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The Suffering Church

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Series: What's Wrong With the Church?
Revelation 2:8-11

**BIG IDEA – GOD HAS A PURPOSE IN THE PAIN AND A STRATEGY
IN THE SUFFERING**

All right, Two Cities Church. It is an exciting time to be at Two Cities Church. There are many reasons for that. If you're new, it's a great time to be new because we're all kind of being new together in this building, whatever this means. We've been in this building now, if you're new, for six weeks. Here's what's interesting. I'm just trying to figure it out with you, so I'm just going to tell you what we're experiencing.

Since we got into this building six weeks ago, we have grown by 1,000 people. I know, it's exciting. We're excited about that, but I have, we have, one major question...*Who are you?* Where did you come from? Why are you here? We're excited that you're here. We want you to take your next step. That's why we're talking about the Weekender.

Okay. Do the math. About 800 new adults and 200 new kids. That's how it breaks out. So, out of the 800 adults, 230 of you are coming to this Weekender. Amen? We're excited. But 800 minus 230 is still a lot of you need to come, so I want to let you know about this. This coming weekend, the 26th and 27th, I want to invite you and your family to the Weekender.

What is the Weekender? Let me just tell you what it's not. It's helpful to know what things are not. The Weekender is not a theology class, although, yes, we're going to tell you what we believe. We always try to make the main things the plain things and the plain things the main things, but it's not a theology class.

It's not a membership class. Yeah, we think membership is great. You could take your next step toward membership afterward if you want to, but that's not what it's there

for. It's not even a connections class, although (even though you don't listen to me sometimes on this, it's okay) if you don't get in a group and on a serving team, you really won't get all you could out of our church. But it's not even about that.

If our mission here is to make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship, we can't disciple you... We can't come alongside you and help you disciple your family if you're not in our church and we don't know who you are. We're just going to figure it out together. We have plenty of space. Make it hard on us. Sign up for the Weekender. Get in. We're super excited.

Secondly, for those of us who have been around for a little bit, you got this prayer guide last week. I don't know if you noticed this, but on Wednesdays we're fasting together as a church. If you didn't know that, gotcha. You didn't do the prayer guide this week. It's okay. We want you to take your first step, your next step, and sometimes the humiliating thing is you have to go, "It's a baby step for me."

Some of you go, "I've never fasted in my whole life." That's okay. Wherever you are, that's where you start. We're saying, "Hey, on Wednesdays what if you skipped breakfast and lunch?" If you can't handle that, just skip one of them. If you can't do Wednesday, do a different day. The whole idea with fasting is I give up food to go deeper with God.

My Community Group and I did this this week, and we were texting each other throughout the day. You know, "How's it going? How's the fasting going?" Here's what you'll realize when you don't eat for a meal or two. You're going to experience physical hunger. That physical hunger should remind you of your spiritual hunger. Anyway, I hope you'll join us in this journey.

Guys, I'm going to say it until you're tired of hearing me say it or maybe at least until you go, "Maybe he's serious about this." We are going to make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship. That's what we're going to do. So, if we're going to have an environment of prayer and worship, this prayer guide comes alongside hopefully to help serve you, your family, and your Community Group. Let's pray, and then we'll dive into our series.

Lord, thank you for the men and women in here. We want to be an environment of prayer and worship, but not just this room. We want every room we're in, whether it's the dining room table or the bedroom with our kids before we go to bed at night... Wherever it is, would you create environments of prayer and worship, of dependence and adoration, Lord?

Lord, we pray for all the new people. People are afraid to go from unknown to known. I get that, Lord. We pray that many people would take their next step to get deeply connected to community. We know from Scripture it takes a church to raise and disciple a Christian. We pray that many more, even this weekend, would take their next step. In Jesus' name, amen.

There are three things I have to tell you at the beginning today about the church. We're going to be talking about the church for six more weeks, so get used to it. What I want to do at the beginning is tell you guys different things about the church that I want you to know. Here are three things.

First... I thought about this a lot and how I was going to word this, so I hope this hits you. *The most important thing about any church is what every true church has in common.* Did you hear what I said? The most important thing about any church (and there are, like, 500 here in Winston) is what every true church has in common. That's good to know.

If it's a true church, it's going to preach the Bible. If it's a true church, it's going to have baptism and the Lord's Supper. If it's a true church, it's going to deal with sin. If it's a true church, it's going to make disciples. If it's a true church, it's going to sing praises to God. You get it.

There's a second thing about the church you have to know. *Every church is different.* So, the most important thing about any church is what they all have in common and what's the same, but every church is different. In fact, that's why you choose a church. There are a lot of churches. You choose a church based on what's different.

Sometimes it's the location. "I want something downtown." "I want something in the suburbs." "I want something in the country." Sometimes it's the leadership. You benefit from the gift set of the leaders in that church. Sometimes it's the people in the church, because they have their own passions. "Okay. This has a lot of college students. We have a big medical community."

There's a third thing I want you to know. Every church is the same in what's most important, and every church is different, and that means they have different temptations and struggles. You get that. The third thing is *there's no such thing as a perfect church.* If you've found the perfect church, please do not join it because you would ruin it. Two Cities Church is a perfect example of an imperfect church.

I want to talk to you about (and we've been looking at) what Jesus has to say to the church, which is what he actually has to say to different churches because every church has different struggles. There are seven churches in the next... We have six

weeks left including this week. Sometimes he commends. Sometimes he confronts. Sometimes he comforts.

There are only two churches that Jesus does not confront them about anything. One of them, if you'll type to Revelation 2:8, we're going to meet today: the church at Smyrna. It's only the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia that he has nothing negative to say. Do you want to know why? You probably don't want to know why because you're not going to like the reason. I didn't like the reason.

The two churches that are doing the greatest that Jesus has nothing negative to say about... Guess what? They're both suffering immensely. Oh, you didn't want me to say it. This is true biblically. This is true historically. This is true globally. The suffering churches are the strongest churches. Why? Because suffering does two things to the church. It purifies it and it unifies it.

What do I mean by it *purifies* it? Okay. If this church really started to suffer, all of you casual, cultural Christians... Here's what you'd be doing: "Good luck with all of that." When the church is suffering, it purifies the church and unifies the church. You don't have time to worry about your goofy personal preferences. You don't have time.

Same thing with a nation. Remember when 9/11 happened? It was like, "We have an enemy, and we're all suffering." Bush's approval rating was at 86 percent. Why? Because "We have to be united. We have a common enemy." Today I want to read to you the shortest and most straightforward letter of all of the seven letters to the church at Smyrna.

Look here. Revelation 2:8-11. It's really short. Imagine this, guys. You're the pastor of the church. You're the leader of the church. "Guys, we got a letter from Jesus." "Great. I'm sure it's encouraging. Let's see it." Okay. Here's what it says. ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'"*** Okay. I'm encouraged so far.

"I know your tribulation..." You can just write *pain, problems, pressures, or persecution. "...and your poverty..."* "You're in pain and you're poor." ***"...(but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."*** Okay. Jesus, I'm not super encouraged.

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation." Did Jesus not read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*? This isn't encouraging. Maybe it'll get better. Here it goes. ***"Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

The church at Smyrna is being attacked. Every church, whether it's aware of it or not, is always being attacked. The question is just *how* the church is attacked. There are three ways. If you are interested in this, you may want to write this down. I'm going to return to this week in and week out. There are only, always, three ways the church is attacked.

First, the church's mind is attacked through *false teaching*. We will not deal with that today, but we *will* deal with that next week. The church basically begins to believe and, therefore, behave just like the world. They no longer have anything to encourage and challenge and equip the church with. They no longer have anything to say to the world. They lose the gospel. We see that all the time. I could just take you into our city or anywhere around the nation and go, "False teaching. False teaching." Okay. You got it.

The second thing is *worldliness*. If you think about it, the first attack is on the mind and the second attack is on the soul. It says, "Don't be different, and don't be distinct. Say that you believe all of the things you believe in your mind, but have a different value system. Have the value system of the world." That happens all the time. The world loses its distinction, and if you want to make a difference, you have to be different.

Now, here's the interesting thing. Satan likes to use those two strategies first, and for most churches and most Christians they work. When they don't work, he moves into the third category, *persecution*, which is against the body or, for us a lot of times, against the emotions. I want you to see today that what Jesus is going to speak he's going to speak to a church that is suffering.

For some of you, this is a sermon for today. You get it. You're like, "No one even knows" or "I'm going through so much. I'm suffering." I don't know what percentage of you. For some of you, this sermon is for today. You're like, "It's for me. Thank you, Kyle. This is what I needed." For a lot of you, this is not a sermon for today; it's for tomorrow.

I mean, I read this passage. Could you imagine? You read this passage, and you're getting ready to preach on this. What do you say to *you*? Life is pretty comfortable. Things are going well. You're busy and excited about the future, not experiencing a lot of suffering. As a church, we're in a brand-new building. I mean, how do you talk about facing death and being slandered? We're going to figure it out together.

It's interesting. As I've been teaching the Bible week in and week out in this church now for seven and a half years, I've been surprised by how often two themes come up. The first theme: suffering. The second theme: sex. Some of you are like, "I'm tired of you talking about both of them." Okay. Great.

Why does the Bible talk so much about suffering and so much about sex? Because God cares a lot about our pain and our pleasure. I want you to know this about suffering. You have to know this today, by the way. We'll get to this later, I think, if we have time. The time to get ready for suffering is now. You negotiate in peacetime, and you get ready for suffering before you suffer. There are certain things you have to know now.

So, here's a theology of suffering from God's perspective. Suffering is part of God's strategy. That takes an element of faith. You need to see that in Scripture, see that in the life of Job, see that in the life of Christ. Or maybe another way to say it is God has a purpose in your pain and a lesson in your loss.

Now, the Bible doesn't give and I don't, therefore, have the micro-answers to your questions of "Why me? Why now? Why this?" I don't know that. We do know that all suffering serves two major purposes, and that's really easy to answer from the Bible. Why is there suffering in the world? Which is, by the way, called *theodicy*...a defense of God in the face of suffering. That's easy to answer.

The answer is the purpose of all suffering is your maturity and God's mission or your good as defined by Scripture and God's glory. Those are easy to answer. Not easy to emotionally accept, but from Scripture easy to answer. What I want to do with our time left is I want us to look at the church of Smyrna. By the way, you can kind of hear it in the word. Myrrh was made there.

Myrrh was a flower that when crushed became an oil. All of the women are like, "Yes. It was the first essential oil." There it is. You're like, "I'm listening. He has my attention." It's interesting. Most people notice this. Myrrh is crushed and, therefore, has a bright, beautiful fragrance that comes from being crushed. The church at Smyrna is crushed and is beautiful in God's sight because of that and in that moment.

Smyrna is an interesting place. A lot of famous people are from Smyrna. Homer is from Smyrna. Not *that* Homer. Not Homer Simpson. No, the guy who wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *That* Homer. Polycarp... You've probably never heard of Polycarp, but Polycarp was one of the first famous bishops. He was discipled by John.

Smyrna is what's called a *second city*. It's like the second-best city in its province. So it was the second-best city in Asia Minor. Ephesus was the best city. We talked about

it last week. That was the first city. Ephesus was Charlotte. Smyrna was Raleigh. Charlotte is like, "We've got the Hornets and the Panthers" and Raleigh is like, "We have the Hurricanes, for those of you who watch hockey."

It was a second city. With the time we have left, I want you to see what Jesus says to a church that is deeply suffering but is being faithful. The first thing Jesus does is he tells them about him. Look here. This is in verse 8. ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'"***

This is what Jesus does. He meets you where you are with who he is. That is such a deep idea. I'll try to return to it later. Basically, with every church he doesn't explain who he is the exact same way. He takes an attribute of himself that you most need to know in the moment.

So, *first and last*... Here's what he's saying. Let me try to bring it down. He's saying, "I was there at the beginning, and I will be there at the end, which means I'm with you every step of the way." It's another way for God to say, "I don't change," which is good because everything else *does* change. You change, and you probably *should* change, and you probably *need* to change.

One of my personal pet peeves... I don't know if they still do high school yearbooks, but remember your high school yearbook? Do you remember what your girlfriend or your boyfriend wrote on the back cover of it or maybe your best friend wrote? "Never change." It's like, "I'm 17! All I want to do is change." We should change. God never changes, and that's the comfort. The comfort is that though everything in your life changes, God is the one constant.

Jesus comes, and he reveals himself. He says, "I am the first and the last." Then he says this. Follow me here. He says, ***"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)..."*** Imagine this. He says, "I know your tribulation and your poverty." It's one thing to have tribulation. I told you earlier...problems, pressures, pain, and persecution. It's another to have those and be poor.

Some of you will never understand and never have understood what it is to be poor. When horrible things come into your life and you also don't have the money to deal with them, it is a whole other level of problem. Jesus is going to show us a couple of things today that I think are really important to know about suffering, but in larger part they're just a good thing to know about the Christian message and the Christian faith and the Christian walk and being a Christian disciple.

01 FOLLOWING CHRIST WILL AFFECT YOU FINANCIALLY

Here's the first one. You saw it in verse 9. I'll just unpack it for us. *Following Christ will affect you financially.* It's very simple. We can talk about all of the reasons why, but following Christ affected the church at Smyrna financially. They're in poverty. They're not just poor because they're poor. We'll talk about that in a minute. They're poor in *this* situation because they're following Christ. We don't know all of the reasons.

Did the government do something to them because they wouldn't worship Caesar? We don't know. Did they lose their business? Did they lose their dignity in culture? We don't know. What we know is they were poor in large part because they were following Jesus. Now, obviously, everyone who follows Jesus isn't going to be poor, but everybody who follows Jesus will have their finances affected.

Or here's the way Jesus says it: it is going to cost you to follow Christ. That seems so strange even though that's Christianity 101. "Take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me." We continually are looking for a costless Christianity. Let me say it another way. If we're talking about finances, here's what I know about you and you know about me and *you* know about you: your faith is shown or shows up in your finances.

God created the world, and it can't be any other way. Sorry. What you believe you can lie about or you can think you believe certain things, but what you believe will always, always, always show up in your budget. So, if you believe in the stock market, it's going to show up. You're going to invest there. Several years ago, there were those of you who believed in cryptocurrency, and you're very sad right now. It was a wrong belief. But you did that.

One of the questions you could ask about where you're spending your money is "What am I believing?" Okay. Here's something to think about. Why if I follow Christ will it affect my finances? One answer is because you can't meet Jesus and have any dimension of your life stay the same, so that makes sense.

But if you just took the 101 things the Bible says about money, possessions, wealth, property, or any of those, and you said, "Okay. I'm going to read the Bible and *tithe* means tithe and *tithe* means 10 percent, so I'm going to..." Just think about this for a second if you did this. You said, "Well, then I'm going to give 10 percent of my hard-earned money to God's purposes in the world."

Well, then you'd have to look around. I mean, don't say this out loud, but you look around at somebody who makes the exact same amount of money as you who's not a Christian and go, "I can't live like them. I've already decided that 10 percent is going

to go to the kingdom of God, so I'm already behind." That's maybe what the world would say. "I'm going to live off of 90 percent of what everybody else who makes what I make does. That has to affect my house, maybe my car."

Then if you do things like have a value for what the Bible teaches on simplicity or sacrifice... Anyway, let me be clear. Following Christ will affect your finances. Let me say one or two more things about that. We do not believe in the prosperity gospel or the poverty gospel. The *prosperity gospel* says, "The more God loves you the wealthier you'll be." The *poverty gospel* says, "The poorer you are the more God loves you."

There is no inherent virtue in being poor or being rich. In fact, did you notice? He says in the text, "I know your poverty, but you're rich." How can that be true at the same time? We know you actually can't be poor and rich at the same time unless there are different types of poverty and different types of riches. What is he saying? "You are financially poor, but you are spiritually rich."

Listen. There are four types of people in the world. This is kind of an interesting matrix to see life through. There are people who are financially rich and spiritually poor. What do we call them? *Americans*. They are the hardest people on earth to reach, because when all of your physical, all of your social, all of your emotional, and all of your temporal needs are met, it is very hard to feel your spiritual needs.

There are people who are financially rich and also spiritually rich. That is a very, very, very, very, very, very, very small number of Christians through all of world history and even today, but they tend to be the Christians who get the gospel to go all over the rest of the world.

There are people who are financially poor but spiritually rich. Who's that? Most Christians everywhere else outside of America. In fact, let me tell you what happens, because we want you to go on a mission trip, and you'll go on a mission trip at some point, I'm sure. I've led some and been on a lot of mission trips. Let me tell you the two phases of a mission trip if you've never been on one.

Here's phase one of a mission trip. We get off the plane. We're in Africa. We're in India. We're in Central America. It doesn't matter where we are. Everyone gets off the plane. The first thing everyone does... "*Gasp!* Look at the poverty. They don't have water in their house." You visit someone's home. "Did you see that there were six of them living in that one room?" You're there for a couple of days. "Did you notice everybody here wears the same outfit every day because they only have one outfit?"

You have to just go through that. Everybody does. Every person who does their first short-term mission trip goes through the "I can't believe the poverty" phase. Here's step two of every short-term mission trip: "I can't believe how joyful they are. I can't believe all of these Christians here are happier than I am, even though they have so much less than me." They are financially poor, but they are deeply spiritually rich.

Then there are people who are financially poor and spiritually poor. Guess who they are: all of the people left all over the world who have yet to hear the gospel. Let me give you a phrase, because I want us to learn more about world missions. There's something called *unreached, unengaged people*. Here's what that means: no Bible, no believer, no church building.

Why are the unreached people still unreached? Because they're very hard to reach. You're like, "That was very simple." It's not a clever name. They're called *unreached* for a reason. Why are they so hard to reach? Do *you* want to live in northern India? Do you have any idea what it's like to live in northern India? I knew a guy who lived in northern India. He said the electricity worked some of the time.

My friend who was a missionary in India said, "You know what, Kyle? When I'm in America, the living is so easy, but the people's hearts are so hard." He said, "When I was in India, the living was so hard, but the people's hearts were so soft." Following Christ will affect you financially. This is something every Christian has always known.

02 FOLLOWING CHRIST WILL AFFECT YOU SOCIALLY

Secondly, I want you to see this. Turn back with me to verse 9 again. ***"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."*** This is not going to be a super-encouraging sermon for you guys. Second point: *following Christ will affect you socially or relationally.*

Do you see *slander* there? *Slander* basically means to make false or damaging statements to hurt a person's reputation. This was cancel culture in the first century. I think some of us understand that following Christ is going to affect us financially. I mean, your mom taught you it. Your dad taught you it. Your youth pastor taught you it. You just learned it.

"If I get a dollar, I give a dime. If I get 10, I give a dollar. If I get 100, I give 10." You got it. In some ways, that was easy for you to get. This is the hard one, because some of you just want to be liked. You want everyone to like you, which is the

immature dream of a 14-year-old girl. That's what that is. "Everybody will like me" is the immature dream of a 14-year-old boy or girl.

Here's what Jesus is telling us: not everybody is going to like you. Here's another part of that: not everyone is going to understand you. It's hard on us. As Christians, we want to be understood. We're often misunderstood. People say things about us that aren't true. Guys, this is ancient.

This group of people in Smyrna, along with many Christians in the first century... Let me tell you what they said about them. They called them *atheists*. Now that doesn't make sense to us, because we're like, "Wait. No, they worshiped Jesus." Yes, but they would only worship one God instead of many gods, and they wouldn't put any idols or images of their God out there. "Oh, so they were called *atheists*." Yes.

Secondly, they were called *cannibals*. You're like, "Okay. I don't get that." They misunderstood the Lord's Supper and what Christians were doing. They said, "You eat people's body and drink their blood? You are a cannibal." Now they weren't. They were misunderstood. They couldn't explain themselves. No one wanted to listen.

They were thought of as being against the nuclear family. Why? Because Christians were the first people to take familial language, *brother* and *sister*, and use it outside of the nuclear, biological family of origin. They were considered against the government. Christians aren't against the government. We want to pray for our leaders. We want to live at peace. But they wouldn't worship Caesar.

Okay. Today, how does this work? Well, there are many things people are going to say. First of all, they're going to call us *intolerant*. I'm tempted to say a lot about that, but I'm going to preach a whole sermon on tolerance and intolerance in a few weeks, because Jesus says to one of the churches, "You tolerate what you shouldn't."

So, some churches are too tolerant. Yes, we'll get there. But just know we're going to be called *intolerant* because we can't affirm and celebrate all beliefs, perspectives, lifestyles, and ideologies. Secondly, we're going to be called *narrow-minded* or *primitive* or *archaic* or *prudish*. Who knows. I don't know what it is. That's because we believe in something instead of everything.

We're going to be called... By the way, it's okay, but some of you are going to misunderstand this when I say this right now. We're going to be considered against women's rights, because the pro-abortion, pro-death, pro-choice movement has put abortion, wrongly, in the category of women's health care and women's rights. Dare I say no one has done more for women than Jesus Christ.

Now, here's what you have to do. The more you get into leadership and the more public of a person you are and the more people you have under you... I've had to learn all of these lessons. You have to learn to trust God with two things. First, you need to learn to trust God with your salvation. That's how you become a Christian. "Lord, I give you my sin. I give you myself. I can't earn it." We get that, hopefully. We talk about that a lot. We'll talk about it at the end.

After you trust God with your salvation, there's another movement a lot of people haven't gotten to. Here's the second movement, especially if you're a leader: "I trust God with my reputation." Some of you are so concerned with protecting your reputation instead of building your character.

Now, John pulls back the veil and tells us who's behind the slander. Look. I'll show you this. This is really interesting. Verse 9: ***"...and the slander of those who say that 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 throw some of you into prison..."***

He uses both the *Devil* and *Satan* as two different names for the same person. He's telling us that behind the slandering is Satan. Behind what looks like our enemies is our true Enemy. Let me say it this way. You and I, if you're a Christian, have a spiritual, personal, intelligent enemy. I thought about all four of those words for a while. We have a personal, spiritual, intelligent enemy.

You actually know this. You won't want to admit this, and you don't have to share this with anybody. Just think about this between you and me right now. Think about all of your temptations. When you think about your temptations, if you're really honest, you'll go, "It's so interesting when they happen. It's like at the worst time or maybe the best time for them to happen for me to do something, and they feel unique to me. Like, it's what my dad struggled with."

If you could be this honest, you might say something like, "It feels like it was designed for me." It was. We have a personal, intelligent, spiritual enemy. It's good to know this, because then you don't have to be mad at your coworker. She's not your enemy. He's not your enemy. Look. When the Bible says, "Love your enemies," it's talking about people who hate you, not anyone you hate.

From the Christian perspective looking out, we have zero enemies except for Satan. When the Bible talks about our enemies, it's talking about people who don't like us. The reason we can have compassion on them is we're able to see the Enemy behind the enemy.

Then there's another something that's sad that you see in this. He calls them a *synagogue of Satan*. Could you imagine if that was the name of a church? "Oh, this is First Church of Satan." Here's what he's saying: sometimes persecution happens from within the church. It's not as common. It's normally outside, and it's by the world. We'll try to talk about that a little bit too.

Every once in a while... Thank God this has not happened much here. We've had a couple little cases here and there. It's when there's persecution from within. This will drive especially... I mean, I've seen this. This will wear out pastors. It's like, "My deacons are persecuting me? Are you kidding me?"

It's like, "Oh, I get it. That makes sense. The couple that I did all their premarital counseling with and we also married and we also commissioned their kid... They're turning on us?" "The rogue staff person? What?" This happens a lot more than you might realize. People from within become divisive and have their own agendas.

03 COMFORT: JESUS' WORD FOR THE SUFFERING

Jesus tells us you will be affected financially, and you will be affected socially in following Christ, but he wants to comfort us. I want to show you this. He says, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

Jesus wants us to expect and, therefore, prepare for suffering. Our problem is we do not expect suffering. Most of us have some version of "My life is going to go like *this* across time. It's going to get better, I'm going to be healthy, my kids are going to be well behaved, and we're going to make more money every year." All of us think that somehow we're going to die at 90 years old with a Bible on our chest in our sleep.

I don't know what happened. I don't know where it's from, but the expectations we have for our lives are wrong. Jesus says we need to not be surprised. We're not pursuing suffering, but we should not be surprised by suffering. Then here's the other thing about suffering: the time to get ready for suffering is now.

My biblical counseling professor in seminary... He was a great guy. He walked with a lot of people through suffering. I remember he was talking to a group of us. We were young seminarians at the time. He said, "Guys, if you're a pastor and someone is deeply suffering and you bring them, in the midst of their suffering, a book on

suffering..." He said, "The best thing you should do is light that book on fire in front of them and warm them with the book." You can't learn about it when you're in it.

So, what you need is an understanding of God (we said this on our Vision Sunday) that's better than your sin and bigger than your suffering, and you need that *before* you suffer. Then the other thing you need is Christian community. You need relationship. Whenever somebody says, "I don't need a Community Group," I know what they mean. "I'm not suffering." That's what they mean.

What they say is, "We're busy, and the kids with amusements and activities and athletics and academics. We can't fit it into our schedule." It's like, "Okay." I've never heard a suffering person say that. A suffering person is like, "I definitely need this." For example, there are different types of insurance. You doctors, when you become residents and fellows, all of these guys show up who want to sell you disability insurance. Right? We know about disability insurance.

You know about life insurance. You have your kid, and everyone is like, "Life insurance. Life insurance. Life insurance." You get your first job. "How's their health insurance? Health insurance. Health insurance." Okay. Fair enough. I have one for you: relational insurance. What are the relationships you're investing in right now so when the proverbial poo of life hits the fan (sorry for the illustration) you're ready for it? When suffering happens, you're going to need God and a group.

Jesus says a couple of things to the suffering. First, he says, "I know." I didn't point this out, but if you go back to verse 9, he says, "***I know your tribulation...***" Do you know that sometimes you just need to know that Jesus knows? This is actually true in all of life. If something happens... Have you ever had this? A couple of you have had this happen. You get such bad news you need to tell people in person.

It's like, "Oh no. I'm driving six or seven hours because this isn't a phone call. This is surprise Mom and Dad in the middle of the night to tell them this." Most times when you have really bad news people can't fix it, obviously. You know they can't fix it, and they know they can't fix it, but you're like, "I just needed to know that now you know."

That's a big moment in people's lives. "I got the diagnosis, and you know." "Our marriage is a mess, and you know." "Our daughter is breaking our hearts, and we haven't been able to tell anyone for six months, but now someone else knows." So, the first thing Jesus wants you to know is that he knows.

Secondly, he says, "Don't fear." He's saying, "You're going to suffer." This is an encouraging message. "You're going to suffer and then go to prison, but don't worry; you're going to die." It's like, "Uh, okay." Part of what makes suffering so much worse

than it needs to be is we're afraid of it. One of the reasons is we think about the future apart from the grace of God. God does not waste his grace. He'll give you grace in the moment when you're suffering.

We're in different places in this room. Some of you have suffered immensely, and every once in a while you read the book of Job and are like, "Are God and Satan conspiring against me?" Almost everybody will feel like that once or twice in their life. "Are God and Satan up there conspiring against me?"

But have you ever not suffered very much, and you're kind of like, "Is he going to notice?" Have you ever worried about that? God is going to look at Gabriel or Michael and be like, "Do you see John down there? Go get him. He has not gotten what he needs." We are afraid of suffering because we think about the future apart from the grace of God in it.

Then he says one other thing. I want you to see this. ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer."*** We talked about that. ***"Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

It's very simple. It's not easy to follow, but Jesus' advice in the face of suffering is "Do not fear and be faithful." What does it mean to be faithful? It means I believe God's promises even in my pain. Now, here's the hard thing. It's very hard to find people who are faithful today. *Faithful* means I keep going. I don't quit. I don't give up. I don't give in.

See, we live in a time where... "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. You don't like your college? Go ahead and transfer. You don't like your job? Go ahead and quit. You don't like your city? Go ahead and move." Obviously, I'm not saying that can never happen and not be legitimate, but we live in a world where we have let our kids get out of everything all the time so they never learn the stick-with-it faithfulness.

He says, "I want you to be faithful." See, here's what happens. Whenever you experience temptation or trial...either one...pain or pleasure that could take you away from Christ, you'll have to decide... There are only two options in suffering or in temptation. "Am I going to continue or am I going to compromise?"

I'm just trying to tell you right now... Please make this decision. We'll walk with you. We're going to help you. You're going to have to decide, "Am I going to continue to believe what God has said or am I going to compromise?" I'm not a doomsday person. I want to let you know this. You already know this. When I say this, you're going to go, "Yeah, this is true, Kyle."

We are in the midst of a moral revolution as a society. Three things have to happen for a moral revolution to happen. First, what was condemned is now celebrated. I bet you could think of a couple of things that used to be condemned that are now celebrated. That's stage one. Most of us were asleep at the wheel when that happened. "This isn't that bad. That's not that big of a deal. We'll let everyone do whatever they want to do."

Okay. Stage two: whatever used to be celebrated is now condemned. You're like, "Yeah. Why is everyone picking on me? I'm just trying to do what everyone has always done." Not anymore you're not, because what's condemned is celebrated and what's celebrated is condemned. Then the third one hasn't happened yet, but it's coming. Well, maybe not. Maybe things will change. Those who will not celebrate will be condemned.

Just remember that I said this, because this is going to be true. There is no hiding. You can hide for a little bit. Your HR department is not going to let you hide. "Are you going to put the pronouns up or not?" There's nowhere to hide. So, you just have to say, "Not everybody is going to like me. Not everybody is going to understand. I'm going to be warm and winsome and humble and self-deprecating in how I do it, but I'm not going to compromise; I'm going to continue."

Let me tell you what else is going to happen to some of you and you're going to compromise. Have you ever heard of moral relativism? *Moral relativism* is like, "I don't know what's right. I don't know what's wrong. All lifestyles are fine." Let me tell you how, ostensibly, people like *you* in churches like *this* become relativists: they have a relative.

How real do you want me to get right now? Your son wants to live an alternative lifestyle, and you raised him very differently than that. It's all confusing. Thanksgiving is confusing. Christmas is confusing. The potential wedding is really confusing. What you do afterward is confusing. Wouldn't it just be easier if you compromised?

You're going to have to decide today that you're going to continue. You have to know today there's nowhere to hide. They're going to come for you. They're going to ask you your sexual ethic. Just get used to it. If you're a doctor, it's coming. If you're a lawyer, it's coming. It's coming. Here's what he says. You only have to be faithful... He says, "Not for very long. Just until you die." Okay, Jesus.

It's interesting, because when bad things happen to us, what do we think? Here's what we normally say. This is a colloquial saying in our world today: "It could be worse." Have you ever heard that? Something happens, and you look and go, "Well,

at least we're not the Joneses. You saw what happened to the Smiths. Thank God we're not them. It could be worse."

Paul doesn't do that. John doesn't do that. He never says, "It could be worse." He always says, "It's going to get a lot better." He says, "Be faithful unto death." Now listen. This is such a strange thing. Believe me. I understand how strange it is for me to talk to you today about you getting ready to die.

For most of us, this is so strange. We're like, "Where are we, and who even talks about these things?" You only get to die once. Okay? There are a lot of things you get to do many times. You get to die one time. One of your goals for your life should be that you would die well. Obviously, that means you die trusting Jesus.

How about this? What if you could die and still have your sense of humor? That wouldn't be a bad goal because of all that it would mean. What would it mean if you still had your sense of humor? "I'm not bitter. I'm not hopeless. Everything isn't staked here. I can have a self-deprecating... I can make my daughter laugh on my deathbed. I'm not angry. I'm not revengeful."

04 WE MUST THINK ABOUT WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT

He says, "Be faithful unto death," because he reminds them of one last thing. Let me show you this and we'll be done. He says, *"Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."*

I need to end (as if this has been appropriate already) in talking about something that is not for polite conversation. Do you know what I'm talking about? You know people, right? You wouldn't talk about what I'm about to talk about at a country club dinner. What I'm about to do is not good manners.

I recently saw *Sound of Freedom*, which I recommend you see. It's a movie on the horrors of sex trafficking. It's hard to watch. In the movie they talk about why they can't make any progress with the sex trafficking industry, and one of the things they said is it's not a conversation for polite conversation. It's like, "Do you want me to tell you what they do to 6-year-old boys?" No, you don't. It's like, "Okay."

It's very hard to get anywhere until we are able to look at something and say, "This is horrible, and we have to talk about it." Well, that's how this passage ends. It talks about the second death, which is very horrible. Some of you have never heard of the

second death. Just like when we talked about riches and poverty... You know, there are two types of riches and two types of poverty.

The Bible speaks of two types of life and two types of death. When you're born physically, that's your first birth. When you're born spiritually, when you become a Christian, that's your second birth. Billy Graham didn't come up with this phrase. We call it being *born again*. When you die physically, that's your first death. If you haven't trusted Christ, the Bible describes hell, hades, the lake of fire, as the second death.

Now, that's intense, so let me just show you, just so you see it really quickly. Go to Revelation 20. I just don't want you to think I'm making this up. I'm quoting Revelation. ***"Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire."*** Okay. We got the definition of it.

Here's what I want you to know. I know you want me to be done with my sermon, but in about a hundred years you're all going to be glad I talked about this. Christians are born twice and die once. Non-Christians are born once and die twice. What's interesting is... The church cares about suffering. This is why I'm giving 50 minutes to talk about suffering. I want you to understand this.

We (Two Cities Church, Christians all over the world) care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering. So, what Jesus does at the very end to people who are about to face death... He tells them, "Don't worry; you will escape the second death." To some of us who are modern... Our world has shrunk to our weekly schedule, and we don't think anything of eternity or the life to come. That seems not important.

When you are facing death, Jesus wants you to know death is just a doorway, if you're a believer, and there's nothing but good on the other side. If you go back and look at this letter, Jesus starts and ends with the exact same themes: life and death. Why? Because Jesus wants you to know, "I am going to come to you as I am, and I am going to meet you where you are."

The other thing Jesus wants us to know... He says at the beginning, "I'm the one who died and came back to life." He wants you to know this, Christian: "I have already been where you're going to go." So, this is the great truth. You're going through suffering? Jesus is like, "I've already been there. I don't ask people to go anywhere I haven't gone. I've already been where you're going to go."

Or you have to go through death. "I've already been where you're going to go." Or you're going to be poor. "I've already been there. I know the way around. I know the way through." That's what you want from a tour guide in a dangerous place. "Don't worry, guys. I'm here all the time. I've been here. Follow me."

"Oh, you're slandered? Don't worry. I was rejected by the religious leaders of the day and the political leaders of the day. My family didn't understand me. The disciples didn't understand me. I've been where you've been." At the cross, Jesus experienced the first death and the second death. You have to see it with eyes of faith. Jesus died physically, but he experienced the punishment and wrath of God, the second death.

So, here's what Jesus says to the Christian. Listen. "Wherever you're going, I've already been." Then he says, "If you trust in me, I went somewhere where you will no longer have to go. I went and experienced the full punishment of God in your place so that you, because of my life, death, and resurrection, can have the crown of life." When you know that, it helps you to face the future without fear, and it helps you to commit to being faithful. Would you bow your heads with me for a moment?

Lord, all around this room I want to give people a chance to respond. The Word of God is taught and given to us not to increase our knowledge but to change our lives, Lord, and we want to respond. We want to pray and obey and sing and bring. We're going to sing about the Son of suffering in a minute. I would imagine in a room like this there are people all over this room who may have realized, "Oh my! I have only been born once, which means I'm going to die twice." Lord, we care about all people.

If you're in here today and you want to believe... I can't make you believe. I can just set up the meeting between you and the Lord. The Bible says if you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. You can escape the second death today by placing your faith in Jesus Christ. If you do that, I want to give you an opportunity afterward to come forward and talk to our prayer team and our elders who are on the side.

Lord, we want to be a church that suffers well. Help us to know today and every day that suffering is part of your ordained strategy, that there's a purpose in the pain, there's always a lesson in the loss, and everything is working together for our good and your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.