

“Smyrna: Dead Yet Alive Again,” Revelation 2:8-11 (Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017)

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.

⁹“ ‘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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.’

PRAY

We are in the book of Revelation on Sunday mornings, looking at the letters written by Jesus to the seven churches of Asia. This is the most famous part of the book of Revelation, and probably the easiest to understand.

Today we are looking at the second church – the church at Smyrna. All the commentators point out that Jesus praises only two of the seven churches in Revelation: Philadelphia in chapter three, and Smyrna here in chapter two. No criticism, only praise and encouragement.

Why is that? Because they were bearing up well under suffering. Jesus says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) ...” Revelation 2:9.

What we’ll do this morning is through the lens of Revelation 2 look at what the Bible says about suffering. Now, I know it’s Mother’s Day. Shouldn’t I preach an inspirational, light-hearted sermon on a day like today? Perhaps I should.

But those of you who are parents know that even with the best children, there is suffering involved in raising them up. As someone once put it, as a parent you are only as happy as your unhappiest child. Suffering is bound up in being a parent.

So even though it is Mother’s Day, I still think suffering is an appropriate topic. And we’ll look at it under three headings: *first, the blessings of suffering. Second, the danger of suffering. Third, the way to overcome our suffering.*

First, the blessings of suffering. I said we’d look at what the Bible says about suffering, so let’s look first at 1 Peter. 1 Peter is probably the premier New Testament book on suffering, as the various forms of the Greek word for “suffer” occurs more often in this book than any other. It is the major theme of the book. And in 1 Peter 4:12 Peter is writing about suffering writes this: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” Peter says, “Don’t be surprised by suffering.” Why?

We live in a fallen world. The world as God made it originally was good and sinless. He made it perfect. There was no pain, there was no sorrow, there were no tears, there was no sin. But

then came a historical Adam and Eve, and they sinned in the Garden of Eden thousands of years ago, and by their sin plunged the creation into ruin and decay. As beautiful as our world can be, it pales in comparison to what creation was before sin wrecked it. In this fallen world, there are natural disasters, droughts, famines, there are viruses, there is cancer, there is death. We weren't made for any of that, we were made for something else, which is why we recoil at all those things. Yet they exist in this fallen world, and they bring with them suffering. And Peter says, "Don't be surprised."

And of course it's not just that we suffer because the environment around us inflicts pain. We are sinners, and so we inflict pain on one another. C.S. Lewis in his book *The Problem of Pain* writes this: "When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs. . ." I'd say that's about right – 80% of our sufferings or more can be chalked up to how we hurt one another, not to natural disasters. To that list C.S. Lewis made I'll add sufferings of men such as lies, betrayal, selfishness, whining, bigotry, slander, gossip, and neglect.

We should not be surprised when we suffer. But suffering itself is not the last word on the matter. The pain when it comes does not have the final say. The Greek word translated as "tribulation" in Revelation 2:9 is the word *thlipsis* and it literally means "pressure." That's a wonderful word to help us understand what suffering is and what it does to us.

When we suffer, we experience pressure. Suffering squeezes us. I almost never bring a prop to a sermon, but I did today. I heard this years ago from a Presbyterian minister named Wilson Benton who in turn heard it from one of the Tripp brothers. If I apply pressure to this water bottle, if I squeeze it, what happens? I get water all over the floor. Now, why is there water on the floor? You say, "Well, because you squeezed it, you idiot." No, not really. The only reason there's water on the floor is because there was water in the bottle. If there had been milk in the bottle, or Coke, or Pepsi, or gasoline, then we would have something else on the floor.

What suffering does is that it squeezes us so that what is really on the inside of us comes out. Suffering shows you who you really are. Everyone feels nice and kind and generous if nothing happens to be annoying him at the moment. You want to see what a guy is really like? Let him be tested by suffering.

I *can be* such a nice guy. I really *can be*. When nothing is bothering me, when I'm not being annoyed, I can be a fun person to hang out with. But get under my nerves just a little, and things change. By God's grace I haven't had a very painful life – about three years ago I broke a tooth and had to have a crown put on, and that was the worse physical pain I'd experienced in a decade. So, I really don't know how I'd be under a lot of pain. But I know how I can be when I've only been annoyed, and it's not good.

For example, a little league baseball game. You know what my goal is when I watch one of my children play in a little league game? My goal is that if you saw me sitting there, and you didn't know me, then you couldn't tell which child on the field was mine by the way I act. My goal is to say the same things, the same encouraging things, to all the kids that come up to bat.

Because you can usually tell which child belongs to which parent by the way the dad acts when his child gets in the batter box. He hasn't said a word all the way through the order, but then when his child gets up all of the sudden *he starts clapping. He starts coaching the child.* And everyone around says, "Oh, that must be that kid's dad."

The other day I was watching a game and I promise you this happened. A kid walked up to the batter's box, and all of the sudden a guy who's been sitting in the bleachers, quiet the whole game, starts clapping and says, "OK, you can do this – just like we practiced." Alright – there's the dad. He's identified himself. The kid swung at the first pitch, missed, and I hear from the bleachers, "You're too tense. You've got to relax." Second pitch – swing, and a miss. "Relax! Relax!" Then the kid struck out, and the guy said, "What are you doing? You didn't relax!" Just so you know, it wasn't anyone from Grace Bible. But I was so annoyed – I wanted to walk over and say, "You know why he can't relax when he's batting? Because he has a moron for a dad."

I was so annoyed at him. I felt squeezed, I felt pressure, and you know what came out of me? Sin. I didn't say anything – I guess I don't want to get into a fight at a little league game, so I keep my mouth shut. But my thoughts were sinful, self-righteous, mean, unsympathetic. I had no idea what that guy had been through, the stress he was under, what his dad had done to him at his little league games. All I knew is that I was annoyed and in my heart what I wanted more than anything else was to tell him off.

Now, on a scale of 0 to 10, how severe was my suffering? It was a .002. It was next to nothing. Yet suffering, even the slightest suffering, reveals what's really in you. In 1 Peter 1, Peter is writing about the hope Christians have, and then he says this: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 1:6-7

But don't you see? Until suffering comes along in your life, you can't see how sinful you are and grow. You can't become a great person. Not only is it Mother's Day weekend, it's graduation weekend from Ole Miss. Congratulations, graduates. And you've suffered some, I'm sure. It was hard to finish Ole Miss.

Nevertheless you of all people need to know that God in his sovereign goodness will allow suffering in your life, and when he does it will be to show you your sin in such a way so that you can repent of it and become to kind of person God designed you to be – a great person. Someone with gravity. A weighty person. Not an overweight person, but a weighty person, someone with substance. Someone with character. Someone with wisdom and patience and insight. There's no other way to get it; there are no shortcuts.

Who are the people you really admire in your life, the people with character and wisdom? Are you picturing them? Do you know why they are that way? They've learned the lessons trials and suffering was supposed to teach them, and it's made them great.

You say, “J.D., you’re talking about getting upset at a baseball game or graduating from college. You’re talking about little pains.” I know that, and we’ll talk about the big sufferings in a minute. But the principle remains the same no matter the size of the suffering. God does use suffering to bless us.

Second, the danger of suffering. Now we’ll talk about the church at Smyrna, and I’ll re-read verse 9: ⁹“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.” A lot of Christians over the centuries have misused this verse by applying it in an anti-Semitic way, saying that people who are Jewish today are in some kind of Satanic cult. That’s nonsense. That’s not at all what John, who wrote Revelation, or Jesus, the one quoted in verse 9, would have ever thought or said. Both John and Jesus were of course Jewish, they ministered in and among Jews, their loved ones were Jewish, and they self-consciously thought of themselves as Jews. They weren’t anti-Semitic, so to read any of the Bible in that way is completely wrongheaded.

What is being said is this: some of the ethnic Jews in Smyrna, especially those high up in the local synagogue, were behaving in a very un-Jewish, ungodly way. Probably what was happening in Smyrna was that the message that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the promised leader of the Jewish people, was making progress in the Jewish community there, and more and more Jews were coming to believe in him. So, to hit back, the Jewish leadership in Smyrna began to misrepresent the Christians to the Roman authorities. Under the influence of Satan, they slandered the Christians to the Romans (the word “Satan” in verse nine literally means “the slanderer”) and said the Christians were up to no good. In particular, they spread the rumor that Christians were disloyal to Rome, and ready at any moment to work to overthrow the government.

So, in response, the authorities in Smyrna began to persecute the Christians. They put them in prison (that’s verse 10). The Christians were impoverished (that’s verse 9). That may have meant that the Jews organized pogroms against the Christians. That did happen from time to time in the first century. We also know that Smyrna was an economically vibrant city, located on an important trade route through Asia. In ancient Smyrna, if you wanted to be a member of the trade guilds, the trade unions, you had to offer sacrifices to the emperor at the Roman temple in the city. Without the protection and opportunities afforded by the trade guilds, it would be very easy to fall into poverty.

But of course few of us suffer today because of official persecution. Few of us are in danger of slipping into poverty because we are Christians, but I wouldn’t say it’s impossible. I know that if you work at the university, you can probably say you’re a Christian without any problems but I’ve heard from several of you that you don’t feel you can speak your mind on certain issues without repercussions. And in the past in our country we’ve certainly seen Christians persecuted – it’s just that it’s been perpetrated by other Christians. Baptists were persecuted in colonial Virginia because they refused to be licensed by the authorities to preach. African American Christians certainly suffered persecution because their faith correctly taught them that they should have equal rights under the law.

Yet even as few suffer today because of official persecution, there is a lesson for us to learn from the church at Smyrna. Verse 11: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The message to the seven churches in Asia is a timeless message, it is meant to be heard and applied today. The seven churches (seven being the number of perfection) are representative of all churches of all times. And even though we may not be suffering because of persecution the way the Smyrnan Christians were, the danger of suffering remains the same.

Jesus writes to the church in Smyrna because he desperately wants them to overcome their suffering, he wants them to conquer in spite of their suffering. You know what that means? Jesus knows there is a real possibility that even though suffering can make you great it won't happen. The danger of *suffering is that it doesn't make us great but that it makes us break*. It has a lot of different ways of doing it, too.

There's the martyrdom complex. Someone gets hurt and embraces the suffering in an unhealthy way, so that it becomes their identity – this is who I am, I am defined by this tragedy that happened to me. If you've ever met someone like that, it is extremely hard to love them and have a relationship with them. All they ever want to talk about is what happened to them.

That in turn can lead to isolation. Instead of you running to the people around you who do love you for prayer and support, you cut yourself off from them. You say, “No one could possibly understand what I'm going through.” You learn to keep the suffering close to you and nurture it.

And nursing the suffering combined with isolation turns them into an angry, mean person. You become so embittered because of what you've suffered that basically you start to hate everything and everyone around you. You've been hurt, and the only way you know how to cope is by making other people hurt. And of course, you add all this up over time and it warps you, it dehumanizes you, it destroys you. So what, if anything, can we do to make sure our suffering is used to make us great and not make us break?

Third, how to overcome our suffering. In our Christian subculture, sometimes we get the message (and sometimes we send the message) that a real Christian is happy all the time. No matter what goes on, he's praising the Lord, he's joyful, nothing gets him down. You hear some Christians talk and it's almost like they expect hurting people to say something like this: “Yes, I just got fired from my job and my wife just left me and I'm at the vet and my dog just died, but I'm still praising the Lord! Isn't God good? All the time God is good, and God is good all the time.” It's like some bad combination of country music and contemporary Christian music.

Many of you will know who Joel Osteen is. One of his more recent books is called *Every Day a Friday*, and in chapter three of his book he talks about his sister Lisa. For months, he said, Lisa was depressed. She wouldn't leave her house. Family and friends tried to help her, but it was no use. She prayed and read the Bible, and that was no help. But finally, he says, “Lisa put on a smile out of sheer determination. She smiled by faith. She chose to wear a cheerful countenance. [As a result] she broke free from the chains of depression... Have you heard the saying, ‘You've got to fake it until you make it’? You may have to wear a fake smile, but if you keep at it, God will turn it into a real smile... We all can find some reason not to smile, whether

it's high gas prices or low income. But your response should be, "I'm too blessed to be stressed. My future is so bright, I need sunglasses. Or ... 'If I was doing any better, I'd be twins.'"

Now, it's true that Christians have plenty of reasons to rejoice, and we probably should smile more. But it's unhelpful to tell someone to fake happiness until they feel it. We never see that counsel anywhere in the Scriptures.

There is a process the Bible gives to overcoming our suffering, but you can't short-circuit it by faking your way out of the pain. But if you will walk through the process, then you can be someone made great by suffering.

Five things we can do: *praying, thinking, trusting, thanking, and hoping*. First, when we suffer, we can pray. I love the story of Hannah from 1 Samuel 1. Hannah is married to a man named Elkanah, but she can't have any children. She is barren. The language is strong; her womb is closed. Nothing was more important to a woman in the ancient world than bearing children, and Hannah couldn't do it. And while Elkanah is a good man – he's wealthy, prominent, and he genuinely loves Hannah – Hannah doesn't really have Elkanah, does she? She *shares* him, and she shares him with Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife, who is the fertile Myrtle of the ancient Near East. Plus, Peninnah is Hannah's rival for Elkanah's affection, and every chance Peninnah gets she torments Hannah for her inability to provide children for Elkanah.

Hannah is suffering and is in a horrible position. What does she do? She goes to the tabernacle to pray, but not in normal, calm, "keeping it all together" kind of way. "She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly." 1 Samuel 1:10. She's not holding it together. She is not smiling, she is not faking it until she makes it. Instead, she's falling apart. In fact, she's in such a despairing condition that Eli, the high priest who ministered at the tabernacle, thinks she's drunk.

When you suffer, the first and best thing you can do is go to the Lord in prayer and tell him all about it. And when you pray if you feel like weeping, weep. If you feel like screaming, scream. And here the Psalms are such a help. The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible; they give voice to the full range of human experience, especially suffering. So you can just read the Psalms and make them into your prayers. They can pray for you when you're hurting so bad you don't have the words. Psalm 130:1: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive, to my cry for mercy."

But what if you're in such a bad situation that you don't feel there's any hope? What if you feel you have been completely abandoned by God? There are two Psalms in the Bible – Psalm 39 and Psalm 88 – that don't have in them a single note of hope. The author of Psalm 88, Heman the Ezrahite, ends his Psalm like this: "¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. ¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. ¹⁸You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness." Psalm 88:16-18. That's how he ends the Psalm.

Now, why would God include that in the Bible? I'll tell you why: because he's wonderful. And because he knows. He knows that's how we feel sometimes. Like I said earlier, I haven't

suffered all that much in my life so I'm not sure I've ever been in a position to really pray Psalm 88. *But some of you have.* And God knows, and he says it is ok for you feel hopeless and desperate. And when you are in suffering like that, make Heman's words your words. Turn your suffering into prayer. The Bible wants you to give voice to how you really feel, and not for you to have to fake it until you make it.

And if you do, maybe when you get through praying Psalm 88 you'll look over at Psalm 89. You know how the first verse of Psalm 89 goes? "I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations." Psalm 89:1. And in that situation, if you read that verse, then I feel certain you'll be onto the next step in overcoming your suffering.

Second, thinking. If you read Psalm 88 and Psalm 89, and you'll have to think, "How can these two Psalms be in the same Bible? They don't fit together." You'll think about it. And the fact of the matter is Heman and Ethan (who wrote Psalm 89) probably didn't understand, couldn't understand, how those two could fit together.

But we can. "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." Revelation 2:11. What is the second death? It's the punishment we all deserve for our sins. Everyone on earth will die once, if the Lord Jesus tarries. We will all face the first death. But the second death is an eternal death, the death we deserve for our sins. It is hell. But those who hear what the Spirit says to the churches will overcome and not be hurt by the second death?

What does that mean? The Holy Spirit is telling the churches one primary message: Jesus is the Christ, he is the Jewish Messiah. He is the Savior of the world. And yes you are a sinner and you deserve the second death. But on the cross Jesus took on the second death for you. You know, we might hurt so bad that we feel like God has abandoned us, that there is no hope. But only one person has ever really been in that position. On the cross, God turned his face away from Jesus while Jesus suffered. God had to look away, so Jesus could bear the full weight of the second death. We might feel like God has forsaken us, but only Jesus could truly cry the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?"

But three days later, Jesus overcame both death and the second death through his resurrection. Death has no hold on Jesus anymore. And dear friends if you will believe that you are a sinner, that you deserve the second death, but Jesus has overcome it for you, then you'll be united to Christ. And guess what? His victory becomes your victory. His conquering becomes your conquering. Praying leads to thinking, thinking about your suffering in the context of the Bible.

Which, third, will lead to trusting. In 1966, Elisabeth Elliot wrote a book (it's semi-autobiographical) entitled *No Graven Image*. It's the story about a young missionary named Margaret Sparhawk who dedicated her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes in South America whose languages had not yet been written down. The key to her work was a young man named Pedro, the only man who knew both Spanish and the Indian languages. So, Margaret and

Pedro got to work on the painstaking process of learning and creating an alphabet and dictionary for a language.

But before they could finish the work, Pedro's leg got infected, so Margaret (since part of her duties as a missionary was to provide basic medical care) gave him a shot of penicillin. But Pedro went into anaphylactic shock and died. And that's how the book ended. Margaret's work on the language was over; there was no one in existence who could help her. It looked like a complete and utter defeat for the gospel.

When the book was published fifty years ago now, the Christians in the United States hated it. I mean they loathed it. They said, "God would never allow such a thing to happen to a woman who had so dedicated herself to his cause – how could a Christian write such a book." One pastor even bragged to Elisabeth Elliot that he personally kept the book off of Christian "book of the year" lists.

But they all missed the point. The common Christian subculture mistake is thinking that God always acts the way we think he should and he always supports the plans we make in his name. But Elisabeth Elliot knew that notion of God is false, it's an idol (that was the "graven image" of the title of the book) and she wrote in another place that "God is God . . . and his will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to." "Those hands that keep a million worlds from spinning into oblivion were nailed motionless to a cross – for us. . . . Can you trust him?"

As you see who God is in the Bible, then you can trust him. *Fourth, thanking.* As you trust God in your suffering, you'll find that he will open your eyes to all kinds of blessings that have come as a result of your suffering and you'll be thankful. One of the great things about being a pastor is that people come to you with their stories of how God has worked in their lives. And it never ceases to amaze and encourage me how people who have suffered terribly – cancer, divorce, betrayal, death of a loved one – are nevertheless able to say afterwards, "As painful as it was, as bad as it hurt, I'm so thankful. I would have never known this about myself without the suffering. I would have never learned. I would have never changed. God was good even in the pain." Conjure up in your mind the worst suffering you can come up with, and I've probably had someone come to me and bless God for what it's done in their lives.

Finally, fifthly, there is hoping. Christians can hope for lots of things: to get married, to have children, to get a particular job, that they will be healthy. There is nothing wrong with anything. But the ultimate New Testament hope is our salvation. And I mean that in the full sense of the Biblical word – not some point in the past where we prayed to receive Christ, but in the future when we are freed from our sin, we are given glorified bodies that cannot get sick, cannot wear out, and cannot die, and we see God face-to-face. That's the Christian hope.

And nothing will bring about that kind of hope like suffering. Nothing will make you say, "Come, Lord Jesus," like suffering. "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Romans 5:3-5.

There's a hymn that goes like this: "When through the deep waters I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow will not overflow; for I will be with thee in troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress." Friends, I'm going to pray for us now that as a church we would suffer well, we would be there for each other as we suffer, and it would bring us tremendous hope. PRAY