

SUFFERING WELL
Revelation 2:8-11
By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Go back and look at all the heroes of the Bible, and you will see that they suffered. They went through hard times. They experienced difficulties. Go through the Old Testament -- everyone from Noah, to Job, to Abraham, to Jacob, to Joseph, to Moses, to David, to the prophets had to suffer. Go to the New Testament -- Jesus was crucified; eleven of the twelve apostles were killed for their faith. The apostle Paul experienced poverty, homelessness, hunger and thirst, torture, three shipwrecks, and eventually execution.
2. What does that tell us? Two things.
 - i. You will suffer as a Christian. You will face sickness, failure, rejection, loss, sickness, pain, loneliness. No matter how much faith you have. No matter how much you pray. No matter how obedient you are. Christianity can get you out of a lot of unnecessary suffering, but it can't get you out of all suffering. It can save you from self-induced suffering caused by sin and foolishness. But it can't save you from all suffering.
 1. **David Jeremiah** "We can find ourselves in the middle of God's perfect will and in the middle of a perfect storm at the same time!"
 - ii. The Bible is not a success manual, it is a suffering manual. The Bible does not tell us how to succeed in this world, but how to suffer in this world. It tells us how to succeed with God. How to succeed spiritually. How to succeed eternally. But it doesn't tell us how to climb the ladder of success. It tells us how to handle it when we fall off the ladder and then the ladder falls on top of us. The Bible tells us the meaning of suffering, the purpose of suffering, how to benefit from our suffering, and how to suffer in a way that glorifies God. If your goal is to make a lot of money then don't read the Bible, become a surgeon (or if you're like Nancy Pelosi, become a politician). But if you want to learn how to suffer well, how to handle adversity in a way that glorifies God, then the Bible is your book.
3. As you'll see this morning, there are two ways to handle suffering. You can suffer well, or you can suffer poorly. Today we're going to learn how to suffer well.
4. We're looking at Revelation 2-3 where we find seven letters to seven churches in Asia (modern Turkey). Jesus is the author, and the churches are the recipients.

II. TEXT: Revelation 2:8-11

1. "Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life:
 - i. Remember that "angel" can simply mean messenger, and in this context refers to the pastor of the church. The pastor is God's messenger to the church.
2. 9 I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Don't be afraid

of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death.

- i. This letter is written to the church in Smyrna, about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was called the Crown of Asia, and was known as the most beautiful city in Asia. A center of science and medicine. A sea port off the coast of the Aegean Sea. This is the only city of the seven cities in Revelation to still exist today, only it goes by a different name, Izmir, Turkey.
- ii. The citizens of Smyrna were devoted to the worship of the Roman emperor. There was a temple there dedicated to Tiberius who was the emperor at the time of Christ’s death.
- iii. They were also devoted to the worship of the goddess Cybele. She was something like a “Mother Nature.” She was seen as the origin or creator of all human beings. There was a huge temple dedicated to her that was constantly busy with immoral rituals.
- iv. Smyrna also had a large Jewish population.
- v. The Christians in Smyrna were suffering. It is described as affliction and poverty. They were being persecuted by both the Jews and the Romans.
- vi. One of the interesting things about the church in Smyrna is that it received no critique from Christ. That’s only true of this church and the church in Philadelphia. All the other churches received scathing critiques from Christ. So, this church was spiritually healthy, they were pleasing Christ, yet they were suffering.
- vii. Once again this is a reminder that Christianity is not a way to escape suffering. It is not the way to health, wealth, and prosperity in this life. Christianity is about how to have a relationship with God, and how to serve and glorify God in the midst of suffering.
- viii. In this short letter, Jesus gives the church in Smyrna five strategies for how to suffer well.

III. 5 STRATEGIES FOR SUFFERING WELL

1. Don’t be afraid.

- i. **Revelation 2:10** “Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”
- ii. Christians don’t have to fear. Shouldn’t fear. Shouldn’t worry.
- iii. Why We Don’t Have to Fear
 1. Jesus is in control.
 - a. **Revelation 2:8** “Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life.”
 - b. In each letter Jesus starts out by pointing to some aspect of His nature. Here He identifies Himself as the First and the Last. That is a title of God in the Old Testament (Is 46:6).

- c. Jesus is saying, "I am Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. The God who created the heavens and the earth with the word of His mouth. The God who is in control of all things."
 - d. Jesus is telling them, "I am in control, and I'm working it all together for your good."
 - 2. Jesus knows your situation.
 - a. **Revelation 2:9** "I know your affliction and poverty"
 - b. If the God of the universe, the creator, knows your situation, then that means He is near, and He cares about you. And that means that you can reach out to Him for help.
 - 3. Your suffering won't last forever.
 - a. **Revelation 2:10a** "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days."
 - b. This too shall pass.
 - 4. After death comes heaven.
 - a. **Revelation 2:10b** "Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."
 - b. Your suffering is temporary, and then comes heaven.
- iv. Why does the Bible tell us to not be afraid?
 - 1. Fear makes you miserable, and God doesn't want that for you.
 - a. **Brian Tracy** "The greatest problem of human life is fear. It is fear that robs us of happiness. It is fear that causes us to settle for far less than we are capable of. It is fear that is the root cause of negative emotions, unhappiness and problems in human relationships."
 - 2. Fear is irrational.
 - a. A few years ago I had surgery on my arm. When they numbed my arm, some of the pain mediation spread to my diaphragm. When I woke up, even though I was breathing and getting plenty of oxygen, it felt like I wasn't breathing. It was terrifying. I felt like I was suffocating. Why was I afraid? Because my thoughts did not match reality.
 - b. Fear stands for False Evidence Appearing Real.
 - c. When we fear, our thoughts don't match reality. We either don't know God's promises, or we have taken our eyes off of God's promises, or we are doubting God's promises.
 - d. What you are tempted to fear is nothing compared to Who you know.
 - e. Jesus has you. Fear not!
- 2. Count your blessings.
 - i. **Revelation 2:9** "I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich."

- ii. In the midst of their suffering, Jesus wanted them to remember that they were rich.
- iii. **David Jeremiah** “In a world that contains tragedies, we must realize that they’re vastly outnumbered by blessings.”
- iv. According to the world’s standards, they were poor. But in reality, they were rich.
 - 1. How were they rich? In this same ways that all Christians are rich. Regardless of your circumstances, if you are a Christian, you have a relationship with Jesus; you have heaven; You have church family who love you; You have the Bible; You have the indwelling Holy Spirit; You have God’s love for you; You have purpose – to glorify God and witness to others; You have victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. As a Christian, you have things that money can’t buy.
- v. But beyond that, at least in this room, regardless of your situation most of us can be thankful for many things...
 - 1. Your health; Food, clothing, and shelter; A/C and heating; Family; Spouse; Children; Parents; Friends; Employment; Religious liberty; Your pastor.
- vi. The Bible is very serious about the command to be thankful in all circumstances. Rejoice in the Lord always. Why?
 - 1. Thanksgiving glorifies God. He loves it when we praise Him.
 - a. **Stephen F. Olford** “There is no greater evidence of a Spirit-filled person than a grateful Christian.”
 - 2. Thankfulness helps us to face our problems.
 - a. When you focus on your problems, it makes your problems seem bigger. When you focus on your blessings, it makes God seem bigger and your problems seem smaller.
 - b. Suffering well requires emotional energy. You need emotional energy to keep smiling, keep working, keep serving, keep loving, keep forgiving, to keep on. You need emotional energy to fight, to wrestle, to struggle, to stand, to persist, to persevere.
 - c. When you forget your blessings and focus only on the negative, it leads to discouragement and depression. You lose the energy to suffer well.
 - d. But when you count your blessings, it gives you the emotional energy to tackle your problems; to look at your problems in the eye and say, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

3. Learn all you can.

- i. **Revelation 2:10** “Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you”

- ii. Here's the good news. There is a purpose to your suffering. It is not random. It is not pointless. It is not purposeless. There is a reason God lets you suffer.
- iii. Why did Jesus allow the church in Smyrna to suffer? To test them.
- iv. A test is a problem that God allows you to experience for the purpose of spiritual growth.
- v. God uses suffering as a test to grow us.
 - 1. **C. S. Lewis** "God whispers to us in our pleasure but shouts to us in our pain."
 - 2. **Charles Spurgeon** "Grace grows best in the winter."
- vi. How do tests work? A test is both a revealer and an improver.
 - 1. Tests reveal your character.
 - a. It is hard to grow if you can't see your flaws, and it is hard to see your flaws when life is perfect. It is easy to have faith, to be happy, to be nice, when life is perfect. But when things go south, when life gets hard, your character flaws become apparent.
 - b. It is like the silversmith. When you first get silver out of the mine, it is filled with impurities, called dross. The only way to remove the dross is to heat up the silver to a liquid form. When it is heated up, the impurities rise to the surface and can be wiped off.
 - c. To purify and grow you, God uses suffering to help you see your flaws. Once you become aware of your weaknesses, then you can work on them.
 - d. Look for the following when you face trials:
 - i. Do you run to God or away from God?
 - ii. Do you drop out of church or lean on your church family for support?
 - iii. Do you hide your problems or share them with confidants?
 - iv. Do you try to solve your problems with sin, or do you trust God to meet your needs?
 - v. Do you try to comfort yourself with sin?
 - vi. Do you get angry with God?
 - vii. Do you get mean?
 - viii. Do you get depressed and lose your joy?
 - ix. Do you get consumed with worry?
 - 2. Tests improve your character.
 - a. For your physical muscles to grow, you have to put them under tension, or stress. When they are under tension, they have to work harder, which in turn leads to bigger, stronger muscles.

- b. When you go through hard times, they work your spiritual muscles. It's harder to be nice, to be joyful, to have self-control, to keep your mouth shut, to say no to temptation when you are experiencing affliction. You have to work really hard. Thus, your spiritual muscles are forced to grow.
- vii. If God allows you to suffer in order to grow you, then that means He cares more about your character than your comfort. He does not take joy in your pain, but He will let you suffer to grow your character.
- viii. That means you need to care about your character more than your comfort.
- ix. So, to suffer well, focus on spiritual growth. Learn all you can. Don't neglect your spiritual disciplines, but lean into them even more. Spend even more time in prayer, in the word, and at church.
- x. Ask the Lord, "God what you do you want to teach me through this? How do you want me to grow through this?"
- xi. Don't let your suffering destroy you. Don't let it define you. Let it develop you into a better man or woman of God.

4. Focus on faithfulness.

- i. **Revelation 2:10** "Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."
- ii. What is our goal when we suffer? Our ultimate goal is not to end the suffering, to shorten the suffering, to lessen the suffering. The goal is to suffer well, and that means faithfulness.
- iii. There are two ways to suffer. You can suffer well, or you can suffer poorly. To suffer poorly is to lose the faith, abandon Christ, backslide, drop out of church, cheat on your spouse, self-medicate with drugs and alcohol, quit, drop out, leave, be bitter, blame others, be mean, commit suicide, backslide.
- iv. What does it mean to suffer well? Keep the faith; keep serving; keep smiling; keep loving; keep being faithful to your spouse; keep providing for your family; keep preaching; keep witnessing; keep forgiving; keep praying; keep giving; keep working; keep growing; keep fighting. That's what faithfulness is all about.
- v. When we go through hard times we tend to ask the wrong questions. Why me? Why now? What did I do wrong? How could you let this happen? How can I get out of this? And that's why we don't suffer well. Instead we should be asking How can I glorify God through this? How can I be faithful through this?

5. Look forward to heaven.

- i. **Revelation 2:10-11** "10 Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death."
- ii. Jesus finishes with two promises for the suffering Christian.
 - 1. The crown of life, which refers to eternal life. The crown simply means reward, so it is the promise of a reward which is life. Heaven.

2. You will never be harmed by the second death. The Bible talks about two deaths.
 - a. Physical death, when the soul separates from the body. If you are a Christian, your soul immediately goes to heaven. That's the first death.
 - b. Spiritual death, which refers to the lake of fire, or hell (Rev 20:14). When Jesus comes back to judge the living and the dead, believers will receive their rewards, while unbelievers will be thrown into the lake of fire, along with the devil (Rev 20:10, 15).
 - c. Jesus is promising believers that we will never be harmed by the second death. We don't have to worry about hell.
- iii. To suffer well, fix your gaze on heaven. This is one of the reasons we don't have to be afraid of suffering. And it's one of the strategies for suffering well. Whatever you face, it's temporary, and then comes heaven.
- iv. Thomas Watson "It [heaven] is a perfect state of bliss, which consists in the accumulation and heaping together all the precious things of which immortal souls are capable."
- v. After high school I went straight to college. I didn't enjoy it, but I finished in four years. Then I went to seminary. Some people love seminary. I didn't, but I finished in three years. How did I make through all of that schooling without quitting? I knew there was an end in sight. My suffering was only temporary. And then I could go do what God has called me to do, and that was to start Church Acadiana.
- vi. When you are suffering, think about heaven. Whatever you are facing won't last, and heaven will be better than you can imagine.

IV. CONCLUSION

1. Tsang Tsz-Kwan is a college student in Hong Kong. She is blind and severely hearing impaired, and she has limited sensibility in her fingers. When she tried to use her fingers to read in Braille, she couldn't make out the letters. Instead of giving up on reading, she taught herself how to read Braille with her lips. She became an avid reader and student. She went on to score within the top five percent in almost all her subjects in Hong Kong's college entrance exam. This is a young woman who suffered well. She didn't commit suicide. She didn't resort to a life of uselessness. She didn't turn to drugs and alcohol. She didn't curse God and become bitter. She kept going. She kept striving. She kept learning and growing. She kept fighting.
2. You are going to suffer. That's a given. So suffer well.
 - i. Don't be afraid.
 - ii. Count your blessings.
 - iii. Learn all you can.
 - iv. Focus on faithfulness.
 - v. Look forward to heaven.