

# A WORD TO THE SUFFERING

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Rev. 2:8-11; 2 Cor. 1:8-11

## Introduction

“What is the most painful thing you have ever experienced?” That is a very personal question, but you can learn a lot about a person from such a question. If I asked you to answer that question, I would probably get quite a variety of responses. Some people tell of a broken arm in childhood, and we realize they’ve not yet encountered much pain in life. Others have endured more pain than we can imagine—not just physically, but life-pain. Such pain changes us, either for better or worse.

Suffering is not something we really like to deal with or talk about. Yet is it something we ought to expect as Christians. The Word of God and history are clear about that. The Apostle John, who wrote the book of Revelation, certainly knew suffering. He was banished to Patmos by the emperor Domitian for his testimony regarding Jesus Christ.

The other apostles also knew what it was to suffer. In fact, according to tradition, John was the only one of the twelve to die a natural death. The others were all put to death for their faith and preaching.

The Apostle Paul knew suffering. This morning, along with our passage in Revelation, we are going to be looking at some words from the Apostle Paul that I hope will help us get a handle on this subject of suffering and enable us to better deal with whatever we may be facing.

We begin today with some background on the church at Smyrna. They were a church that knew much about suffering. Let’s start with a bit of background. *Put up map and show the location of Smyrna.*

**History:** A Greek colony est. c.1500 BC. Destroyed around 600 BC and virtually ceased to exist. It was rebuilt around 300 BC and became one of the most prosperous cities in Asia Minor.

**Claim to fame:** Natural seaport, on an important trade route, beautiful city, famous for its magnificent public buildings. It disputed with Ephesus over the title of “First City of Asia.”

**Politics:** Smyrna was a faithful ally of Rome. One of the first cities to officially engage in the worship of the Roman emperor, and built a special temple in honor of Emperor Tiberias during his reign (AD 14-37, after Caesar Augustus).

**Religion:** The gospel came to Smyrna quite early, probably from believers in Ephesus. The church there faced tremendous persecution from both the large Jewish population, and the Gentile citizens who were committed in their worship of the emperor. Many were put to death for their faith. A number of years after the writing of this message, about AD 156, the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, who had been a student of the Apostle John, was burned at the stake.

So, with this background in mind, let’s take a look at this message from the risen Lord to the suffering church in Smyrna.

## I. Identification

Note how Jesus identifies himself to the church. I believe he is also identifying with the church in Smyrna. The First and the Last, who died and came to life again. He is the eternal one – the First and the Last. Cities may come and go, as Smyrna had, churches may grow and decline, but he is eternal and does not change.

And so the message to the church in Smyrna and to us is that no matter what we suffer, no matter what happens to us now, or in the future, He is still there.

## II. Understanding

Jesus Christ was well aware of the struggles of this church. He mentions three specific areas of suffering. The first is afflictions (tribulation). These believers were struggling under a burden that was crushing them.

The second struggle was poverty. They had nothing. Their religion was not legally permitted so it was easy to take action against them and they were pillaged by Jew and Gentile alike. They were poor. Yet Jesus says, You are rich. They had what really mattered.

Quote from an unknown source: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

The third struggle was with religious persecution – those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. The early church often suffered under the hostility of the Jews, in the name of religion.

These believers were facing incredible affliction. The pressure they were under was overwhelming. It was beyond what anyone should have to bear.

I want to take you now to 2 Cor. 1:8-11. This is Paul's account of a time when he felt very much like these believers in Smyrna. *Read v. 8.* Here we see a glimpse of what Paul was facing.

Paul used stark language here. "We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced." The word *affliction* is often translated *tribulation*. The root idea is that of pressure. What kind of pressure? "We were utterly burdened..." Some translations say, "...we were burdened beyond measure..." It's as though he was saying, "I've had difficulties in the past, but I've been able to measure them. When I was chained—that was a *five* on the pain-scale. When I was beaten with rods—that was *seven*. When I was shipwrecked in the deep—that was *eight*. When I was stoned in Lystra—that was *nine*. When I was flogged—that was *ten*." But this pressure and pain was off the chart. The NKJV says, "...we were burdened beyond measure, **above strength**..." He didn't have the inner reserves to deal with it. It was crushing, so much so that he says, "...we despaired even of life." Wow! Here the great advocate and example of resilience and hope used the word *despair*. What experience in the apostle's life is he referring to? We don't really know. Nothing mentioned in the Book of Acts really seems to equal what Paul described here. By not knowing the specifics, we can better relate it to our own experiences.

It was pain beyond measure. Paul experienced it. The church in Smyrna experienced it. And some of you may be experiencing it.

### III. Encouragement

Let's go on. In the next stage we find a word of encouragement. Rev. 2:10 – "Do not be afraid..." When faced with suffering, that is ex-

actly what people need to hear. But more than that, they need to hear it from the one who really knows and understands. *Read v. 10a.*

This is the kind of thing Paul talks about in 2 Cor. 1.

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 ESV)*

David McCasland, in a Radio Bible Class booklet entitled, *"Life-Changing Messages from the Risen Lord"* tells the following story:

After the shock of being told he had leukemia and then undergoing a week of treatments, 15-year-old Douglas Maurer sank into a deep depression. When one of his aunts ordered flowers for him, she asked the young florist to make the display especially nice. "It's for my teenage nephew who has leukemia," she told the clerk over the phone. When the flowers arrived in Douglas' hospital room, he found a handwritten card in the basket: "Douglas-I took your order. I work at Brix Florist. I had leukemia when I was 7 years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley."

Writing about this incident, columnist Bob Greene said, "Douglas Maurer was in a hospital filled with millions of dollars of the most sophisticated equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with medical training totaling in the hundreds of years. But it was a salesclerk in a flower shop, a woman making \$170 a week, who—by taking the time to care—gave Douglas hope and the will to carry on." Why? Because she had faced the same situation he was facing and had overcome.

When faced with suffering or affliction what we need more than anything is to hear comfort and encouragement from someone who has

When Jesus says to the hurting church in Smyrna, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer," he speaks as one who has been there. He suffered in ways we will never know or understand. Yet he endured and he overcame, and now he calls on us to do the same.

Now I want to look back at Paul's words again. There is something more that we need to see.

When we are suffering or in pain, we often ask "Why?" But Paul didn't ask that question. Instead, he answered it. He said, *"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us*

*rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” (2 Cor. 1:9) The Lord brought him to the edge of the grave to teach him to trust the One who can work all things for good even when it seems too late.*

Remember how Jesus identified himself to the church in Smyrna: *“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”* Paul says, *“...this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”* It is the resurrection that brings hope and victory in the midst of pain and despair. God brought His Son Jesus Christ through to victory. He brought Paul through his pain. He will do the same for us.

The writer to the Hebrews said, *“...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”* (Hebrews 12:2-3 ESV)

Our most accelerated times of spiritual growth are often during the most difficult periods of life. Perhaps if you are in considerable pain today, either physically or emotionally, it's because God wants to develop your faith in order to accomplish a wonderful result.

## IV. Deliverance

Having taught him that lesson, the Lord gave Paul a threefold deliverance. *Read v. 10.* What we have here is the verb “to deliver” occurring in the past, present, and future tenses. The NKJV puts it very well. It says, *“...who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us.”* He did and He does and He will deliver. That was Paul's confidence, because he understood what true deliverance really is.

In 2 Timothy 4:17–18 we have some of the last words the Apostle Paul wrote. There he said: *“...So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.”* Then having written this, Paul was promptly beheaded! Isn't that interesting? That tells us something about God's perspective on deliverance. He delivers us all along the way, but one day

He's going to snatch us out of all our pain and pressures and problems. That will be the ultimate deliverance.

Well, let's go back to Rev. 2 again. *Read v. 10.* Jesus message to the church in Smyrna is that there is more suffering coming. Though it may be brief (ten days), it will be intense. It may mean imprisonment, or even death.

Jesus says be faithful, don't quit, don't give up. Hang in there, even if it ultimately means death. The truth is, we don't face that much in our world, but others have and many will continue to do so. But for the faithful, the reward is the crown of life.

*James 1:12 – “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*

## Conclusion

Jesus concludes his message to the suffering church in Smyrna with a promise we can cling to through the most trying of times and circumstances. *“The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”* You see, death as we know it now—physical death—is only a transition. It is moving from this life to the next. But the second death is the separation from God forever. That is something we need not fear.

And so I say, if there is pressure or pain in your life today, take it to the Lord Jesus and learn afresh to lay it at the feet of the One who can raise the dead—the One who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. If you know someone in pain, come alongside as an invisible ally, praying earnestly for them and rejoicing—giving thanks—when the deliverance comes. There is an old hymn that says:

'Tis the grandest theme through the ages rung;  
'Tis the grandest theme for a mortal tongue;  
'Tis the grandest theme that the world e'er sung,  
“Our God is able to deliver thee.”