Overcoming Persecution — Delivery Transcript

Revelation 2:8–11 (CSB) · Wes Terry · Sunday, April 18, 2021 · *We Will Overcome*

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We've been in a series on the book of the Apocalypse, the last book of the Bible, and now we find our way into the seven churches in Revelation chapter 2 and 3. Little bitty letters that Jesus writes to seven different churches, and different letters say different things because of the different problems that each church was facing, and every church has a problem that we kind of face today in our day and age, so the churches that we're looking at aren't just relevant for their historical value, but they're relevant in what Jesus says to them in a lot of the problems that we face today in our churches.

It's interesting that about two hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity went from a no-name movement that was a sect of Judaism to a worldwide phenomenon that ultimately got so big and so powerful that Constantine, out of political convenience, made Christianity a state religion,[1] because he saw it as a useful means of control because that's where the people were in that culture. They had come to identify with the truths of the gospel to such a degree and in such a widespread form that it had basically taken over the world.

Now how did that happen? How did Christianity go from nothing to everything in such a short amount of time? One of the theories, from an early church father named Tertullian, wrote that it was the blood of the martyrs that became the seed of the expanse of the church, that the church grew so rapidly because not just that Christians died for their faith, but how they died for their faith, why they died for their faith— the poise, the confidence, and just the spirit with which they died was so impressive that people had to second guess themselves and take a closer look at the claims of the Christian gospel that enabled people to die in this way.

And one of the people who was martyred for their faith early on in this process was a gentleman by the name of Polycarp. Maybe you've heard of the name Polycarp in a church

history class or growing up in Sunday school, or, you know, maybe you were thinking I'm going to name my child Polycarp. Probably not, but you know, maybe you came across the name. It actually refers to the pastor of the church that we're going to look at this morning in the New Testament, the church at Smyrna. So Pastor Polycarp had pastored there for basically half of his known life, where I'm about to tell you a story of Polycarp's martyrdom, or his death.

He was 86 years old when he died, but he was one of those man's man kind of men. He was well liked, well respected, very venerable, honorable. Even if you weren't a Christian person, you kind of respected Polycarp because he was just one of those kind of guys. My favorite story about Polycarp, I didn't share this in the other two services, but y'all are special. So one of my favorite stories about Polycarp was when he meets Marcion, who was an early church heretic, he denied a lot of the gospels as being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

So he kind of had his own little thing going. And he was known as a heretic at the time. And when he meets Polycarp, Marcion goes, man, do you know who I am? And Polycarp goes, of course I know who you are. I would always recognize the firstborn of Satan. And they kind of have that kind of budding relationship and friendship from there. So he was just a man of boldness, a man of principle, a man who would not back down from a fight, that was Polycarp. And he's eighty-six years old and he is on the run from the law because the Roman government at this point in time is cracking down on things like emperor worship and anyone who would not worship Caesar as God was getting, you know, persecuted.

And of course Polycarp being a Christian was not going to worship Caesar as God. So he's going from safe house to safe house trying to protect himself and then one of his so called friends, a fair weather friend, sells his location out. The government finds him, arrests him, and they take him into the arena where they were going to martyr Polycarp alongside of a lot of other Christians. And as they're entering the arena, according to the documents that we have, which is a letter called the Martyrdom of Polycarp, it was written by the Christians in Smyrna, and this is how they described his death.

As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven and said, be strong, Polycarp, and play the man. And when the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar, and the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. And upon hearing that he was, he, the proconsul, the government guy, tried to persuade Polycarp to apostasize. That's just a fancy word that means reject your faith in Jesus. He says, have respect for your old age, Polycarp. Swear by the fortune of Caesar, repent and say down with the atheists.

Now they say down with the atheist because Christians were seen as atheistic in that culture because they didn't worship the hundreds of Roman gods that were in the Roman pantheon. So Polycarp's not an atheist, he's a theist, he's a Christian, but what he does when the

proconsul says, say down with the atheists, he looks out at the arena of all these people who were not Christians who were cheering for his death and he says down with the atheists just like that. Kind of tongue in cheek. Doesn't that tell you the kind of guy that he is?

I don't know. Dad joke, maybe. All right, so he doesn't say down with the atheists the way the proconsul wants him to. Then he says, I think I've got this one up there, "Swear," urged the proconsul, "reproach Christ, and I'll set you free." And this is a famous quote of Polycarp. He says, eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king and my Savior now? Then the proconsul says, well, I have wild animals here. I will throw you to them if you do not repent.

And he says, call them. It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good and turn to what is evil. Then the proconsul says, if you despise the animals, then I will have you burned, to which Polycarp said, you threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and then is extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want. Bold, bold words from Polycarp. So they take him out, they tie him to a pole.

It would look something like this. They covered him in pitch and they lit him up like a candle. Typically they would nail whoever is going to be burned at the stake, they would nail their feet to the stake to keep them from moving and running off. Polycarp tells them, no, I don't want to be nailed to the stake. I will stand here in the power of the Lord and receive this death without agony or without trying to run off. And according to the Martyrdom of Polycarp, if it's true, if it's to be believed, then when they lit him up like a match, there was like this big arch.

And the fire did not consume his body, but it looked like this man covered in silver that was glowing in the midst of the fire. The scent was one of frankincense and myrrh. And because the fire did not consume him, you see this Roman soldier over here who pierces his side with that spear, just as Jesus was pierced on his side, and Polycarp gives up his life and becomes a martyr. A martyr at 86 years old, a martyr who was super popular in that world, his death became a rallying cry for Christians in the area and all around Asia Minor.

And his martyrdom ultimately led to the decrease of persecution of Christians in Smyrna because when the crowd saw what happened to Polycarp, Their hearts were kind of warmed towards the Christians. They no longer wanted to see them persecuted and run off the face of the planet and Christianity kind of exploded from that point in that area and the persecution began to decrease. So it's a pivot point in the early church because of the boldness of Polycarp, someone who overcame persecution. Now I don't want us to take Polycarp's life and read it into the text that we're about to read.

Because this happens about 60 to 70 years after the letter that we're about to read. But it is unbelievable how the letter we're about to read fits Polycarp's testimony and lifestyle. It's as if he received that letter from Jesus, internalized it, and became the kind of Christian that overcomes persecution no matter how hard or difficult it may be. So let's read the text. Revelation chapter 2, starting in verse 8. Jesus says to write to the angel of the church in Smyrna. That's where Polycarp pastored. Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life: I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich.

I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life or the victor's crown. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death.

So there's a lot of stuff in there that obviously relates to overcoming persecution, but before we read those things, I just think it's funny that if you read these seven letters to these seven churches, this church and one other church are the only churches out of all seven that don't receive a condemnation from the Lord. The only thing that Jesus does to this church and one other church is encourage, inspire, affirm what it is that they're doing. But the two churches that Jesus doesn't condemn or rebuke, those are the poorest churches, those are the least successful, in the world's terms, type of churches.

They were the most afflicted. And I think that's just a reminder because Jesus affirms those churches and rebukes the wealthy churches, the successful churches, the culturally influential churches, he rebukes them for their compromise and other things. And it's a reminder, just because a church looks healthy on the outside, just because a church meets all the metrics of a big budget and nice buildings and behinds in the seats does not necessarily mean that church is a healthy church. It also doesn't mean that Jesus loves small churches and hates big churches. I'm not saying that.

But it is a reminder that a church is not a healthy church unless and until Jesus says it's a healthy church. And in our church, we think about it: Broadview Baptist Church is not and will not be a healthy church unless Jesus says that it's a healthy church. And sometimes the metrics that Jesus looks at to determine whether or not a church is healthy, probably most of the time they're not the metrics that the world uses to deem success. So we could be a church that meets budget, has nice buildings, and growing number of behinds in the seats.

And Jesus could look at us and say, no, there's some serious issues there. And part of the reason that we're doing these studies in these seven churches is because we want to not only hear the encouragement from Jesus to churches like Smyrna, but we want to hear the rebuke of Jesus to churches like Ephesus that says you've lost your first love. So even if everything

else is in place, if that's missing, then it's a problem with me. And so we want to be a church that receives both the rebuke of Jesus and the encouragement of Jesus.

This morning we're going to receive the encouragement of Jesus to become a church that overcomes persecution. But to help us learn how this church overcame persecution, you really got to know the politics. And I know people don't like to talk about politics in church, so I'm not talking about American politics. I want to talk about politics in Smyrna, because if you can understand the political climate of Smyrna, then you can understand why the Christians were so hotly persecuted in particular in that area. It was intensely hot persecution in Smyrna, unlike other places around the world.

And the reason is because Smyrna was a very pro-Rome kind of city. They were loyal to Rome in ways that other cities were not loyal to Rome. Smyrna was probably about forty miles north of Ephesus. I think it was originally founded by the Greeks, 3000 BC, around 1000 BC. It was re-established by the Roman government because they had been conquered by the Lydians about a thousand years before that.[2] So you got guys like Alexander the Great who come on the scene, they take this town, they beautify it again, it becomes one of the most beautiful cities in Asia Minor.

Big luscious trees, they had a road called the Golden Road that would house the temples to the various gods that the Romans worshipped on either side of the yellow brick road. No. The road of gold, or something along those lines. Also, Smyrna, this is interesting to me, there was the one city that won the reward of having the temple to Caesar established there. There was a contest in Asia Minor to see which city is the most pro-Roman government city? Which city is the most patriotic city out there? And Smyrna won the contest hands down because they were fanboy-level status to the Roman government.

They love Rome, they love the Roman government, they love the Roman ways. Everything about Rome, they just cherished and loved. And so the temple to offer sacrifices to Caesar was located in Smyrna. And the way that the Romans would work is you could, if the Romans conquered your territory, or, you know, they invaded you and took over everything. You got to keep your religion, you got to keep your culture, you got to keep your food and all that stuff. All you had to do was add one more god to your repertoire of gods, and that was to worship Caesar as God, emperor worship.

And all the religions that were conquered by Rome, they were totally fine with that because most of them were what you call polytheistic, which means they worshipped many gods. So they were just adding Caesar as one more god. When you get to the Christians and the Jews, however, it's a whole different setup because they were monotheistic, meaning they worshipped only one God. That's why the slander of the Jews became so effective at creating the persecution of the Christians. And you see that in verse 9 if you want to read it again.

The persecution in Smyrna was brought about not because of the Roman government per se, according to Jesus. He blames the persecution on the Jews who say they're Jews but are not, but rather are a synagogue of Satan. See there, I know the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Now why does Jesus say that about the Jews in Smyrna? Well, again, you got to understand the politics. The slander of the Jews was effective because originally the Christians were underneath this umbrella clause in the Roman Empire where they did not have to worship Caesar as God.

Jews and Christians were exempted from worshiping Caesar as God so long as they would offer sacrifices to Caesar as the ultimate ruler or the ultimate king. And the Jews kind of on a technicality reading the Old Testament, they said, well, that's not technically idolatry. If we offer sacrifices to Caesar as ruler, we're not worshiping him as God. And so that was kind of the setup. Until the Christians started growing as a movement and the Jews became a little bit, I don't know, not so friendly with the Christian religion. They said, no, you believe Jesus to be the Messiah.

We don't believe that. You're talking about a kingdom that is to come. You're talking about the return of Christ. We don't know if we buy all that, we don't know if we believe all that. And so we no longer consider you a part of the Jewish sect. You are your own animal, you're on your own. And when they said that at the same time, the Romans became very suspicious of the Christians. You had a guy named Nero. Anybody ever heard of Nero? Crazy Nero. He looked at every new religion with a great deal of suspicion, and he saw these Christians as unusually suspect because they believed Jesus to be the king, the true king.

They were preaching a kingdom that was separate from the Roman kingdom that was higher and more important than the Roman kingdom. And so he saw that as a treasonous act, he saw that as a suspicious act. And so he brought all kinds of pressure to bear on the Christian movement politically. This culminated— of course, you can read this on Wikipedia if you want— where Nero blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians. It was really his fault. But he needed a political fall guy to take the penalty for it, and so he blames the Christians.

And the Christians were becoming increasingly hated by the culture because of their weird ways, their weird antics. Some of them accused them of being incestuous, cannibalistic, because they took things like the Lord's Supper with the body and the blood of Jesus. They accused them of being unpatriotic because they wouldn't worship Caesar as God. They accused them of being divisive because they wouldn't worship the Roman pantheon. And so you've got these two sources of political hatred, one coming from the Jewish synagogue there in Smyrna that says these Christians are not part of us.

They have to worship Caesar as God. They're not under our umbrella exception. And then you have the Roman government cracking down saying, you sure do sound unpatriotic. You sure do sound like you're more committed to Jesus than you are the Roman government. We

don't like that. You have to worship Caesar as God or we're going to crack down on you. And guess what the Christians said? They said we will not. We will not worship Caesar as God. And as a result, they were persecuted. And it started out economic. If you can't worship Caesar as God, then you can't participate in the economic system.

That's why they were so poor. That's why Jesus says, I know your poverty, I know your affliction, and I know the slander of those who say that they're Jews and they are not. So the Jews were saying stuff like, these Christians are not Jews. They don't offer sacrifices to Caesar. They have allegiance to Jesus' kingdom and none other. They are weird, they're cannibalistic, they're incestuous, they're a divisive bunch, no good for Rome. Treasonous, subversive. Get them out of here. Okay, that's the background of verse 9. That's why Jesus says, I know it.

And it's not just the state. It's the slander of the Jews who say that they're Jews, but they are not. They're a synagogue of Satan. So the real source of your persecution? It's the devil himself. And that's ultimately what he culminates with in verse 10. If you want to read that again, he basically says the persecution's already bad, but it's going to go from bad to worse. So do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. He says that some of you are going to be thrown into prison, and the devil's going to throw you into prison to test you.

Some of you are going to experience affliction for 10 days, and I want you to be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. Now, what is it that the devil is trying to accomplish in the persecution? You can just hit clear all, I think, and it'll get rid of those words, okay? The devil is throwing these people into prison, and the devil persecutes Christians today, I think, for one reason only, and that is to silence the Christian voice from being truthful about the hope we have in the gospel and the truth about Jesus Christ.

And really the devil does that one of two ways. I think he can use incredible hardship and physical violence and threats of death to silence believers, or he will use incredible prosperity and cultural success and cultural currency to silence believers. And I think in the West, at least historically, the thing that the devil has used to silence Christians is prosperity and wealth and cultural currency. And there's a movement even now to say, well, if you'll be one of those Christians who doesn't call this sin and doesn't agree with the historic faith at that level and that level, then you can still be well respected by our culture.

We'll still accept you in the higher echelons of society. You can still have your cultural currency. You just can't believe this and you can't believe that. You've got to compromise your convictions in order to keep your cultural power. And the devil does that in our culture to silence Christians from speaking the truth about what is. In other cultures, cultures like North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, West Africa, the devil uses threats of physical violence and harm and things like suffering and death to silence Christians. And for some people it's not even that they fear for their own lives, it's that they fear for the safety of their family.

I don't want them to come in and arrest me and then sell my kids into slavery and the sex trade or whatever the case may be. And so they silence themselves and they refuse to speak out the truth about Jesus Christ and the hope of the gospel. And so whether it's incredible prosperity or incredible persecution, the goal is the same. He wants to silence us. And in the face of that persecution, we need to hear the words of the Lord. And his words are a reminder, and then there's three different commands.

He reminds them in verse 9. I see and I understand what it is that you're going through. He says, I know your affliction and poverty, but you're rich. I know the slander of those who say they're Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. So if we're going to hear the words of Jesus, the first thing we've got to hear Jesus say is, I know. I understand. I see what you're going through. It reminds me of— you guys remember that commercial with the woman that has the big nail in her head.

And she's like, I've got this pain in my head and I don't know what's going on, and it's just constant throbbing. And the guy's like, just take the nail out of your head. But then the lady goes, no, I just want you to listen. Don't remove the nail. Just identify with me in my pain. Just know what I'm going through. And it's a lesson every new husband or boyfriend has to learn that sometimes it's not about fixing the problem. It's about identifying with the pain that a person is going through.

And that's what Jesus is doing in this text. He's saying, I know, I see, and I understand. And Jesus isn't saying that as someone who hasn't gone through similar kinds of persecution. The book of Hebrews, chapter 4, says that we don't have a great high priest who's unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. But we have a high priest who's been tempted in every way that we are, just without sin. So since you have that kind of high priest, let us draw near to his throne of grace with confidence.

Confidence because we know that when we approach him we're going to find help in our time of need. Custom fit help, the exact kind of grace we need in the moment to persevere through to the end. So number one, we need to be reminded that Jesus sees and understands the suffering that we go through. So in our culture, we don't have physical persecution, at least not yet. In our culture, Christian persecution looks like economic suffering. It looks like being socially marginalized, being slandered. If you ever listen to the way news media talks about Christians, they almost never really understand what the Christian witness actually is or what Christians actually believe.

They kind of belittle us and marginalize us and mock us. And when that happens, you need to hear from the Lord, I know, I see, I understand what it is that you're going through. You're not alone. And that itself is a comfort. When you realize, well, I'm not the only person who has trouble raising my kids. I'm not the only person who has trouble in this or that marriage

issue. I'm not the only person who's struggling to stand strong for Jesus Christ. When you know you're not alone, it itself is a comfort.

Then after he gives them that reminder, he gives them these three imperatives in verse 10. He says in verse 10, do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer. And then he tells them, look, it's the devil who's about to throw you into prison to test you. You're going to experience affliction for 10 days. And then the last thing he says is, be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the Stephanos, the crown of life, the victor's crown. So in your notes, just for the sake of memory, I've got almost three C's.

You've got to conquer your fear. Consider the spiritual source behind the persecution you're undergoing. It's a spiritual source. It's the devil who's doing it. And then number three, keep the faith. And yes, I know that's not a C, it's a K, but it sounds the same. It's good enough in my book. Conquer your fear, consider the source, and keep the faith. So let's just think about these words of Jesus because again, I think the antidote to persecution, the way to overcome persecution, is to just hear and believe what Jesus is saying in verse 10.

First thing he says is you got to conquer your fear, which is kind of weird to say because you really should never tell someone how to feel because a lot of people can't help their feelings, right? Feelers out there, can I get an amen? When you're feeling your feelings, you can't stop feeling your feelings. Your feelings are your feelings and you just feel feelings all the time. You feel them. So Jesus is not saying stop feeling your feelings. He's saying don't let your feelings dictate your response to the persecution. Don't allow yourself to be crippled by that fear.

Don't let that fear and anxiety control— don't let it determine and shape your response to the persecution or threat of persecution that you are experiencing. Do not be afraid. He tells his disciples in Matthew chapter 10, don't fear the people who can kill the body only. Fear the one who can kill body and soul in hell. In other words, fear your heavenly Father more than you fear these earthly men and women who are the source of the persecution in your life. Be not afraid. Remain clear and steadfast in your convictions about Jesus Christ, which is easier said than done.

But if you're ever going to overcome persecution, it's got to start by stopping being afraid. And in our culture, you know what I think this translates to? There are a lot of Christians who are super engaged in politics, and a lot of their political activism is motivated by fear. A fear of what's yet to be or what's to come. And there is a sense in which you can be properly concerned about the implications of certain policies or whatever the case may be. But when you allow yourself to be crippled by fear, then your response to that threat of persecution or to that actual persecution that's taking place is wrongly shaped.

It's not gospel shaped. It's not shaped in a way that honors Christ and helps you overcome temptation. Instead it is the opposite of that. You're allowing your fear and anxiety to cause you to respond in a distinctively unchristian way. So conquer your fear, and then number two, consider the source. He says the devil's going to throw you into persecution. So he's already told them it's not the state, it's the slander of the Jews. But then he says these are not real Jews, these are so-called Jews who are really a synagogue of Satan.

And then he elevates it even further and says the devil himself is going to throw you into prison for ten days. Now, what does Jesus mean? Does he mean that the devil is going to incarnate himself in his little red costume and his horns, and he's going to grab Christians physically by the arms and throw them into prison? Of course he doesn't mean that. What Jesus is saying to these Christians is recognize the spiritual source behind the physical bodies that are causing you pain. He's reminding them what Paul said in Ephesians chapter 6 verse 12, in our battle, we don't battle against flesh and blood.

We battle against rulers, against authorities, against cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil spiritual forces in the heavens. So again, in our response to persecution in the West, a lot of it right now is social, it's maybe economic, there are threats, but there's a temptation I think in all of us to make the person the enemy or make the politician the problem instead of the ideologies behind the politician and the spiritual forces behind the ideologies. There is a spiritual realm that is feeding and undermining and giving structure to all of the forces that crack down on Christians with persecution.

And Jesus would say, be mindful of that source, not just the flesh and blood, be mindful of the spiritual source. And you'll respond properly. It's what Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 2. Timothy's battling persecution with some people who are trying to shipwreck the faith of people in his church. And Paul reminds Timothy, you've got to correct your opponents, you've got to address the evil, but do so with the Spirit of God. He says, correct your opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

Look at this. Then they'll come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. In other words, Timothy, consider the source. These people who are causing you so much heartache in a way are themselves victims because they've been taken captive by the evil one to establish his goals and accomplish his purposes. And so they're not ultimately your enemy. He is, and your job is to try and rescue them from his trap. That's the spirit with which a Christian engages in the battle.

That's the spirit with which a Christian overcomes persecution. A spirit of love, a spirit of gentleness. That's why the early Christian martyrs were so powerful. It wasn't just that they died, it was the way that they died. It was Stephen as he's being stoned to death saying, forgive them, Father.[3] That's the Christian witness. 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 18, Paul

tells the church in Thessalonica, I'm trying to get to you, but it's Satan who's keeping me from getting to your shores. And so example after example, recognizing the spiritual source. And when you recognize the spiritual source, you will respond to your persecution differently.

Then the last thing Jesus says is to be faithful to the point of death, to keep the faith no matter the cost, and if you'll keep the faith, it'll lead to wearing the crown. The cross always precedes the crown. You guys ever hear that hymn? I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today. Or the hymn Jesus paid it all. It's a reminder that in the Christian life suffering precedes the glory. Hardship precedes the healing of that hardship. The cross precedes the crown. And it was the crown that I think for these Christians in Smyrna and people like the apostle Paul, that was the motivating image that kept them in the game.

And when Jesus says keep the faith, I don't think he necessarily means don't engage in the political process or just kind of have this Eeyore mindset of, you know, we're always going to lose, and just suck on lemons until I die— just kind of a downer kind of mindset. But keeping the faith is rather engaging in your day-to-day life, engaging in the persecution, but doing so with a distinctively Christian spirit. That's what it means to keep the faith. That's why Paul said at the end of his life, he said, Timothy, I have fought the good fight.

In other words, I didn't check out, I fought. I was in the game. I was trying to win the battles. I fought the good fight of faith. I have kept the faith. I have finished the race. So now there is reserved for me a— there it is, the word— a stephanos, a victor's crown, a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day. The brother of Jesus, James, says the same thing in James 1. He says, blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.

So keep the faith until the end, no matter what. And if we do that, Jesus says, I promise you will not only get the victor's crown, he says in verse 11, to the one who conquers, you will not be harmed by the second death. And that's kind of an interesting phrase. I don't know if you've ever heard that phrase before, the second death. The book of Hebrews says it's appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment. So do you die twice? Well, according to Jesus, you do die twice.

You see that phrase, the second death, show up one other time in the Apocalypse, and it's in Revelation chapter 20, actually. And a lot of people, when they read second death, they think that refers to kind of like this annihilation. You cease to exist as a human; it's kind of like you get judged and then you are no more, which would be nice. But that's not the way the Bible actually answers the question. When the Bible answers the question, what is the second death? The Bible says the second death is hellfire for all eternity.

Look at if you got a Bible, look at Revelation chapter 20, because really, this is not just a promise. It's not just an encouragement to Christians who persevere. It's actually, I believe, a warning to non-Christians who don't persevere. Or it's a warning to Christians who are Christians in name only, who think that they're Christians, but they don't really possess a Christian faith because they shrink back in fear anytime there's any kind of pressure put on them. Christians who are not the real deal, they're fakers and posers. Revelation chapter 20, if you look in verse 12, you see this picture, Jesus sitting on this big white throne, and before the throne you have all these dead people, all the dead who've ever died.

They're standing before the throne, and as they're standing there, you have these books that are opened, and Jesus, as the judge, reads from the books and judges the works of those who've died. In verse 12 it says, I also saw the dead, the great and the small. So like the Bill Gateses and the Wes Terrys, they were all there. They were standing before the— and I mean, I'm the great one, right? No, I'm just kidding. Just kidding. I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And books were opened.

Another book was opened, which is the book of life. Okay, that's the book you want your name to be in. The dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. So their secret motivations of their heart, what they did, what they didn't do, all of that is being judged on these people as Jesus reads these books. Here's what's supposed to have happened. Here's what you did, here's the discrepancy, you're guilty. Then verse 13, the sea gave up the dead that were in it, so more dead people show up.

Then death and Hades gave up their dead, so like all the people who are in hell right now, they get thrown up into the judgment seat of Christ. And they get judged according to their works. And so there's all kinds of dead people. Like, all the dead people that have ever died are right there before the throne, meaning you, me, everybody. And we're before the seat of Jesus Christ, this great white throne, and our works are presented before the throne of God. And imagine your life being cast in 4K clarity before your eyes, and Jesus says, I know the truth about what happened.

I know what you said, I know what they believed, but here's what really happened. This was your real agenda. This was the real motivation of your heart. Every idle word you've ever spoken, every careless phrase. Every hurtful thing, every act of bitterness, every sin of omission, every sin of commission, every single wrong thing you've ever done. Put before you. Okay, who's excited? All right, nobody, right? And guilty, guilty, guilty. Every person is guilty. No one escapes the judgment of the white throne. But some people are guilty and their name is written in a different book.

What's that book called? It's the book of life. So for those who are in Christ, those who overcome, Jesus is going to say later, if you overcome, I will write your name in the book of life. Here he says, if you will overcome, you will not be harmed by the second death. And

what is the second death? Look at verse 14. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. The lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

So you're either in the book of life and you are not harmed by the second death, or you're not written in the book of life, you're judged according to your sins, you're guilty, and you're thrown into the lake of fire for all of eternity. A fire that was created for the devil and his angels, a fire of forever torment, of agony, of separation from God for the rest of your days. And so it's a warning. It's an encouragement to Christians. You will not be harmed by the second death. I heard one pastor say, if you are born twice, you'll die only once, assuming Jesus doesn't come back.

Hmm. But if you're only born once, then you're going to die twice. In other words, if you don't have a spiritual rebirth, you've only had your physical birth, you never come to believe on Jesus as Lord, you never repent of your sin. You never are saved, to use that terminology. Then you're going to die twice. You're going to have your physical death, and then you're going to stand before God one day in judgment, and he's going to give you a second death of hellfire for all of eternity. Or you can be someone who believes in Jesus as Lord, you can put your faith in Jesus as Jesus said in John 11.

Anyone who lives and believes in me never dies, and though they die, yet shall they live, because I am the resurrection and the life. So if you're born twice, you're born again, you're born of the Spirit, then even though you may die physically, that death won't harm you because I've conquered death. And even though there will be a second death, you will not be harmed by the second death because your name is written in the book of life. And so before we take the Lord's Supper this morning, I want to encourage every person in this room to examine their heart and to answer the question, is my name written in the book of life?

Am I a Christian who is going to persevere and overcome? Am I a Christian in name only, who looks the part when it's easy and it's culturally acceptable and I get influence and power because of my Christian convictions. Are you a fair weather Christian only? So as soon as the pressure comes, as soon as it gets hot, you check out. I don't want any part of that. All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer. It's part of the Christian life. So embracing that suffering now and asking the Holy Spirit to produce a kind of confidence in you and an ability to hear the voice and the words of Jesus, do not be afraid.

Consider the source and keep the faith. Those are the Christians who persevere to the end, and those are the Christians who receive the reward. And I'm not trying to say you can lose your salvation or anything like that. What I want to encourage you to do is to possess a true salvation that cannot be lost. And I know, we're in the West, and for American Christians, it's easy to be deceived about what you actually own and possess. But as the pressure mounts and as the persecution increases, may we be found as a people who hear from Jesus, I see

your affliction, I see your poverty, but you're rich because you possess what matters most to me.

A poverty of spirit, a confident faith, a willingness to persevere through to the end, no matter what you face. So I just want to ask you right there where you're seated. We're not going to have an altar call, but let's just bow our heads and close our eyes and allow the Spirit of God to speak to our hearts about what is true of us. As David said, would you search me, O God, and see if there's any offensive way in me? And if you would say, the Spirit of God has convicted me, I'm not a Christian.

I'm not a real Christian. I'm not a Christian like Revelation chapter 2 talks about. I don't have confidence that my name is written in the book of life. Then at the end of our service, I want you to come up and tell somebody, tell me or Taylor or any of the staff. If you're watching online, comment or direct message us. Go to the website on the bottom of your screen and settle that decision in your life. And then for the rest of us, those of us who are in Christ, those of us who are believers, as we take the Lord's Supper, let's do so mindful that Jesus himself suffered persecution.

His body was broken for us, his blood was shed for us. And because of that, we don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with us, but one who has experienced what we have experienced, overcame it, and promises us grace if we will remain steadfast in our hope, firmly planted in our convictions. And so allow this Lord's table to encourage you in the faith to stand strong in the face of persecution.

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1. Transcript note: spoken as "about two hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus … Constantine … made Christianity a state religion"; Constantine legalized and favored Christianity (Edict of Milan, AD 313, roughly 280 years after the resurrection), but it was Theodosius I's Edict of Thessalonica in AD 380 that made Nicene Christianity the empire's state religion. Source: Wikipedia, "Edict of Thessalonica." ↩
2. Transcript note: spoken as "originally founded by the Greeks, 3000 BC, around 1000 BC. It was re-established by the Roman government because they had been conquered by the Lydians about a thousand years before that"; Old Smyrna was first settled by Greeks around the 11th century BC, was broken up by the Lydian king Alyattes around 585 BC, and was refounded on a new site under Alexander's successors Antigonus and Lysimachus (about 316–281 BC), before Roman rule. Source: Wikipedia, "Smyrna" and "Old Smyrna." ↩
3. Transcript note: spoken as "forgive them, Father"; Stephen's dying words were "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" ("Father, forgive them" is Jesus' prayer from the cross, Luke 23:34). Source: Acts 7:60 (CSB). ↩