



TIME OF GRACE®

Jesus Judges Churches Too: Faith in the Midst of Suffering

Study Notes

Summary

While Jesus never promises us an easy life, he does promise us two immensely important blessings: His knowing presence and eternal life. In our day, his promises have not changed, meaning that we can suffer well, trusting that our Father knows what we are going through and has the crown of life waiting for us at the end.

- **Revelation 2:8-10a** To the angel^[a] of the church in Smyrna write: ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

The Bad = Lots of _____.

- **Revelation 2:10b-11** ¹⁰ Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. ¹¹ 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.

The Good: Lots of _____.

Points to Ponder

1. Take two minutes to pray for fellow Christians around the globe who gather each week despite threats of imprisonment, torture, or even death.
2. Evaluate: The more Christians do life together, the more they remain faithful in the face of suffering.
3. Meditate on the words of 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. What connections do you see between these verses and today's message?

4. Does your congregation have volunteer opportunities available? Ask our Father if you could be one of the many “you first” members who makes their church the best it can be.
5. Think of two people in your life who aren’t “rooted” in Jesus. Pray for them today, asking God to open doors for you to invite them to church.

Homework for Next Week

Read Revelation 2:12-17

Time of Grace Ministry
Jesus Judges Churches Too: Faith in the Midst of Suffering
Revelation 2:8-11
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Pastor Mike Novotny

I can't think of a single book cover that moves me emotionally quite like this one. This is my personal copy of Eusebius's "The Church History." Have you read it? Have you heard of it? No, I didn't think so. Eusebius was a guy who lived right about the time that Christianity was made legal in the Roman Empire, the early 300s A.D., and as a historian he wanted to track the history of the Christian church all the way back to the days of Jesus and the Apostles, through those early centuries to the time when Christianity became a legal entity. And part of what he discovered in those 300 years or so of research was moments like this one. Due to copyright restrictions, I can't show you a picture of this book cover, so let me describe it to you.

There's a massive Roman stadium that is packed with people. Think of an NFL playoff game, tens of thousands fill the stand, and they're cheering and they're chanting, and their arms are raised, except down on the dirt field are not players, they're people. Christian people. A group of about 35 of them, men, women, little children are huddled together on their knees and their hands folded in prayer, and in the midst of them is this elderly man, white beard, hands outstretched looking up to heaven because he and his church family are about to be slaughtered. Behind them in the background of the picture are four crosses with dead Christians on them for refusing to worship the Roman Emperor, the Caesar, as their lord, savior, and god. They were sentenced to death for being traders to the Roman state. First they were nailed up on crosses, and then apparently, that wasn't enough for the crowd. Their bodies were lit on fire. In this picture half of them are scorched like meat that you forget on the grill. And these other 35 Christians are waiting for their death not by a cross, but by a beast. In the original painting, a massive lion stands right to the left of this crowd of Christians, strong, muscles ripping, and he's about to pounce and tear these people of faith apart. What always gets me though is the little girl. The little girl may be six years old, is on both knees, hands folded like you might have at the side of your bed, and she's looking right at the lion.

The cover of this book is disturbing, but it is so good for my soul. There are times in 21st century American culture I find myself feeling or I find myself in the middle of discussions with other Christians where we kind of throw a pity party that things aren't what they used to be. You know, YouTube takes down a video that has Christian theology. The Supreme Court of our government passes a law that doesn't line up with Christian values, and we feel so oppressed and persecuted, right? And then I look at that book cover and I say, "All right, Mike. Buck up. Stop the whining. Stop the pity party. There are people who have suffered much worse for their connection to Jesus." It snaps me out of that crazy, new cycle where we just kind of pout and gather together and act like victims.

It reminds us to be strong for the name of Jesus. But even more so, when I look at this book cover, it reminds me of the almost constant connection in church history between being faithful and life being painful. Right? From way back in the earliest days that Eusebius recorded and all the way up until our day, there has always been a correlation between Christians who are faithful and those whose lives are painful.

Like the believers who don't pick and choose things from the Bible, they want to embrace all of it. They want to hold on to every single sentence that came out of the mouth of their Savior and not be ashamed of it, and they want to passionately love every single person that God loves without picking and choosing and forming little Christian cliques. Every Christian who has been that faithful soon finds out that life gets rather painful. Most of the time it's not crosses that are set on fire or lions released in church services. Most of the time it's smaller, but it's still real, and it's something that you will probably experience in your life if you haven't just yet. Let me give you a few examples of what I mean of the connection between faithful and painful.

Imagine you're a seventh-grade boy at a local middle school. You love Jesus, and you know that Jesus loves all people, even the kind of awkward, difficult-to-talk-to kid in your class. But you also are connected with the popular kids in your grade and sometimes the way that kids bond with each other are inside jokes and whispered remarks about other kids in their class.

And so here you are as a seventh grader and you know that to be faithful to Jesus will probably be painful. To take the side of the awkward kid instead of the popular kids. To stand up for him and confront them is probably not going to go great for you. Your place in the circle, the kids that you run with, the friends that you have sleepovers with, that might all end when you tell them that Jesus doesn't love their hate.

Or think of that Christian couple who actually makes a commitment to read the four gospels for the very first time together. They're a two-income family with a three-car garage, kids who play club sports, and a family vacation they take every year. And after they get to the end of the gospel of John, they look at each other and say, "How did we never know this, the constant, beautiful, sacrificial, passionate, frequent teaching of Jesus about giving and loving and serving the poor?" They look back at their budget and say "How did we never know this?" And so, they go to their friends that they've been doing life with, the other two-income, three-car garage, club-sports-playing, annual-vacation-taking Christian people, and they say, "Did you know this? Like how much you all spend on the summer vacation and how much are you giving to the poor?"

If you want life to be instantly painful, ask someone a specific question about their budget or their schedule. That moment is going to come, and although it's a heavy thing to talk about in church today, it's going to come for all of us soon, and that's why I want to share with you this little letter that Jesus wrote. It is just the perfect place to turn when you're struggling and facing the test of faithfulness. It's a letter you could read in less than 30 seconds, and it would be Jesus's booster shot to help you be faithful even if it's painful.

You see, about 2,000 years ago, Jesus wrote a hand-written letter through the apostle John to the Christians at the church of Smyrna. Smyrna was on the western coast of modern-day Turkey and back in those days, it was a hot spot for all things Roman, Roman culture, Roman sports, Roman governments, and especially the Roman gods, and that's what made things painful.

Back in those days one of the ways that you would prove that you were a true patriot, that you loved your country, was by burning a bit of incense to the Caesar as your lord, your god, and your savior, and that was the problem. The Christians couldn't and the Christians wouldn't because their Lord and Savior and God Jesus said, "You shall have no other gods", so they were seen as traitors, as a liability to the success of Smyrna and the Roman Empire and persecution came fast. For them, being faithful to Jesus meant a painful life. And so Jesus told his friend John to write these words. Here's what he said, Revelation 2 beginning with Verse 8, Jesus says, "To the angel of the church in Smyrna," that's probably a fancy way of saying, to the Pastor of the church in Smyrna, write this, "these are the words of him who is the first and the last who died and came to life again. I know," Jesus says. "I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know," Jesus says, "about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days."

Did you catch that? This is not a 'when God closes a door, he opens a window' kind of teaching. He says you know what else I know? I know what you're about to suffer. I know the devil's going to test you by throwing you in prison, and I know that you will suffer hardship for ten days. Write this down. It's the bad news that Jesus sends to this first century church. The bad news, he says, is lots and lots and lots of pain. Just like Eusebius would later research and record. In those days there was no such thing as easy, sappy, warm, fuzzy, Hallmarky Christianity. Jesus said you're going to suffer, and life will be painful. And here's a huge application that you can't miss. Their lives were not painful because they were less than faithful. When people think that being a good enough Christian will lead to a good life, they set themselves up for spiritual catastrophe.

Has anyone ever heard of one of the most popular Christian movements on the planet right now, the prosperity gospel? Ring a bell to some of you? The prosperity gospel basically says that if you are good enough, if you're faithful enough, if you believe enough, if you pray enough, and if you obey enough, God will make life less painful. Like, just hold on. Just keep praying, just get close to Jesus, just read your bible, just be serious about church, just give generously, and if you do that, you will experience your blessing and your breakthrough. If you have cancer, you'll be healed. If you're lonely, you'll find love. If you want a child, God will help you to conceive. God might close the door, but he'll throw open a window. You'll find the dream job. Just be faithful and life will be less painful. And it sounds so good, doesn't it?

Like who of us wouldn't want that? And globally right now, more than any other teaching, that is the one that is catching on like fire and spreading through Africa, South America, China, the planet. Who doesn't want healing and love and a family and their blessing? But I want to save you a crisis of faith today and tell you it ain't true. We worship the guy who was perfect in his faithfulness and ended up tortured on a cross, which is probably a clue that faithful does not

mean less painful. And so, I'm going to give it to you straight today, and you probably won't post this on Facebook or Instagram afterwards. Here's what I want you to know. It might not get better. Jesus says it here, "Satan will put some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer." And here is the test. Is God worth it? Like, if you ended up living by yourself, never having a family, divorced, widowed, lonely, eating Salisbury steak from a Hungry Man dinner on a 1992 little set up TV tray. If that was the rest of your life, would you love him? If it got more painful, would you still be as faithful?

Well, today Jesus wants to help you get there. Now, that makes me think of this Christian Bible study I recently heard of in the nation of Somalia. Have you heard -- Somalia is, I think, the third hardest place on planet earth right now to be a Christian. Like this right now would not happen in Somalia. You putting a little Jesus fish or Christian bumper sticker or having a tattoo, never going to happen in Somalia. If they find out you are a Christian, they will threaten you, harass you, imprison you, torture you, murder you, or ladies, marry you off to a man who will straighten out your soul one way or another.

But in that country, one of the coolest Bible studies is happening. There's this little group of believers that waits until the sun sets and one of the men from that Bible study, he creeps out of the village where no one can see him under the cover of darkness, and he goes to a cave near by the village and way in the back hidden there in the dirt is one of these. And he finds their only Bible. He sneaks it back into the village where the little group is waiting by candlelight, and they open and they worship with whispers. And they praise the Jesus who is infinitely worth it, and then before the sun comes up and it costs them everything, the man sneaks back to the cave. He drops off the Bible, and he gets back home and crawls into bed.

It's painful, but they are faithful. Here's what Jesus says at the end of our text. He said, "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, to the one who is victorious, who is faithful, will not be hurt at all by the second death." The second death is the one that comes after your physical death. It's what we might call hell, and Jesus says it will not hurt you at all. You won't even smell like a wisp of smoke because I will give you life as your victor's crown.

The hard reality of Christianity is that there might be lots and lots of pain, but write this down. Here's the beautiful promise that through Jesus, you and I get lots and lots and lots of God. You have forgiveness for everything you've ever done wrong. You have the hope of eternal life. You have an answer to death itself. You have a God who goes with you, a spirit who is your counselor, a Savior who is your friend, and a creator who calls himself your Father in heaven. My brothers and sisters, life can be hard and Christianity does not always make it easier, but Jesus says be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you life. So, here's what I want you to do. The next time you feel that tension, I want you to whisper or just say it in the silence of your own heart, "Be faithful." All right? When your friends are joking and they're kind of crossing the line into something that's gossip and that's just not good for anyone, be faithful. When your buddy, you know, you've been counting drinks with him because you've been drinking with him, and you know that next one is too many, be faithful. When you're with your boyfriend and you love him and he loves you and you kind of want him and he kind of wants you, but before you

get over the point of no return, be faithful and say something. When everyone else in the comment section agrees, but you know they're not agreeing with Jesus, be faithful. When your pastor isn't acting much like Jesus the Good Shepherd and you think who am I to say something to the pastor, be faithful. When you know you can't have their approval and Jesus's approval too, be faithful. Whisper it into your own heart, "Be faithful. Be faithful. Be faithful." It might make it harder in the moment, but Jesus said, "Forever and ever you will not regret it."

Let me leave you today with the story of Becket Cook. Becket Cook was a pretty famous Hollywood set designer, the kind of guy who would spend time with celebrities and stars, who once even partied with Paris Hilton and Prince himself, but in 2009 while just grabbing a random cup of coffee, Becket Cook's life turned upside down. He was sipping a caffeinated beverage when he noticed at a table next to him a bunch of people who were talking about spiritual things with open Bibles, coffee shop Bible study, and his curiosity and eavesdropping turned into a question which evolved into a conversation which led to the Christian's invitation which down the road became Becket's conversion. He became a follower of Jesus.

In fact, he was stunned as he started to attend their church, that all the preconceived ideas he had about the church and the Bible and Christianity and Christian people were totally undone, and what stuck him most was the goodness of the gospel that he had heard. He had spent his entire adult life in the contractual world where if you were not rich, famous, beautiful, and powerful, you were nothing. When and if you couldn't bring a good return on an investment, they would approve someone else. It was a cutthroat world, and Christianity was the opposite. It was the place for failures, sinners, outcasts, the oppressed, those who had nothing to offer. Grace reached to the bottom, and the faithfulness of Jesus saved him. He fell in love with the good news. But many of his friends did not. You see, Becket Cook was gay, and even though the desires did not go away in his heart, what he had found in Jesus was someone who was infinitely better than anything that this world could offer. And Jesus was not just his occasional counselor; he was his Lord and he was his Savior, and he trusted him even when the road was difficult. So, every feeling he had, every desire, every relationship, every hope, and every dream for this life he bowed the knee and submitted to the one who had given up his entire life for him. And his friends did not like that. Instead of celebrating the greater hope and confidence he had found in Jesus Christ, Becket lamented, "Jesus cost me. He cost me friends. He cost me really deep lifelong relationships."

So, why was he faithful? Here is Becket's answer, "The gain is God. Eternal life. This impenetrable joy of not only knowing Christ, but knowing the meaning of my life, where I came from, what I'm doing, where I'm going. This life gives me such peace." Friends, I hope you believe that too. Following Jesus will not be easy. Faithfulness will cost you. For some of us it will cost us everything we have, but be faithful. Be faithful. Be faithful. Jesus might add lots and lots of pain to your plate, but he gives you infinitely more in return. He gives you lots and lots and lots of God. And in the end, there's nothing that matters more than that. Let's pray.

Dear Father in heaven, thank you for forever. We can't see the happiness of that moment right now, and that's why it's so hard to sometimes believe that you are worthy and you are worth it.

I pray especially for the younger brothers and sisters who are here today, the children, the teenagers, the 20-somethings, those who don't have enough experience just yet to realize that life goes so fast, that even when hard months and years and even decades fly by, we blink, and we see someone who looks different in the mirror. God, give them wisdom beyond their age that they would believe that even though the days themselves might feel long, life itself is short, but you God, endure forever. Send your Holy Spirit to open the eyes of their heart and all of our hearts that we would actually believe that Jesus is worthy, that he's worth it, that he's beautiful, that he is preferable to anything this world could ever offer us.

And now, I pray, Father, that we would be faithful. Help us not to water down your truth and help us never to fall short of love. Instead fill us up just like your son was perfectly in our place full of grace and full of truth. Help us to be faithful.

I ask you, Holy Spirit, to help us in those moments. It's going to happen this week in a conversation, in a texting thread, online, face to face. There's going to be a moment when we want to chicken out, when it would be easier to not be faithful. Help us to stand strong, to be unashamed of the gospel, and to believe all things, Lord, that you are worth it. We ask you for strength today. We thank you for the heaviness of this message but a message that many of us will need to hear. We ask in the glorious name of our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.