

A Matter of Life & Death

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- [0 : 00] So in our community groups, as some of you all know, we've been working through the New City Catechism. A catechism, it's a series of questions and answers that help summarize the key tenets of the Christian faith.
- It's helpful for helping us get to grips with what the Bible teaches. And the first question of the New City Catechism is this. What is our only hope in life and death?
- And the answer that it gives is this, and I think it's really helpful. That we are not our own, but belong, body and soul, both in life and death, to God and to our Savior, Jesus Christ.
- This is the Christian hope in summary form. And for us today in Glasgow in 2023, in some ways it's quite easy to be able to confess that hope.
- Very rarely does it cost us much. But in a context of suffering and persecution, to be able to confess that, it's a lot harder.
- [1 : 04] In fact, for some of our brothers and sisters across the world, death is a real threat for making that confession of faith. And really, when we do make that confession, when we say that our only hope in life and death is our God and Jesus Christ, our Savior, what we're really saying is we're saying that, actually, I am willing to die for the sake of Jesus and for his name.
- The reason I start here is because this church in Smyrna, the second church that Jesus gives a message to in these seven letters that we get in this early part of Revelation, the church in Smyrna was facing the real prospect of death for believing in Jesus.
- They were facing poverty. They were facing abuse. They were facing imprisonment and death. And they act as kind of like a case study for us, a case study that asks us the question, what does it really mean for us if we believe in Jesus to say that he is and to believe that he is our only hope in life and death?
- Because believing in Jesus really is a matter of life and death. We've got three points we're going to work through. We're going to think about the church, the church in Smyrna, who were facing this prospect of suffering and death.
- We're going to think about the reason that they were able to do that, which is her Lord, their Savior, Jesus, who is theirs and our hope in life and death. And then we're going to finally think about her response and indeed our response, which is faithfulness to the point of death.
- [2 : 48] And you might think, gosh, this sounds like it's going to be really grim. Really quite overly focused on death. But the reason why actually this is so helpful to think about is because our faith and our hope in many ways are revealed in extremists, in that crucible when we come across challenges and ultimately for these Christians whenever death is a threat.
- And also because it's a wonderful hope, a wonderful hope that can be defined in the face of death. And what I hope we're going to have confidence in is that the Christian hope really does allow us to be defiant in the face of all things because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

So our first point, looking at the church, a church that was facing suffering and death. When we look at this church in Smyrna, we see that in some ways everything is upside down.

They're a picture of how the gospel turns everything on its head. They were a small church in Turkey beset by a whole host of challenges and opposition. But as we see them facing these challenges, actually what we see is that what looks like weakness is in fact strength.

What looks like power actually is impotent. What looks like a hopeless situation is in fact hope. And what looks like death and the end of the road is in fact the promise of life.

[4 : 15] Because the gospel completely redefines the way in which we understand the world. The gospel gives us a new way of looking at things because of everything Christ has done.

And it answers the question, why be a Christian if it could mean death for confessing that faith? So this church in Smyrna, they were facing these various challenges.

The first one they were facing was poverty. We see this in verse 9. I know your afflictions and your poverty, says Jesus. The gospel does not promise for anyone wealth and prosperity, though some teachers would suggest that.

But scripture never does. In fact, scripture frequently suggests the opposite. And that's exactly what we see here. The Christians in Smyrna, because of their faith, had in fact led them to a place of poverty.

Living counter to the culture that they were in, had led to rejection because they didn't follow the gods and the idols or worship the emperor that the culture around them was doing.

[5 : 21] It led to financial implications because of their faith. It reminds us that following Jesus frequently involves sacrifice.

It always involves sacrifice. And that's what these Christians in Smyrna were discovering. It wasn't just poverty.

There wasn't just financial implications. But these Christians were also suffering heaps of slander and abuse from those around them. And from one corner in particular, which was the Jews.

So that's the second challenge that they were facing. We see this in the rest of verse 9. Jesus says, I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

So the abuse that they were facing was, I imagine there probably was abuse from the wider culture, but the particular abuse that was really challenging them here was coming from the Jews.

[6 : 17] Which is why Jesus calls them not Jews, but a synagogue of Satan. It's worth saying this isn't an anti-Semitic comment. After all, the New Testament writers were themselves Jews.

What it's really conveying is this idea that the New Testament is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises. The problem is that the Jews, to whom these promises had been given throughout the generations, they'd rejected them.

They hadn't believed. So when we get to the New Testament, and as we see the gospel going out across the world, there are many Jews who do believe. They become Christians.

They become part of that early church. And Christians, really, in the New Testament, are described as the true Israel. Paul uses that language in Galatians and in Romans.

Which is why Jesus can then say to these Jews that actually they're not Jews because they've rejected the promises of God in the Old Testament because they've rejected Jesus.

[7 : 21] Because they're rejecting the church and Christians and persecuting them. And hence, they are a synagogue of Satan. Because they're not doing God's work.

They're actually doing now the work of the devil. And we see this throughout history. The gospel is offensive. Peter describes it as a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

And as you go through the Bible story, as Jesus teaches, as the apostles teach, and even as you look through church history, as the gospel goes out through all the world, there are people who believe, but there's also a much bigger group of people who reject the message and reject the messengers.

The gospel is offensive. And abuse and rejection of the gospel frequently comes from unexpected places, like what we see here.

The Jews are the people who should have been embracing the gospel. But instead, they're the ones who are handing these Christians over to the Roman authorities. Abuse can come from those who claim to follow the same God.

[8 : 30] And the faithful church can often come under attack from the branch of the church that actually decides to follow the pattern of culture rather than the pattern of Christ.

And that, again, is something that we see throughout history. And it's just as likely to happen today. And this is, as Jesus says, the work of the devil.

Because there is a real spiritual power behind human opposition. And that's what we see in the third challenge that these Christians were facing, which actually is the devil himself.

Look at verse 10. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you. This is the power behind this synagogue.

It's not a rhetorical flourish to call them a synagogue of Satan. There's a real spiritual enemy present. It's why, again, to quote from Peter, he tells Christians to be alert and of sober mind.

[9 : 32] Because your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.

Because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. There's a line in Sherlock in the very first episode.

I'm a big fan. This line stuck out to me in the first watch. But John Watson says to Sherlock Holmes, normal people don't have arch enemies. But the thing is, if we're Christians, we do.

We do have an enemy. And that is a reality of following Christ. And then the fourth challenge that this church we're facing, and we see this in the rest of verse 10, this is what the enemy is doing to them.

I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you. And you will suffer persecution for 10 days. Be faithful, even to the point of death. So this real spiritual enemy, working through human opposition, means that the threat of death is hanging over these Christians.

[10 : 40] Because it's worth noting that imprisonment itself, although that's the highest form of punishment that we have in our culture, it wasn't really a Roman punishment. If you were in prison in a Roman culture, that was just a prelude to either a trial or to execution.

So when it says that these guys are in prison, it means that death really is on the horizon for them. And so when we look at this situation, you've got to ask the question, what is it that was stopping these Christians in Smyrna from giving it all up?

All they had to do was worship the emperor or deny Jesus. And they wouldn't have to be dealing with all this pressure or with the threat of death hanging over them. Before we get to that answer, it's worth noting that Jesus himself, whenever he was preaching the gospel, preaching his message, said that he was not going to be a walk in the park.

He said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

But whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it. Jesus makes clear that following him is, in some senses, a death sentence, carrying your own method of execution.

[12 : 00] But he says that the sacrifice is worth it. That in losing your life, paradoxically, this is this upside down nature of the gospel again, in losing your life, well, actually you end up saving it.

And this is what we see. As we look throughout the whole history of Jesus' church, we see people willing to take up their cross and follow him.

This is the way of our brothers and sisters in history. And a good example, just to pick out one, actually comes from the church itself in Smyrna.

Just a few decades after this letter was written, a guy called Polycarp, who was the minister of the church there, he probably would have read this letter himself. He was denounced to the authorities by the Jews, in fact, for refusing to worship the emperor.

And he was killed for it. And he said, before he was martyred, 86 years I have served him, Jesus. He has never done me wrong.

[13 : 05] How then can I blaspheme my king who has saved me? And Polycarp is not an exception. His experience is one that carries all the way through the history of Christ's kingdom.

But it's not just a historical thing. It's very much a present reality, too, for our brothers and sisters across the world. The church globally is more persecuted in many ways than it ever has been.

Just a few figures to bring that into reality for us. In Nigeria last year, there was 5,014 Christians murdered. Globally last year, there were 2,110 churches that were attacked.

And last year, 140,000 Christians had to leave their homes because of their faith. And in countries like China and others, to be a Christian is illegal.

To share your faith is forbidden. And so when we look at this, and as we think about the church globally, not just here in Glasgow, what is it that makes Christians believe a message that so often can lead to persecution and to death?

[14 : 21] Well, the answer is because of Jesus. That brings us on to our second point, the church's Lord, who is our hope in life and death. Everything centers on who Jesus is.

The gospel, it's not an ideology or a philosophy or a worldview per se. The gospel is rooted in a person. It's rooted in Jesus, who he is and all that he has done.

And this passage here, this letter to the church in Smyrna, highlights three core things that remind us and show us why these Christians and other Christians are willing to die for the name of Jesus.

The first thing is Jesus is the eternal Christ. This is the idea that we were singing about earlier when we sang Faithful One, because Jesus is unchanging.

We see in verse 8, these are the words of him who is the first and the last. This idea that Jesus is the beginning and the end. Everything is encompassed within him, if you like.

[15 : 22] He's the eternal creator. Nothing is outside of his control. He is watching over all things. And now if that's true, that is a great hope for the church undergoing persecution and suffering.

Because though they might not understand what's going on or why, we can take comfort that our Lord is the one who is God and he is in control of all things.

So Christ is the eternal one. He's also the resurrected Christ. And this is core to the gospel message. Look at verse 8 again. He's the one who died and came to life again.

You can't have the gospel without the resurrection. Jesus himself said, I am the resurrection and the life. And throughout the New Testament, the gospel writers are there at pains to show us that this is at the heart of what we believe.

Now, Paul makes the point that if Christ hasn't been raised, well, then our preaching is useless. And so is your faith. The whole of Christianity hangs on the truth and the hope of the resurrection.

[16:36] A quote from Tim Keller, who went to be with Jesus on Friday, the American pastor and writer. This quote, I think, helpfully conveys just how essential the resurrection is.

He said that if Jesus rose from the dead, well, then you have to accept all that he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, well, then don't worry about anything that he said.

And the issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching, but whether or not he rose from the dead. The resurrection is key.

We don't have time just now to go into the evidence for the resurrection, but if that's something you'd like to chat about, then do grab myself or Jonathan later. But there is compelling evidence for the resurrection.

And if Jesus has risen, we have hope. Hope that there is something beyond death. And then we also see that Jesus is the compassionate Christ.

[17:37] He's eternal. He's the resurrected one. And he is compassionate. He says in verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty. Jesus knows.

The eternal one actually cares. The one who commands creation is intimately involved with the personal situations of all of us. He cares about the struggles of his people.

And he understands because he has experienced the worst of this world. And when Jesus says that he knows, he's offering more than just sympathy.

He's not just saying, I know what you're going through and then leaves it at that. No, because Jesus is God. He doesn't just sympathize, but he offers us something more.

He offers us a hope beyond suffering and death. Because if you follow Jesus, there is a resurrection hope. Because he rose from the dead.

[18:38] And if Jesus rose from the dead. And if that is the future for his people, joining him in that resurrection life. Then the gospel, as we said, changes everything.

So for these Christians in Smyrna, though they were poor, Jesus says they are rich. Verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. Now, poverty is, of course, a terrible thing.

And it leads to very real suffering. And so if anyone else had said to these Christians struggling with real poverty, you'd think, that's a bit heartless.

That's a bit trite. But this is no trite platitude. Jesus is, in fact, conveying an unseen reality. That the Christian, though we might suffer, though we might have financial struggles, we actually have riches.

Because there's a future beyond what we experience right here, right now. We have an eternal hope that goes beyond this world. Beyond the material things that we see now.

[19:48] So for Jesus to say this, it's not trite. Because it's true. And so there's this movement from poverty to riches. There's a movement from death to life. Be faithful, says Jesus, even to the point of death.

And I will give you life as your victor's crown. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Jesus' resurrection gives us hope. Hope of a life after death for the Christian. People always say there are two certainties, death and taxes. I don't have much to say on the taxes front.

But on death, Christians have a lot to say. We will all die. But for those who are in Christ, we will not be hurt by the second death, says Jesus.

The second death is language, we only find it in Revelation. But it's language that speaks of the judgment to come. The judgment that all experienced for sin.

[20 : 51] And sometimes the language of hell is the most common way of describing it. But for the Christian, the one who believes in the resurrected Lord of life on their behalf, has no fear of the second death.

Because Jesus has taken that punishment for them. And so this hope of life is a real distinctive of the Christian hope. Lots of worldviews, lots of religions hold to a view of an afterlife.

And we can understand why. Don't we all hope that there is something more? But for Christianity, the hope is rooted in the fact that we can actually say, we've seen someone come back from the dead.

And that's where we root this hope. This movement from death to life. And which means there's a further movement from defeat to victory. What looks like defeat for these Christians in Smyrna is in fact a trumpet blast of victory.

Because Jesus says they're going to receive the victor's crown. There's this expectation of being welcomed into the arms of Jesus when this life is over.

[22 : 02] And receiving a reward for persevering to the end. Because the Christian life, it's not a sprint. It's more like a marathon. And we keep running and we keep running. Persevering to the end.

With that hope. That one day we will receive a crown of commendation from our Lord. And so what looks like defeat on earth is in fact a victory in heaven.

Which means that what looks like hopelessness is in fact hope. Because Jesus is our hope in life and death. I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. And so where is our hope? Where is your hope?

Because hope without foundations is nothing more than wishful thinking. We have no idea what the future holds. We have no idea what even tomorrow holds.

[23 : 01] I don't usually quote from Friedrich Nietzsche. But I will today. But he said that hope is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man. If there's no foundation for our hope, then Nietzsche is absolutely right.

It does just prolong unnecessary suffering. But if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then there is a future beyond our suffering.

Because the Christian hope is rooted in a resurrected Savior. And so finally, our third point. What is the church's response? Well, it's faithfulness.

Faithfulness to the point of death. Jesus tells Christians to be faithful to the point of death because, as we said, death is not the end. And so he gives two commands.

Firstly, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer, he says. And that means something when it comes from the one who was crucified. He knows what it means to suffer.

- [24 : 02] That means something when it comes from the one who rose again and who is preparing a place for his people once our suffering is done. Fear is rooted in uncertainty.
- But if we know Jesus, we're not uncertain. We have certainty that Jesus has won the victory for us. And so we do not need to be afraid.
- And the second command is this. Be faithful, says Jesus. Be faithful even to the point of death. And I will give you life as your victor's crown. Faithfulness is following through on those implications of our hope.
- Pressing on in the way that Jesus asks us to. Following his ways. Fighting the good fight, as Paul describes it. Running the race with endurance. It's a call to persevere.
- To keep on keeping on. To keep going. With that finish line in sight. And it's possible. It's possible even when it seems at its most hard.
- [25 : 09] Even when it feels like we're in an uphill part of the race. It's possible in the power of the Holy Spirit. We're not running this race alone. Christ is with us. And we also run together.
- As his church. Supporting one another in the power of the Spirit. And so to illustrate just the movement of what it looks like. To go from fear to faithfulness.
- I want to look just very briefly at Peter as a really helpful example. The Apostle Peter. Before Jesus died. We see him in a courtyard. Jesus is being interrogated.
- Peter is out waiting for him. He's warming his hands by the fire. And there's a serving girl comes up and accuses him of being with Jesus. And Peter says. Not me.
- Not me. I don't even know the man. And he denies him three times. But then Peter after the resurrection. And after Pentecost. Once the Holy Spirit has come.
- [26 : 06] And Jesus has been raised. That's a very different Peter that we see. Because that Peter is saying. Well I cannot help. But speak about what I have seen and heard.
- That Peter is willing to suffer. And he's willing to die for the name of Jesus. What changed? Well Peter knows that Jesus has been raised from the dead.
- And he just exemplifies for us that move from fear of man. To faithfulness for Jesus. Because he's seen the resurrection. And so for us.
- If we can hold on to that truth. That Jesus has been raised for our benefit. And has offered us that future. Well following him is absolutely worth it.
- But as Jesus says. Even though it's worth it. Even though we have that hope. We also have to count the cost. Because following Jesus is going to be costly. The experience of the church in Smyrna.
- [27 : 10] Though I hope that it's not our experience. Is not an outlier. But actually does follow as we said. The pattern of history. And so following Jesus.
- Will mean a life of self-denial. Denying ourselves. Denying some of our deepest desires and wants. Count the cost. Following Jesus.
- Will often mean giving up some of those most tightly held dreams. And ambitions. Count the cost. Following Jesus.
- Will often lead to controversy. And division. Amongst friends and family and colleagues. I imagine particularly more so. As Christianity. Continues to run more and more.
- Counter to the culture we find ourselves in. It will lead to hard conversations. And difficult relationships. Count the cost. It may lead.
- [28 : 05] As the Christians in Smyrna found. To financial sacrifice. And we need to count that cost. And for some. It will lead to persecution.
- And death. And so we need to count the cost. But it's a cost. That is worth counting. Because following Jesus.

Means on the one hand. Giving up everything. In order. To gain so much more. And Paul illustrates this so helpfully. In Philippians chapter 3. We forget what's behind us.

Straining towards what is ahead. And we press on. Towards the goal. To win the prize for which God has called us heavenwards. In Christ Jesus. And so as we close and finish up.

I want to. I want to ask that question that we began with. What is your hope. In life. And in death. Because. This.

[29 : 02] This. This. Gospel message. This. Hope of eternal life in Christ. It really is a matter of. Life and death. The consequences. And the implications. Are absolutely massive.

What is your hope. For those of us who are younger. Start thinking about that hope deeply. Learning faithfulness now. Because making hope.

This hope in the. In an eternal savior. Is a habit that we want to have now. So that when suffering. And trials come. We'll be able to remember. The hope that we have.

And the solidity of it. For those who are. More in the middle of life. And maybe it just feels like. There's a lot going on. Following Jesus is.

It's a struggle. It's hard. Lord. This hope is absolutely worth it. Keep going. Keep going. For those of us. Who are parents.

[30 : 01] Instill and teach. This hope. To your children. And hold on to. Yourselves. Reminding them. And. Yourselves. That it is worth it. Through. Everything.

That we experience. In this life. And for those of us. Who are. Of a more distinguished. Age. In our church family. I hope. That this is an encouragement.

To keep on going. And to finish well. Even as. That finish line. Might look a little closer. Than it was. 20 or 30 years ago. And I hope. That all of us. Will be able.

To keep running the race. Holding on. To the promise. Of the victor's. Crown of life. Because Jesus. Has promised it. To us. And so.

I'll finish with a quote. From Tim Keller. Who as I said. Went to be with. His Lord. And our Lord. This week. Because it helpfully. Conveys. The hope that we have. Everything in this life.

[30 : 56] Is going to be taken away from us. Except one thing. God's love. Which can go on. Into death. With us. And take us through it. And into his arms.

God's love. Which we see in Christ. This eternal hope. Which we have. I hope you're able. To hold on to it. To know that death. Has lost its sting in Jesus. And to know that in Christ.

You have the promise. Of the crown of life.