand true to the Lord. Don't follow the example of believers who compromise their witness just for the sake of a little earthly gain - some honour or promotion or money etc. How will such believers stand true to the Lord in the day when we wont be allowed to buy even our necessary food without the mark of the Antichrist (Revelation 13:16, 17)? Surely such "believers" will accept "the mark of the beast" in order to survive.

Remember that the crown of life is a far greater reward than any earthly honour and even than physical life itself.

Again the Lord recognises that not all have ears to hear such a message. And so He calls those who have ears to hear, to hear.

The overcomers will not be hurt by the second death (verse 11).

The second death is eternal death - being cast away from the presence of God for all eternity, into a lake of fire. It is significant that the promise of escaping the second death is made only to the overcomers. That's why it is so important to overcome sin - for death is the end-result of sin (as James 1:15 makes clear).

The fundamental message of the Spirit throughout the New Testament is that we should overcome sin in every form.

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