

Be Steadfast in Suffering

Revelation 2:8-11

Rev. Brian Bill

February 7-8, 2026

In 2008, *Christianity Today* featured a story called “A Victorious Family.” Here are a few excerpts.

Thirty years ago, in the city of Izmir, Turkey, a devout Muslim man named Necati was studying under a radical Islamic teacher. On his way home, he took the only available seat on a crowded bus, right next to a Christian woman named Semse who was quietly reading her Bible.

Curious about the book in her hands, he struck up a conversation, even accusing her of being a foreign missionary. Semse, proud of her Turkish identity, replied boldly, “*We should all be missionaries of our faith. Aren’t you a missionary?*”

That simple exchange sparked daily conversations on the bus. Over the next year, Necati wrestled with what he was learning about Jesus. Eventually, he left Islam, accepted Christ, quit his studies, lost his job, and was disowned by his family. Despite the huge cost, their love grew stronger, and they later married.

Necati became a passionate Christian worker. He distributed literature in Izmir (which once landed him in prison for a month), he became a pastor and eventually moved with his wife to another city to lead a small church and direct a publishing house. Tragically, on April 18, 2007, Necati and two fellow believers were brutally murdered by five young Muslim men who had pretended interest in Christianity.

This story began in Izmir, Turkey, which is the modern-day city of ancient Smyrna, where an inordinate amount of Christian persecution has taken place from the very beginning.

One of Smyrna’s best known martyrs was Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and longtime bishop of the church. During a wave of persecution in A.D. 155, Roman officials urged him repeatedly to deny Christ and save his life. He refused each time. When given one final chance, he responded with words that still echo

across the centuries: *“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”*

As soldiers prepared to nail him to the stake, Polycarp declined, saying, *“He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain unmoved without the security of nails.”* As the flames rose, he prayed, *“I bless Thee for deigning me worthy of this day and this hour that I may be among Thy martyrs and drink the cup of my Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Persecution intensified under Emperor Diocletian, who launched an empire-wide effort to annihilate Christianity. Though persecution eventually subsided under Constantine, tragedy returned in 1922, when the genocide of Greek and Armenian Christians reduced the Christian population from nearly 20% to less than 2%. Today, it’s less than one-half of one percent.

How did the believers in Smyrna remain faithful through such relentless suffering? I wonder if it was because of the words of Jesus found in Revelation 2:8–11. Verse 8 begins, *“**And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write...**”* Smyrna was a beautiful city, celebrated for its culture and learning. It called itself the “Glory of Asia.”

Smyrna was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus and was home to the temple of Emperor Tiberius Caesar. The worship of Caesar became compulsory when once a year, the citizens were required to burn incense on the altar to him. According to the commentator Barclay, *“All that the Christians had to do was to burn incense and say, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is precisely what the Christian would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.”*

Of the letters to the seven churches, this is the briefest (sorry, that doesn’t mean the sermon will be shorter). Just like with the letter to Philadelphia, Jesus has no rebuke or call to repentance for them. Ray Pritchard writes: *“The silence of our Lord is striking when you consider His harsh words for other nearby churches...a deeper reality is at work here. Their suffering had made them strong.”* Another commentator remarked, *“Sweet smelling Smyrna, the poorest but purest of the seven.”* Now known as Izmir, it is the only one of the seven cities still in existence today.

As we've been learning, Revelation is all about the risen, radiant, and returning King Jesus. If we hope to persevere through persecution and to be steadfast in suffering, we must trust His person and His promises by getting our Christology correct. Each of these seven letters begins with a description of Christ, reminding us that whatever we are facing, Jesus is the author, the answer, and our authority. Here's our main idea: *Trust Jesus completely, especially in suffering, because He holds our past, our present, and our future.*

I see ten ways we can be steadfast in suffering.

1. Trust His Sovereignty – *“The words of the first and the last...”* (v. 8a). The word **“first”** means *“foremost”* and **“last”** means the *“utmost.”* This takes us back to Revelation 1:8 where we read: **“I am the Alpha and Omega.”** 1:17 explains this more: **“Fear not, I am the first and the last.”** He is the eternal and infinite God. Since Jesus rules history from beginning to end, nothing enters our lives that does not first pass through His sovereign hands.

2. Trust His Power – *“...who died and came to life”* (v. 8b). This descriptive phrase has its roots in 1:18: **“I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.”** To a church that would soon face persecution **“unto death,”** Jesus is presented as the redeemer who prepared the way through death to resurrection life. Since Jesus defeated death itself after experiencing slander, rejection, and persecution, He can handle any problem we might have.

Chuck Swindoll does a great job describing how this letter may have been received by the believers in Smyrna.

“Imagine yourself sitting among the gathering of God’s people in Smyrna on a cold morning before sunrise. A small, lamp-lit room houses the remnant of beleaguered church members. The once-lively crowd of Christians now displays obvious gaps where men and women once sat. Some have fallen away under the persecution. Others are simply gone – arrested, exiled, or executed...in the dim light the pastor unrolls a scroll and begins to read with a calm, quiet confidence. Whispering and shuffling in the room ceases when you hear from whom the message comes – the risen Lord Himself. The entire group seems to hold its breath when Christ begins His commendation...”

3. Trust His Omniscience – **“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a**

synagogue of Satan” (v. 9). This word for “**know**” means “*to see with perception,*” not just awareness, but deep, personal understanding. Jesus doesn’t merely observe our suffering from a distance; He fully comprehends it from the inside out. He doesn’t say, “*I’ve heard*” or “*I’ve been told,*” but rather, “***I know.***”

The word “**tribulation**” refers to trouble, distress, and crushing pressure. It literally means “*to press or squeeze.*” According to Joe Stowell, this term comes from an ancient method of torture in which stones were piled on a person’s chest one by one until breathing became impossible and death eventually followed. The Christians in Smyrna had at least two heavy weights on their chest.

- **Poverty.** This refers to abject poverty. Many of the Christians were kicked out of the trade unions and ostracized so they couldn’t make money. Jesus is quick to tell them that though they may be materially poor, they were spiritually “**rich.**” James 2:5 says, “***...has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He has promised to those who love Him?***” The church at Smyrna was the rich poor church while the church at Laodicea was the poor rich church. When Beth and her sisters would come home and mention how “rich” someone was, Beth’s dad would always say, “*No, they’re not rich. Those in Christ are rich.*”
- **Slander.** This is a strong word which refers to “*evil reports*” and the worst type of verbal abuse. Both the pagan Romans and unbelieving Jews attacked Christians with false accusations. These Jews weren’t acting like God’s people but were instead being used by the evil one to slander the saints of God. When Domitian issued an edict declaring emperor worship mandatory for all inhabitants of the Roman Empire, he exempted the Jews from this requirement. Some of the unbelieving Jews did not want this religious freedom extended to Christians.

They accused Christians of cannibalism, claiming that in communion they were eating the body of Jesus. They also asserted that “love feasts” were immoral, and because conversion often split families, Christians were accused of being anti-family. In addition, they were called “atheists,” because they rejected the gods of the pagans and didn’t bow down to statues. They were also accused of being political enemies of Rome because they refused to say, “Caesar is Lord.”

Some of you are living under a lot of pressure right now. Maybe it's the weight of grief (a new session of Grief Share will begin next month). Or perhaps it's the heaviness of anxiety or the burden of financial strain. Some of you are exhausted by trials or you're being persecuted for your faith. It feels like something heavy is sitting on your chest, stealing your breath and draining your strength. Friend, Jesus turns to you and says, ***"I know."***

Incidentally, the more we speak with conviction about sin, even if we're compassionate toward sinners, the more we'll be attacked and slandered. No matter how loving we are, when we speak up for the sanctity of life, when we convey the biblical truth that there are only two genders determined at conception, when we hold to marriage as a covenant relationship between one man and one woman, and Jesus as the only way to Heaven, we'll be called bigots, narrow minded, out of touch, and hateful. Even so, we will continue to speak with conviction, clarity, and compassion as we follow the example of Jesus who was ***"full of grace and truth."*** (John 1:14).

Have you ever considered that Jesus knows everything about you, and loves you anyway? Since nothing escapes His attention, you will never be forgotten or forsaken by Him.

This makes me think of the timeless African American spiritual:

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus.*

Trust Jesus completely, especially in suffering, because He holds our past, our present, and our future.

4. Trust His Command – ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer..."*** (v. 10a). This is not a suggestion but rather a command from Christ. It literally means, *"stop being afraid"* even though there's more suffering to come. Fear fades when faith focuses on Christ's control. Persecution is a promise according to Acts 14:22 ***"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*** Jesus promised in John 16:33: ***"In the world you will have tribulation."***

5. Trust His Plan – ***"Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested"*** (v. 10b). I wonder if the believers in Smyrna were hoping to hear that King Jesus was going to do something about their unjust treatment and

protect them from suffering and imprisonment, but that wasn't the plan. In those days, when a person went to prison, it was to await execution.

The name “*devil*” means, “*slanderer or false accuser*,” while the title “*Satan*” in verse 9 refers to “*adversary*.” In John 8:44, Jesus referred to Satan as “*a liar and the father of lies*.” If we pull these two titles together, the evil one opposes and accuses God's people. Even though people were doing the persecuting, the accusing Adversary instigated it all.

The trials we go through are designed to grow us. God uses suffering to strengthen and purify as we read in James 1:2-4: “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” Persecution has a way of unleashing God's power and purity in our lives.

I appreciated one commentator's insight: “*The Greek word translated ‘Smyrna’ was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate the Hebrew word for ‘myrrh,’ a substance used as a perfume for the living (Matthew 2:11) and the dead (John 19:39). Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing fragrant resin, the church was crushed by persecution, and gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God.*”

In addition, myrrh was used for the anointing oil for priests and furnishings in the tabernacle (Exodus 30:23), it was utilized as a perfume for weddings (Song of Solomon 3:6), and it was given to numb pain as demonstrated when Jesus refused it when He was on the cross (Mark 15:23). Myrrh was given as a gift at the birth of Jesus, and 75 pounds was used to wrap His body for burial. I wonder if some of this myrrh came from Smyrna.

6. Trust His Timing – “*...and for ten days you will have tribulation...*” (v. 10c). It's difficult to know if the phrase “*ten days*” referred to a literal ten days, if it was symbolic, or if it referred to ten longer periods of persecution. In the Bible, “*ten days*” signifies a brief time (Acts 25:6). I lean toward them being literal days based on Daniel 1:12: “*Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.*” Whatever it means, we can see that suffering is measured and limited by God. We can trust God's timing because He has put boundaries on our suffering. As someone has said, “*Your trial has an expiration date.*”

Having said that, there's sure a lot of persecution happening right now. In fact, Open Doors says the persecution of Christians is at record levels today. They just released their 2026 World Watch List, and the numbers are staggering:

- 388 million Christians face persecution worldwide, which comes out to one in every seven believers.
- Nearly 5,000 Christians were martyred for their faith last year alone.
- 3,490 of those deaths occurred in Nigeria, which has become the global epicenter of deadly anti-Christian violence. Just last month, 177 Christians were abducted from three churches.

In their most recent podcast, Voice of the Martyrs (one of our Go Team Partners), reported that countless Christians are being abducted and murdered in Iran right now as ongoing protests are giving the government opportunity to intensify their targeting of believers.

Trust Jesus completely, especially in suffering, because He holds our past, our present, and our future.

7. Trust His Charge – “Be faithful unto death...” (v. 10d). After writing about how Satan the Accuser will be thrown down to the earth, Revelation 12:11 says, **“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”** These believers loved their Lord more than they loved their lives. Like many of you, I want to finish well with my life, and I want to remain faithful unto death.

Nancy Guthrie writes: *“Jesus’ sobering message to the church in Smyrna was that they could expect to be put to death for their allegiance to Him. But speaking as the one who died and came to life, Jesus assured them that being put to death would not be the end of their story.”*

Christians who refused to declare “Caesar is Lord” faced:

- Social rejection.
- Economic exclusion.
- Physical persecution.
- Torture and death.

Obedience may cost you everything. As someone has said, *“Faithfulness is measured not by ease, but by endurance.”*

8. Trust His Promise – *“...and I will give you the crown of life”* (v. 10e). This crown refers to the victor’s garland given to champions. It was most often woven out of olive leaves. It was fragile and quickly faded, but the crown Jesus gives is eternal, unfading, and forever glorious. Athletes trained for years for a temporary wreath while believers endure suffering for an eternal reward as 1 Corinthians 9:25 says: *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”*

From a distance, the skyline of Smyrna resembled a crown, thus giving it the name “Crown City.” As the Olympics begin this weekend in Italy and athletes compete for a gold medal, Christians in Smyrna had no chance of getting a victor’s crown in athletic games because they weren’t allowed to participate. However, they will be given the victor’s *“crown of life”* by the One who once wore a *“crown of thorns.”* He will soon return wearing many crowns on His head (Revelation 19:12). The same Savior who suffered shame is coming again as absolute King of kings and place the unfading crown of life on every faithful head in Smyrna...and in this room.

9. Trust His Word – *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...”* (v. 11a). This is a call to spiritual attentiveness so we will hear and heed what the Spirit is saying. Everyone has physical ears, but not everyone truly listens. The idea is, *“To lean in and pay close attention by receiving this message.”*

The wording is personal and singular: *“He who has an ear...”* and it’s also plural as a call to congregations: *“the churches.”* Every believer must listen personally, and every congregation must listen corporately. And we all have the responsibility to respond.

While I don’t, and won’t watch the Grammy’s, I did view a clip of Jason DeFord (AKA “Jelly Roll”), win three Grammy Awards on Sunday night. Incredibly, he used this moment on music’s biggest stage to openly share the Gospel, telling millions of viewers that faith in Jesus Christ transformed his life when he started listening to the Lord: *“First of all, Jesus, I hear you and I’m listening, Lord. I am listening, Lord.”*

Having been arrested for the first time at the age of 14, he was in jail 40 different times for drug charges. Holding up a pocket-sized Bible, Jelly Roll went on to recount his lowest moments: *“There was a time in my life, y’all, that I was broken. That’s why I wrote this album. I didn’t think I had a chance, y’all. There was days that I thought the darkest things. I was a horrible human. I want to tell y’all right now, Jesus is for everybody...Jesus is not owned by one political party. Jesus is not owned by no music label. Jesus is Jesus, and anybody can have a relationship with Him. I love you, Lord.”*

Are you listening to the Lord? Are you hearing Him, and will you heed what He is saying? It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, or how long you’ve been doing it. You too can be forgiven and set free by repenting of your sins and receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, but you must hear and respond to Him.

10. Trust His Victory – *“...the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death”* (v. 11b). In each letter to the seven churches, Christians are challenged to *“conquer.”* This refers to *“being victorious, prevailing, and overcoming.”* Although the Christians in Smyrna may have been put to death on earth, a future life was to be given them which no one could take away.

I’ve always appreciated this quote: *“He who is born once dies twice; he who is born twice dies once.”* If you’re only born physically, you’ll die physically and you will experience eternal separation from the Lord in your “second death” in the lake of fire. If you’re born again, you’ll experience physical death only, because eternal life with God has already begun as John 5:24 says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”*

There is something far worse than physical death: the horror of eternal separation from God in the sulfurous fires of Hell. Believe me, you do not want to experience the “second death.” Check out what Revelation 20:14-15 says: *“Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”* Revelation 21:8 adds: *“...their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”*

Let’s summarize what we learned together today.

1. **Trust His Sovereignty** – Fix your eyes on Christ, who rules history from beginning to end.

2. **Trust His Power** – Believe in the One who has conquered death and can handle any problem.
3. **Trust His Omniscience** – Know that Jesus fully understands your trials and slander you experience.
4. **Trust His Command** – Stop being afraid, even when more suffering is coming.
5. **Trust His Plan** – Recognize that trials and persecution are allowed to test and strengthen you.
6. **Trust His Timing** – Remember that suffering has limits and God has set boundaries.
7. **Trust His Charge** – Be faithful unto death, valuing obedience to God above personal safety or comfort.
8. **Trust His Promise** – Look forward to the eternal, imperishable reward He offers for faithfulness.
9. **Trust His Word** – Hear and heed the Spirit’s message; respond personally and corporately.
10. **Trust His Victory** – Because Christ has conquered, we can live as conquerors.

Let’s pick up the story I shared at the beginning about the three martyrs in Turkey. About 15 years ago, Beth and I had the privilege of going to Israel. We were impacted by the people we went with and the places we visited. Our team consisted of 30 Asian believers from seven different countries and was led by friends of ours who teach at the East Asia Theological Seminary.

It was very moving walking where Jesus walked and getting to know people who have been walking with Jesus in hard places. One of my prayers was for God to teach me and reach me; to rearrange and change me. We didn’t want it simply to be educational; we wanted it to be transformational. I’ve shared some of this before but it bears repeating.

- We got to know a missionary from East Timor who started a church planting school which has launched 30 churches. One of these pastors has since been martyred.
- One sister ministered for many years to women who were forced to have abortions in China.
- A brother from South Korea reached out to North Korean refugees in China. He told us about police raids and torture...and how he couldn’t wait to go back.

- I became friends with the national director of Cru in Mongolia. He told us the church in his country was growing rapidly.
- One sister worked in IT at a well-known international firm and was directing 90% of her income to support multiple missionaries. She lived on 10%.
- One pastor headed up a literature ministry in Myanmar. We've kept in contact, and several years ago, after I sent him the Word document for *Anchor for the Soul*, he translated it into Burmese.
- Another brave brother was ministering in China. His Bible studies were being bugged, so they moved his meetings to motel rooms to avoid being arrested. He told me, "*We experience amazing things.*" When I asked him about the pain of persecution, he smiled and said, "*Yes, but that's amazing, too.*"

As Paul Harvey used to say, "*And now for the rest of the story.*" One of the men on our Israel trip was from South Korea and had served on the team in Turkey where three of his teammates were brutally martyred for their faith. During our time in Israel, we were all praying God would make His way and His will clear for our brother. It was obvious he was wrestling with the decision whether to go back, knowing he could lose his life as well.

What happened next is vivid in my mind. We were back on our bus, having just left one of the historical sites. I noticed him sitting by himself, so I went over and sat next to him. We chatted briefly and then he said humbly, "*God wants me to go back to Turkey, so I'm going.*" I was stunned and undone. I couldn't get a word out. I wanted to encourage him, but I just sat there, tears filling my eyes. I excused myself and went back across the aisle and sat down next to Beth.

By this time, I was blubbering. I turned to Beth and said, "*He's going back to Turkey, knowing he could die there.*" And then I said, "*Actually, he has already died.*"

Are you ready to trust Jesus completely, especially in suffering, because you know He holds your past, your present, and your future.

Invitation

This week, I received a voicemail. The individual introduced herself and said, "*I need to get saved.*" I met with her on Wednesday in the Fireside Room and watched another miracle take place as Jesus saved her by His grace and for His glory. Let me ask you a question: *Are you ready to get saved right now?*

Let's go back to the martyrdom of Polycarp. According to one source, the chief of police said to him, *"I shall have you consumed with fire...unless you change your mind."* To which Pastor Polycarp replied, *"The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little; for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will."*

Do you want to avoid the second death and the lake of fire? Then, you must be born twice. Why do you delay? Are you ready to repent and receive Christ so you can be released from your record of sins? Only then will you find the refreshment you are searching for and experience the restoration God alone can bring to your life.

Lord, I admit I am a sinner and deserve Your just judgment. I repent from trying to follow my own way and now turn to You as the only way. I believe Jesus died in my place on the cross and rose again on the third day and now I receive Him into my life. Please save me from my sins and from Your righteous wrath. I want to be born again so I place all my trust in You and You alone. If there's anything in my life You don't like, please get rid of it so I can love You first. I pray this in the name of Jesus, the One who is both Lord and Christ. Amen.

Thanks to Lynn and Welcome to Mandy