

- I. Intro – Read Revelation 7:9-17
- II. The persecuted Church
 - a. There are Christians around the world that are being persecuted or live under the constant threat of persecution. Examples from Voice of the Martyrs (see handout).
 - b. Persecution is not just martyrdom and imprisonment, but takes other forms as well. 1 Peter was written to Christians who were being slandered, ostracized, and mocked for their beliefs.
 - c. Do you know of anyone presently suffering persecution? Have you had any experiences like this?
 - d. Pray for Christians suffering persecution around the world
- III. God’s purposes in suffering
 - a. For the Church
 - i. We are called to suffer
 1. Read Matthew 10:34-39
 2. Read John 15:18-21
 3. John 16:33; 1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 3:12; Acts 9:16; Acts 14:21-22; Mark 10:30; Luke 22:28, 29; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:20; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Pet. 5:10; Rev. 1:9
 4. What do you think when you hear Jesus speak this way?
 - ii. Individually – Sanctification (bringing us to a greater degree of conformity to Christ and to a greater trust in God)
 1. Read Romans 5:3-5 (cf 1 Peter 1:6-8; Paul’s thorn in 2 Cor 12)
 2. Read Hebrews 12:7-11 (cf 1 Peter 4:1-2)
 3. Can you relate to this sentiment? Have you experienced the sanctifying power of God’s grace during times of trial?
 - iii. Corporately
 1. Purification – persecution has a tendency to reduce the number of nominal Christians among the body of believers. The confession “Jesus is Lord” carries a lot more significance when it means your family rejects you and there is a man with a spear requiring that you confess “Caesar is Lord.”
 2. Expansion – It is through the suffering of Christians (not just in persecutions, but the way they face suffering in general) that God has brought the gospel to the world. The life which declares that I hold something to be more precious and valuable than my money, my comfort, or even my own life, is the most powerful testimony to the worth of Christ.
 - a. Tertullian full quote:

“We are not a new philosophy but a divine revelation. That's why you can't just exterminate us; the more you kill the more we are. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. You praise those who endured pain and death - so long as they aren't Christians! Your cruelties merely prove our innocence of the crimes you charge against us. When you chose recently to hand a Christian girl over to a brothel-keeper rather than to the lions, you showed you knew we counted chastity dearer than life. And you frustrate your purpose. Because those who see us die, wonder why we do, for we die like the men you revere, not like slaves or criminals. And when they find out, they join us.”
 - b. “Filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” –
 Read Colossians 1:24-26
 But the most amazing thing about Colossians 1:24 is *how* Paul completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. He says that it is *his own sufferings* that complete Christ's afflictions. "I rejoice in *my sufferings* for you and I complete *in my flesh* what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." This means, then, that Paul exhibits the sufferings of Christ by suffering *himself* for those he is trying to win.

In *his* sufferings they see Christ's sufferings. Here is the astounding upshot: *God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people.* God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us. Our calling is to make the afflictions of Christ real for people by the afflictions we experience in bringing them the message of salvation.

Since Christ is no longer on the earth, he wants his body, the church, to reveal *his* suffering in *its* suffering. Since we are his body, our sufferings are his sufferings. Romanian pastor Joseph Tson put it like this: "I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share His sufferings." Therefore our sufferings testify to the kind of love Christ has for the world.

- c. See also Philippians 1:12-14
 - d. See Tim Keller discussing early Christians entering plague-infested cities to help care for the sick
3. What lies at the heart of a faith that can suffer the loss of everything earthly thing and do it joyfully?
 - b. For the world
 - i. Creation subject to futility, in hope – Read Romans 8:18-23
 - ii. A cosmic call to repentance – Read Luke 13:1-5
 - iii. C.S. Lewis: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."
 - iv. What role do Christians play in helping the world to cope with pain and suffering? How can we help to interpret it?
- IV. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"
- a. Entrusting ourselves to God when mistreated
 - i. Read 1 Peter 4:17-19
 - ii. Read Hebrews 10:32-36
 - iii. Have you ever been treated unjustly?
 - b. Free to pray for and do good to our enemies
 - i. Read Romans 12:19-21
 - ii. Read Luke 6:27-31