

No Backing Up (Part 2)

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding Jesus' perspective on the church and standing firm in the face of persecution and affliction.

Duration: 26:18

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 15:20, John 16:2, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 2 Timothy 3:12

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher describes a moment when people in downtown Brooklyn were curious about him and gathered to see what he was about. Despite the temptation to say something that would make them stay, the preacher felt compelled to speak the truth. He shares a personal story of receiving threats for his faith and the pressure he faced to deny Jesus. The preacher also discusses the early church's poverty and affliction, emphasizing that God knows and understands their struggles.

Transcript

You know, last week, which is quite unusual here on a Tuesday, I wanted to begin a series. I've never done this before in my life, but I just felt impressed that the Lord wanted me to do a little series on love letters from the Lord based on the letters from Jesus to seven churches in Revelation. And we learned last week that in the second and third chapters, there are seven letters which John, on the Isle of Patmos, because of persecution, received.

One, on the Sabbath, he was in the Spirit, and he had this vision of Jesus in chapter one, glorious vision, he heard words from him. And then, starting in chapter two, he gets these letters to churches. And there's a letter for every church today, if he that has an ear would only hear.

And my feeling is, a pastor can't be successful unless he can get, by waiting on God, some understanding of how Jesus looks at the church, not how society looks at the church or some denomination, or your peers look at a church, or how big your building is, that doesn't mean anything. How does Jesus look at the church? Because then, depending on the pluses or the minuses, the compliments or the corrections, you'll know how to minister, where to move, what to teach on, what to pray about. Well, last week, we learned about that church which had solid orthodoxy, but was lacking amor, in su corazon, no love in their hearts.

They were falling back in their love, Ephesus. I have this against you, that you lost your first love. Now, this next church is one of the only two churches, Ephesus, by the way, had a lot of compliments, but it had that correction.

You lost your first love, repent. There's only two of the seven churches that received no correction at all, and we're about to read about one of them. Well, there's only two churches that have no word of correction, and this is one of them, and it's the shorter letter.

It's the letter that is written to the church at Smyrna, S-M-Y-R-N-A, Smyrna, everyone say Smyrna. Now, Smyrna was north of Ephesus, in what we would generally call Turkey today, and Smyrna was a prettier city than Ephesus, maybe not as large, but a very prosperous port, and what's interesting about its history is that it was founded about 300 years before Christ was born, and then became part of the Roman Empire, and then around the year when Jesus was probably in his 20s, they were chosen, because of their good behavior toward Rome, they were chosen to be the place where a famous statue was put of Emperor Tiberius, Emperor Tiberius, Jesus was born under Emperor Augustus Caesar, and Tiberius Caesar was the emperor slash god in the minds of the Romans that succeeded Augustus. Now, this statue being there, and their prestige in the Roman Empire made them very pro-emperor, and the emperor, remember, was not just the president of the country or the prime minister, he was God, and that is important to understand.

Now, what I'm about to read to you is gonna fly in the face of a lot of what you hear on television and the radio, okay? Because what's invaded America and invaded modern Christendom, with all the discovery of the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the great things that God can do, what is also crept in is a false triumphalism, an idea that when you're a Christian, things are never tough because you have authority and you can just put your foot on the devil's neck and all of that stuff works up crowds, but it's not exactly biblical. Also, what's crept in is a false concept of faith, that God always brings you out of everything. No, sometimes he brings you through.

And the bringing through is painful. So, I don't wanna rattle anybody. I'm not giving you my opinion.

This is why a lot of so-called faith teachers and victory teachers, they can't do exposition of scriptures, verse by verse through the Bible because they will get to Smyrna and other verses, which I'll point out to you, which would close their mouth because the formulas they're giving to people, believe in God, have faith, fill with the Spirit and all of that, and that's it. You're just, you trample the land and wherever you put your foot, you just possess the land and all of that stuff. But that's not exactly what the Bible teaches.

And that's why we need the Holy Spirit because in every situation we're in, I have found this, I've made many mistakes by trying to pray in the past by formula rather than by discerning, God, what are you doing right now? So that I can learn how to pray. So, this is the letter. I didn't make this up.

I'm telling you what Jesus said to a church. Remember, a great church, probably small, but that shows you that big congregations don't mean success. To the angel of the church, that means messenger in Smyrna, write, these are the words of him who is the first and the last.

That's alpha and what? Omega. That means he existed before all and he'll be there at the end. And that's important.

But this is also important how Jesus defines himself. Who died and came to life again. Who was dead but was resurrected.

I know you, now that word I know is not a word like I know just your good things or your bad things. It just means God knows everything. Jesus knows everything.

Nobody has to explain anything to Jesus. He knows everything about what we're going through. And here he says to the church, I know your afflictions and your poverty.

Ha, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews. They're not.

But they're a synagogue of Satan. Strong language. Do not be afraid about what you are about to suffer.

Well, wait a minute. Hey, Lord, if you know I'm gonna suffer it, get me out of it. No, in the mystery of God's providence and his will, don't be afraid of what you're about to suffer.

You will suffer. I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you. God, how could you let the devil do that? Because God says that's what I'm gonna let the devil do.

I told you this would be hard for some of you. I'm gonna put some of you in prison to test you. He will.

And you will suffer persecution for 10 days. What that means, whether it's symbolism, literal 10 days, the commentators disagree on. But here's the word of the Lord.

Be faithful even to the point of death, and I'll give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

We're all gonna have the first death. Let's say you live to 100. You're still gonna die.

Or maybe you'll die in your 50s or 60s or 70s or 80s. But that's not the death to worry about. Everyone's gonna die.

It's the second death. What's the first death? First death is separation of your soul from your body. We all experience that.

It's appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment. What's the second death? When your soul is separated from God, not for 70 or 100 years, for all eternity. So the way we look at life, and everything is now, God do this, I feel uncomfortable, you gotta help me now.

That's not the way God looks at life, because he says your life is a vapor. That's all, it's gone. But you're gonna be with me for eternity.

I've got purposes and plans for you, and I'm gonna use not only the victories and the answers to prayer, I'm gonna use even the difficulties. I know your afflictions, verse nine, and your poverty. I thought if you're a Christian, you just, you're always driving a Mercedes.

Didn't you hear that from some preachers? Here's a great church, and the Lord says, I know your poverty, physical poverty, money poverty, but you're rich. You're rich in what really matters. For God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith.

If you have the peace of Jesus, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, if you have joy unspeakable and full of glory, you're richer than the biggest billionaire in the world. Come on, somebody say amen. What a horrible teaching, what a horrific teaching, and shame on Bible leaders and people of national pulpits and denominational leaders who haven't spoken out against that nonsense of quoting verses out of context and telling every Christian, if you serve God, you'll be rich.

This is a great church, and it was poor. You might be poor as a church mouse here today, but if you have Jesus, you're a billionaire. Did you know that? Come on, let's say amen.

You're a billionaire. Because when the rich man dies, he loses everything and leaves it behind. But when you have Jesus, oh my goodness.

It gets better as the years go on. Of course, some of this is based on the invasion of corporate America and Madison Avenue where we're selling Jesus and we want people to buy Jesus. Well, if you're selling a product, you tell the people just the good things about it, right? If you paint it good enough, they might buy in and become Christians.

That's the mindset. That was never the mindset in the early church. Now, why was this church probably poor? Because of three things that he mentions here.

I know your affliction. That word is an interesting word in the Greek. It means the thing that puts pressure on your deepest spirit.

He said, I know what you're going through. Well, why don't you get us out of it then? No, I know what you're going through. I know your affliction.

And I know your poverty. I know you don't have much. But you're rich.

And I know the slander of those who call themselves Jews, but they're not. It probably is one of the great church leaders, Polycarp, lived in that place, Smyrna, and he was killed there. He was martyred.

And the local congregation Jewish leaders there, tradition, history tells us, they went and prodded the Roman officials because they couldn't kill anyone. They prodded them to persecute Polycarp and get rid of him, and they gathered the wood for his fire, which he was burned in, and then they made sure that nobody could get his ashes and give him a decent burial. That's how demonic the people were back then.

And the Lord says, I know it. Look how quiet it is here. How come you're all not jumping and praising God and running all over the building? Am I preaching the Bible or am I making this up? But Pastor Simba, I didn't come here on Tuesday night to hear that.

Well, I didn't stand up here to tell you what you wanted to hear. I'm trying to preach the word of God. How many want to hear the word of God, the whole word of God? What if I stand before Jesus and he says to me, why'd you tell the people what they wanted to hear? Why don't you give them the whole counsel of God? What am I, what, you want me to be cheap? That you want me to be cheap with you? I don't want, I'm not going to treat you cheap.

I was in Hong Kong with my friend Rabbi Zacharias, and I saw hundreds of underground church leaders, house pastors, lifting their hands, men and women from outer Mongolia, inner Mongolia, all the provinces of China, who operate under the radar. Half of them have been in jail, and I heard them sing a song that

made me start to weep, and it was in Mandarin, and I didn't understand Mandarin, and I was wondering why the spirit was affecting me that way, so I turned to my translator, it was excellent, and I said, could you please interpret that song for me? And they said, we'll tell you what they're saying, I'll tell you, let's listen here. And he listens, and he says, here's what they're singing.

Since you died for us, we will now die for you. Since you gave everything for us, will we give less for you? You went to the cross for us, so if it be your will, we will go to the cross for you, but we love you, and we're gonna spend eternity with you, our Jesus, and stuff like that. And I was saying, you don't hear that at most American churches on Sunday morning, because we live in a false world, we're in a facade here.

We don't know what persecution is. The cops will protect us if somebody comes in to try to disrupt the meeting, but for a good part of the world? Or how'd you like to be with the Palestinians that our missionary David Ortiz took me to an olive grove to pray with? These men wanted to meet me because they had read one of my books in Arabic, and I met with them, and they had made yogurt for me, homemade. They told me their testimony, and one man said to me, what would you do with this situation? Maybe you could help me give him counsel.

He said, Pastor Jim, pray for me, this is being translated to me, because my wife is not a believer, but Jesus appeared to me, and I will follow him until death. But now they know something's wrong with me in the town, the Muslims, so I can't get a job, and they won't hire me to work. And now, I just got an envelope the other day, and in the envelope, which is left at the door, there were two spent bullets, and there was a note that said the next one goes in your heart.

And my wife said to me, why are you doing this? We have two children. Why are you doing this? Turn on this Jesus. Deny this Jesus.

And the tears rolling down his eyes, and rolling down mine, and he said, but I won't turn on Jesus. If they kill me, they kill me, but I'll never deny Jesus. Well, that's what Smyrna must have been like.

You know, the real world. And there is, as I close, a growing sentiment here in this country. We don't face that kind of persecution, but how many can feel the anti-Christian current everywhere? It's in the schools, they're trying to pass this thing now.

I met two leaders today under Brother Trask's leadership, two pastors who both rent in schools, who told me if they pass this New York State law, that churches cannot use schools on the weekend for church. Board of Ed, all of that stuff. Politicians, it's horrible.

Anti-Christian. You can say anything on TV about anything. You can make the lewdest remark.

You just say Jesus Christ, they'll come at your throat. Come on, am I right or wrong? Am I making this up? When it comes to same-sex marriage, if there's anything we should pray about, because my own feeling is if they pass this, there's gonna unleash some kind of demons in the air or something. We need to pray.

How many will clap your hand and say, I'm gonna pray that God will preserve our country from that? So, I know the slander of those who say they're Jews. That's how they probably lost their jobs and had no money. So, here's a church that's afflicted.

Great church, but afflicted. You couldn't even give this testimony on Christian television. You couldn't even go to a big meeting and say, here's a brother of a great church.

You wanna know his formula? Listen to his testimony. We're afflicted, we're poor, and they're lying about us. That's your testimony? Brother, move on.

We gotta get someone who has, went from 400 to 2,000 because, oh, I don't want that cheap stuff. I want Jesus. How many want Jesus, pure Jesus, no matter where he leads us, no matter what happens? But what I don't wanna do is have a Christianity formula that only works in America, and I have to change it when I'm in another part of the world.

I don't want that. That cannot be Jesus, and that's not pleasing to the Holy Spirit. So now, what are the commands of Jesus? I wanna give them to you, wherever you live, and no matter what happens.

He says to that church, great church, great church. Oh, whoever the pastor of that church in Smyrna was, God bless you, pastor. You got people huddled in onto God amidst persecution.

And in case some of you say, no, Pastor Bill, you're taking one verse out of context. Oh yeah, look at this little string. Look at this little string of verses.

Jesus said, then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. Next verse, John 15, 20. Remember the words I spoke to you.

No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will what? Persecute you also. Next verse, John 16.

They will put you out of the synagogue. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he's offering a service to God. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life, Paul says in his last letter.

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. And then finally, to the church at Thessalonica, we sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ to strengthen and encourage you in your faith. To encourage you in your faith.

To encourage you in your faith, why? So that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. This stuff that's going on, we were destined for them.

In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted and it turned out that way, as you well know. So this is a different kind of meeting. This is a meeting where God's gonna dig down in our kitchen and we're gonna decide today we will not be afraid, no matter who says what, and we're not gonna back up.

How many are with me? Say aloud, amen. Amen. I told you about that time when they were filming me for this new series that Zondervan has put out called something on the Holy Spirit.

And they had me in downtown Brooklyn at the park down there with the skyline and they had to wait. They had the lights, the cameras. They had to wait.

It was dusk. They had to wait. It was last summer and they had to wait till the sun went down because they wanted the skyline to be behind me and I would stand and I was leaning on this fence and the thought was all of that machinery, all those machines, the computers, whatever's going on across in Manhattan right now, that big skyline, none of it is worth anything without the power.

You take away the power, everything goes off. That was my point. So while they're ready to film me and they're getting me all set up in the mic and testing, this was the last thing I was gonna do.

They're waiting. Oh, people are walking in downtown Brooklyn and they're walking and they see spotlights and they see all that and they think, who is this guy? Is he famous? Who is this guy? Maybe it's a commercial for something. Let's go see it.

So now I remember a couple were eating ice cream cones and about two gathered, then five, then eight, then 12 and they're all looking at me like, I don't know you. You're not famous. We don't know you.

Who are you? You're nobody. But they said, let's wait because they're waiting and suddenly I just knew. I knew that what I was gonna say and they were looking at me.

You know that downtown Brooklyn look? How many know that look? That New York City look, right? And suddenly great temptation came over me. Say something that they won't walk away. Spin it a little differently.

None of us want to be hated. Do you want people to mock you? You want people to walk away when you talk? Is that an instinct that's in us? No. It's a moment of temptation for me, testing.

It got dark enough, they're all there. All right, lights, we're gonna do gym. Ready? Three, two, one, go.

See all those lights over there? They're nothing compared to the light of Jesus Christ and the moment I said that, the faces changed and they looked at me like, I'm telling you, it was a horrible feeling. The minute I said his name, some started walking away. Others just looked at me like, you gotta be kidding, right? And that's the test of our Christianity.

Who can't serve God now while we're all praising him in this building? If you can't stand for Jesus Christ here, no kidding, we're praising him together. But it's tomorrow, it's the next day. It's when the heat is turned up in our society.

I got a bad feeling about America, I really do. I got a bad feeling. Someone says, no, just rebuke that spirit.

I don't see that in the Bible. Jesus said there'll be wars and rumors of wars. You can rebuke war all you want, it's still coming.

Bind the spirit of war till Jesus comes. It's still gonna be wars because there's certain things that have to happen and in the last days, perilous times are gonna come. And God is refining who really believes in him.

And my pastoral ministry is gonna be tested. Are you fair weather Christians or are you down rock solid? I'm serving Jesus no matter what. Let them laugh at me, let them mock me, let them say whatever they wanna say.

Now, I feel odd even saying that because think of what some believers are facing now around the world. China, Iran, Saudi Arabia. I was just with the pastor from where, and he told me, if you are caught saying to someone, would you come to church, they'll lock you up and they'll never see you again.

If you just say to someone, would you come to my church, my meeting? So we have to get a grip on ourselves. We gotta be real, as they say, real talk. Real talk is, Jesus is coming soon.

We're gonna go home. If we die tomorrow, we don't die. It just begins.

This world is not our home. The rewards aren't coming here. Your car and your apartment and your clothes are not the big things that God has planned for you because he gives it to people who curse him.

Who believes that teaching? If God gives it to people who curse him, how could it be important? I thank God for his blessings. Now, are all Christians persecuted the same way? No, you study history, it's up, it's down, it ebbs, it flows, and that church, even some of you will be put in prison for 10 days. But be faithful, even to the point of death.

Some of us can't take a harsh look from somebody. But Jesus said, no, I'm gonna keep you bold and strong and full of faith. I close with this verse.

When the church had its first persecution, the history of the Christian church, the first persecution was found in Acts 3. Peter and John saw a lame man healed and a crowd gathered and Peter preached again. But the Jewish authorities, they went nuts. When they heard this name, Jesus, being preached, they thought it was over, they had crucified him.

They held Peter and John overnight in the huskew. And the next day before they left them, they got up close in their grill and they said, you do not speak anymore about the name of Jesus or you know what. You know what happened to your leader? It could happen to you, pal.

That's the truth, it's in the Bible. Read it, Acts 3. When they were released in Acts 4, the Bible tells us, they went back to a prayer meeting. And they gathered together and they lifted their voices together in prayer.

If you're not used to hearing everyone lift their voice in prayer, it's just because of our missing the road to vibrant Christianity. And they lifted their voice in prayer and here's what they prayed and here's what happened. This is how we're gonna close.

Now Lord, here's the prayer. Consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with what? Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. And after they prayed, the place they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled, i.e. coming under the control of the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Now this group that was filled with the Holy Spirit, they were baptized in chapter two. Why are they being filled again? Because you can't live off of some experience six months ago, six years ago, 60 years ago. Are you kidding me? You gotta have it every day, something fresh from the Holy Spirit.

They were filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God, how? Although they had been threatened, although Jesus had died in that city, they were bold enough to say no. You kill us, you kill us. But while we're alive, we're gonna tell you about Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, I want that in my heart. If you want that in your life, put your hands together. Clap, close your eyes with me.

Close your eyes with me.

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