

[Slide 1] Enduring Spiritual Hardship
Revelation 2:8-11

Scott Peck wrote a book several years ago that became a classic. It was called “The Road Less Traveled.” The first line of the book is simply profound: “Life is difficult.” Maybe you don’t agree. Perhaps that sounds overly simple to you. I think he is right because most people, either noisily or subtly, reveal their underlying belief that life should be easy. If you will listen closely, you will hear in all of their moaning, pontificating, even in their advocacy for justice.

Peck followed up by saying. “This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it.” That’s where we are headed this morning.

Remember that Christ is speaking to the church. He is speaking to the church about hardship. [Slide 2] Therefore, the subject is corporate, collective hardship. I think our tendency is to individualize everything. But He wants to speak to us about the hardship we have dealt with as a church. Keep that in mind this morning. Let’s read our text in Revelation 2:8-11. [Slide 3]

God gives us a promise regarding hardship but there is also a premise to the promise, something we must first take into account.

The Premise Things are not always as they seem to be [Slide 4]

During a tour of England, an American psychiatrist visited a home for the dangerously insane. Most cases were tragic but on the way out he noticed a man laying colored bricks in the garden. He’d made a splendid mosaic, reminiscent of something you might find in a Roman villa.

“This is wonderful,” the psychiatrist exclaimed. “Thanks,” said the man, “I designed it and laid out all the bricks myself.”

“Where is your studio?” he asked.

“I have no studio, I’m a patient here,” the man replied.

The psychiatrist was stunned. “My goodness, man, you’re a genius. When I get back to London, I’m going to call the director and arrange for your release. I know many wealthy people who would commission you to design something like this for their gardens. Within a year, you’ll be a wealthy man.”

“You would do that for me,” he asked with astonishment.

“Of course,” replied the shrink. “I’ve got to go. I’ll be in touch.”

As the psychiatrist walked away, something smacked him in the back of the head. Down he tumbled, briefcase flying. When he got back to his feet, he looked to see what hit him. He saw a brick. A colored brick. And he heard the patient holler, “Now don’t forget!”

I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (v.9)

Someone once said if you really want to know how God views money, just look at who He allows to have it. Anytime I hear Donald Trump speak on TV or read an article about him, I realize that this statement is true.

Some of the greatest atrocities in history have been perpetrated by religious people. And some of the godliest people in history have been persecuted and killed by some of the most religious people. It started with Jesus Himself. The best way to differentiate between religion and Christianity is between the words “do” and “done.”

Look, the Devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for 10 days... (v.10)

After Winston Churchill lost his bid to be reelected prime minister, his wife said, “Well, it is probably a blessing in disguise.” He replied, “If it is a blessing, then it is well disguised.” That’s the way it feels to us. However, just as the Smyrian believers would be tested through the apparent defeat of imprisonment, we too are able to declare ourselves and define ourselves through hardship. The word “test” carries the idea of “approval” or of “authentication.”

Perspective is everything when it comes to endurance. If you have the right point of view, if you view the situation correctly, you can endure virtually anything. Scott Peck was right about hardship: once we see it correctly, we transcend it and overcome it.

The Promise If you endure, you win (v.11) [Slide 5]

How? Be faithful, not fearful [Slide 6]

(1) Don't be afraid *Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer.* (v.10)

Jesus does not pull any punches here. He never did and He never does. He tells people exactly what they have signed up for. Jesus spent more time disqualifying people than qualifying them. But when you follow Him, you do so in reality. He tells us “suffering is ahead.” There is always is when we seek to be the church. But He assures that there is no need to fear that because He is with us.

Dealing with fear is a matter of adjusting perspective. It is False Expectations Appearing Real. For believers, it is always a matter of asking, “What then?” If I get sick, what then? If I lose my job, what then? Take it to its ultimate conclusion, death, and then ask one more time, “What then?” The answer is “I walk into the presence of God.” That’s how you overcome fear.

(2) Be faithful *Be faithful until death* (v.10)

This is all He asks of us. We are not called to be found successful. We are called to be found faithful. When He comes, all we must be is at the task. That is enough.

Some of you have been deliberating in your mind this whole matter of serving on the transitional focus team that will be formed. I’ve tried to be upfront with you. There’s work involved. There are meetings involved. There is thinking involved.

I hope that you will hear Jesus' promise. "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer." Sure, it will call for effort on our part. It will be hard at times. And our fear could easily be, "Well, I can't do that. I don't have the time. I don't have the background, the experience." And Christ says, "Don't worry about that. Just be faithful." The biggest part of faithfulness is being there, being fully there but also being there. People used to say to me, "Well, I'll be there in spirit." And so what? What does that mean? Nothing, basically.

Sometimes, we are afraid that we don't know enough, don't understand enough. Well, I hope that God's presence in my life is not based on how much or how little I understand. The fact is that He does not call us to completely understand life. Do you understand everything in life? I used to. I was much smarter back in my 20s than now. I don't know as much now. I'm getting dumber by the minute.

Here is something that illustrates how we can make it through all of the mixed up mess we find in life sometimes.

[Slide 7] The human mind is a wonderfully complex organ. You see? It doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word appear, the only important thing is that the first and last letter are in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole. Amazing, isn't it?

There is something that helps us make sense of life and all of its hardships and demands. His name is Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega. He was there in the beginning and He'll be there in the end. We can endure spiritual hardship and make sense of all the craziness in life when we know Him as the Alpha—He is the Alpha male, OK?—as the One who gave us life, called us to Himself. And we can be faithful until death when we know that He will be waiting for us in the end, to claim us as His own.

"The First and the Last, the One who was dead and came to life, says..." (v.8) [Slide 8]

[Slide 9]