

The Church Christ Commends

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2023

Jared Mellinger

November 16, 2023 - Session 4

I'd like to invite you to please turn with me to Revelation 3.

I'm eager to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ from Revelation 3.

Jon, thank you for that introduction. What a week this has been and as I'm sure you feel as well, my heart is so full.

Every sermon that has been preached, every update that has been given, Latin America, the pastor's college, sovereign grace and music, evangelism, church planting, every moment of fellowship, every song that we have sung together, our partnership in the gospel fills my heart with such joy.

I want you to know that I thank God for you and I love each one of you very much. What a joy to be together.

We do continue to plod along in Sovereign Grace's publishing.

There's one thing I'm excited to announce, and that is that the collection of CJ sermons that we gave out last year is reformatted and now available to the public through Amazon.

That's also where you can get Sacred Zeal as well. These things are sold on Amazon.

This is, I think, one of the greatest things that I've done in life, which CJ preached all the sermons. I just compiled them into this book, ***Continue in What You Have Learned: Sermons from C.J. Mahaney that have Shaped a Family of Churches***, and, having compiled these sermons, I am now ready to die in peace, but you can get a copy of this book and may those sermons shape a future generation.

I also want to thank you for your enthusiastic reply to the Relay Conference in January. We have some 400 people registered for that.

John and I are so looking forward to that inaugural conference and we can't wait. We have people from each of the regions and many international who are traveling to be together. Thank you for that expression of partnership.

Revelation Chapter 3

Our sermon title is “The Church Christ Commends”.

We'll be looking at Revelation 3, beginning in verse 7, and I'd like to invite you to please stand if you can for the reading of God's word.

This is God's holy and authoritative word.

To the Church in Philadelphia

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

8 “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

May God bless the preaching of his word and you may be seated.

It was over 20 years ago now that an international bestselling business book was published entitled, ***Good to Great***. I don't read many secular business books. I hope you don't either. They flourish like a flower of the field that is soon gone with the wind, but occasionally they offer a useful common grace insight or introduce a concept that sticks.

One of the ideas that was popularized in *Good to Great* is the hedgehog concept. It comes from an ancient Greek parable about foxes and hedgehogs.

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. The fox apparently comes up with all kinds of strategies of attack. The hedgehog knows just one thing (which I know from playing Sonic The Hedgehog as a kid): curling up into a spiky ball when it is attacked. The hedgehog sticks to doing one thing well, and for that reason, it wins every time.

The author of Good to Great observed that successful companies were hedgehogs instead of being scattered and diffuse in their objectives or doing things that others can do far better, they have a mission that is intentionally narrow and undistracted. It is a mission marked by clarity, specificity, and focus.

Now, the church of Jesus Christ we know is not a business. Our goal is certainly not to go from good to great by secular standards, but there is a sense in which the hedgehog concept applies to the church and to our denomination. That is brothers and sisters, that we have been entrusted by God with one big thing, namely the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The mandate Christ has given to his church as an institution is not broadly to do every good and commendable thing we could be doing in the world, nor is it to do everything that individual Christians will do in their various callings. Rather, the New Testament presents a church with a relatively narrow and focused mission. It is a God-centered, Christ-exalting, word-driven, spiritually-focused, eternally-minded mission. It is a mission that no other institution can carry out. It is a mission that is governed by the kind of salvation Christ brings at his first coming, which is not the redemption of the social and political order, but the forgiveness of sins and peace with God and the hope of eternal life. Ours is a mission that sticks to the one big thing of faithfulness to the gospel.

We preach Christ and Him crucified. We make disciples of all peoples or ethnicities baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. This is the mission of the church.

The leadership team burden behind this message - every one of the messages that we have heard does indeed have a leadership team burden behind it as we plan this conference together - but the burden behind *this* message is a desire that we have for pastors and churches in Sovereign Grace to continue to guard the identity and mission of the church and that, as you do so, you would be encouraged in your labors for the church.

The church is always vulnerable to losing its focus and we find that that is especially true at the present time where there are distractions, pressures, and wrong ideas on every side, enticing the church to expand or adjust its mission.

What we have in the opening chapters of Revelation is Christ's vision for the church.

In chapter 1, we see the ascended Christ reigning in glory. This is our Lord, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on Earth.

Every king, every president, every world leader in all the Earth has a ruler over him and his name is Jesus. He's the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us kingdom priests to his God and Father. This is the Lord of the church. The Apostle John then sees a vision of this glorious savior, the Lord of the church, walking among the lampstands, which are the seven churches. The golden lampstands have their background in the Pentateuch. The lampstand was tended to by the priest in the holy place and so here, it's a beautiful picture.

Christ himself is the priest in the holy place who walks among the lampstands tending the churches. He is the heavenly priest among the lampstands. This is what the church needs to know in our mission in order to be sustained in a world full of suffering, to know that Christ is near to us. He's near to you.

Dennis Johnson says,

"He is no absentee ruler or a distant champion. He walks among the lampstands ever present with His churches and our joys and sorrows, our faithfulness and our failures."

The Lord of the church is ever present with His church.

He's not a far-off savior. Friends, He's with you even now, He's tending to His churches and building His church just as He said He would.

The prophet who speaks to the churches, the priest who cares for the churches, the king who reigns over the churches - this is our Lord.

This vision that the Apostle John had on the island of Patmos recorded in Chapter 1 is a vision that displays the passion of Christ for the church and the centrality of the church in God's plan for the world because Christ reveals himself. How? Notice this - not as walking among isolated individuals. He's not walking among nation-states giving letters to seven nations. He's not walking

among the various spheres of society, giving a word first to the family and then addressing the state and business and education and science and the arts and so on. Certainly, each sphere is designed by God to contribute to human flourishing. It is gloriously true indeed, as it is said that every square inch of creation belongs to Christ.

The reason Christ is among the lampstands, which are the churches, and what so many Christians have failed to understand, is that there is one majestic institution that far outshines the others in its beauty and in its importance in the purposes of God. God's design in the present age is not that nations be a preview of heaven. It is not the earthly city that is intended to be an embassy and colony of heaven. It is rather the church of the Lord Jesus Christ alone that is given this glorious privilege.

Jesus did not come into the world to establish a business. Jesus did not come into the world to establish an earthly government. He did not come to establish the family or a school or a hospital. We want Christians involved in all those things. Yes, and we care deeply. We don't just care. We care deeply about the condition of society and our role and responsibilities in it. Christ came into the world, Christ laid down His life and Christ rose triumphant in victory in order to establish the church. His passion is the church. His promises are for the church.

His precious blood was shed for the church.

Christ's heavenly rule and reign now finds institutional expression not in many spheres, not in earthly nations and families, but finds institutional expression only in the church for which He died.

Don't rob the church of its peculiar glory.

Listen to what John Piper says this. If you're John Piper, this is how you start a sermon. He preached a sermon in 1980, I believe it was the Cosmic Church of Christ. This is when he took to the pulpit about how he started that sermon. He says,

"The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world."

The assembly of the redeemed, the company of the saints, the children of God are more significant in world history than any other group, organization, or nation.

The United States of America compares to the church of Jesus Christ like a speck of dust compares to the sun. The drama of international relations compares to the mission of the church like a kindergarten riddle compares to Hamlet or King Lear. All pomp of Mayday in red square and the pageantry of New Year's in Pasadena fade into a formless gray against the splendor of the bride of Christ.

Take heed how you judge things are not what they seem. The gates of Hades, the powers of death will prevail against every institution but one: the church.

Friends things are not as they seem. Behold the unrivaled splendor of the bride of Christ. The Lord of the church walks among the lampstands. He is building his church. He is keeping his promises, just as he said.

Here in Revelation 2 and 3, the one who gave his life for the church now communicates his vision, his longings for the church.

First sermon series I ever preached as a pastor, seven sermons from Revelation 2 and 3 on these prophetic messages to the churches. I have treasured these chapters over the past 15 years that I have been in pastoral ministry because these seven letters reveal Christ's heart for the church. They reveal what he values in the church.

An observation about the letters in general before we jump into looking at Philadelphia, I want you to notice that these seven letters to the churches are both particular and universal. Here's what I mean by that. On the one hand, each church is facing its own particular situation and threats and is therefore in need of a distinct emphasis to guard against the particular tendencies and dangers in that local church. Ephesus, you are orthodox, you are courageous, you are discerning, you're nailing sound doctrine, but you need to give serious attention to love or you're not going to be around for long.

Thyatira, you guys have the opposite problem. You are tolerant and affirming at the expense of truth. Jesus says, "I have this against you." We see some of the churches face the test of adversity, some face the test of prosperity and so we learn that churches often require a distinct emphasis based on their local context and condition. I believe remembering that in Sovereign Grace Churches is important - crucial as we continue to expand as a global family of churches.

This is also, by the way, why we do not have a Sovereign Grace mothership church whose every move and emphasis we all blindly follow. This is also why local church pastors do not lead with our eyes fixed on everything that is

happening at a national level in the broader evangelical world, but with our eyes attentive to the particular needs of the particular flock that has been entrusted to our care. Where are we as an eldership, where are we as a church most vulnerable?

At the same time, these particular prophetic messages are universal, which means that all of these letters are intended for all of the churches and collectively represent the universal church. That number seven is significant in that regard, signifying completeness and you'll notice that each of the seven letters ends with that refrain about hearing what the spirit says to the churches collectively. This means churches everywhere are to benefit from each of these letters and that we need to have an eye to the diversity of dangers, the Church of Christ faces in the world.

We all tend to be most concerned about a narrow set of dangers, myself included.

Jesus wants us to know that dangers come from multiple directions and it will not do to guard the flock only from threats on one side. In other words, we must listen to and learn from all of the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Now, the church that we are looking at today is the church in Philadelphia.

...I promise I did not pick it because I live near Philadelphia.

This church was not an impressive church by worldly standards. They were aware of their great weakness. They were mistreated by Jews who claimed that Jesus was a false messiah, which is the reason that Jesus introduces himself in this letter, verse 7, as the holy one. It's an Old Testament name for Yahweh, and he introduces himself as the true one. What Jesus is saying there is contrary to what some are saying, "I am God in the flesh. I am the true Messiah. I am the only savior of the world."

He also says in verse 7 that he has the key of David. That is, he has power over salvation and judgment.

He says to them, "Those who reject me may close the door of the synagogue to you and," hear this, "there may be many doors that may be shut by your enemies, but," verse 8, "there is a door open to you that no one can shut and it is the door of salvation."

It is the door of access to the Father because Christ died for sinners. That door stands open to this day and none can shut it.

Jesus goes on to give many encouragements and promises to this precious church in Philadelphia. I have prayed that God would use it to strengthen our hearts today. It is a letter packed with wisdom for pastors and churches in the mission God has given us. What I want to do in the remaining time we have is give four observations about the church Christ commends each one of these shedding light on the identity and mission of the church.

Four observations and the first is this. It is a church with little power.

Verse 8 Jesus says, "I know that you have, but little power."

John Stott says the church in Philadelphia was "pathetically weak."

This is not a fast-growing church. This is not a church making a big impact in the surrounding community. They are not transforming the city. It is the church of little power.

It was likely a numerically small church, perhaps a numerically declining church. We can imagine their scarce resources, their small budget, their ordinary, seemingly insignificant gatherings. "You go to church where? Never heard of it." Jesus says, "You have but little power and so it is with many churches today."

Some of you come even to this gathering, wondering if your church is going to make it because nothing seems stable. Everything seems pathetically weak.

Other pastors talk about how their church is growing and, while you do rejoice and you thank God, you hear about the ministries they have and you just feel like, "What am I doing wrong?"

Some of you even hear Nick Kidwell's update just firing on all cylinders. You're just like, "I don't even need all the cylinders. I just want one cylinder. I just want some sign that forward progress is being made."

You think the church that I serve just seems so feeble and so frail in comparison. Is the sacrifice even worth it?

Well, friends, Christ has a word for you in this letter today, and I find it remarkable. I find it instructive, and I find it absolutely remarkable that Christ has such glowing commendation for the church with such little power. We tend to think that nothing could possibly be worse than Christians having little power. Our savior does not find fault with the church that has little strength, little cultural influence, or little numerical growth.

Rather, he finds fault with a church that has little love, little steadfastness, and little devotion to his truth. He rejoices greatly over the faithful church regardless of its influence. This is what Christ cares about in the church, and our whole system of what we value in the church needs to be recalibrated according to the mind of Christ.

Here's something to notice about these seven churches: For two of the seven, Jesus mentions no positive qualities: Sardis and Laodicea. Did you know those are the two that appear to be the most outwardly impressive churches? For two other churches, Jesus says nothing negative. He has only unqualified commendation - that is Smyrna and Philadelphia, and they are the least outwardly impressive and have the greatest suffering and weakness.

To be clear, it's not that great. Social influence is a bad thing. I want our influence as a church, and my own influence for that matter, to be as great as possible in this fallen world. At times, faithful churches can have considerable influence over broader culture and ought to steward that influence for the glory of God.

You look from a church history standpoint at something like the difference that Charles Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle made in London - it was quite extraordinary.

We should keep in mind there is nothing inherently godly or commendable about minimalist expectations, especially with the gospel as glorious and as powerful as ours.

Look at the cultural and social good the Christian Church has done throughout history. It is indeed staggering, and yet cultural power and social influence is not our greatest passion.

In fact, part of what I want to say, and, I believe, what Christ wants to say, it's not even close. The reason is because that's not our mission and because that is no measure of our faithfulness.

The only reason Christ can commend the church of little power is this: that the mission of the church is not to make the world more like heaven or to transform society, but to be an embassy of heaven by preaching the word and making disciples.

I've said that if the job of Sovereign Grace Churches is to bring about social change in terms of solving various social problems and making the world a better place, it is not an overstatement to say that our churches have failed

miserably. We are a little denomination of mostly little churches and we have but little power.

Yet I thank God that Jesus does not look at the church with little power and find fault. Rather, he commends them for being faithful. He commends you for being faithful.

All, how we need to hear this today, how we need to allow the commendation of the Lord, of the church to wash over us and to penetrate our hearts. I am glad I have a pulpit today because I want to say as loudly as I can that the health of the church, the health of the church does not hang upon the glory of its budget or the glory of its building, but the glory of its savior.

God wants those of you who are currently serving in churches with little power to know his pleasure. He wants you to hear His commendation today, whether you are in the Philippines or in the neighborhoods of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, whether you are in Playa Azul, Costa Rica, or Seoul, Korea. When Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia, "I know your works." He's saying, "I know your faithfulness. I know your steadfastness."

JC Ryle comments on that phrase "I know your works", and he says this,

"Think also what encouragement there is here for every honest and true-hearted believer. To you pastor, to you, pastor's wife, to you also Jesus says, 'I know your works.' You see no beauty in any action that you do. All seems imperfect, blemished, and defiled. You are often sick at heart of your own shortcomings."

Some of you are there. You often feel that your whole life is one great arrear and that every day is either a blank or a blot. Ryle says,

"But now know that Jesus can see some beauty in everything that you do from a conscientious desire to please him. His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of his own spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amid dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amid the chaff in all your doings. Your tears are all put in his bottle. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in his book of remembrance. The least cup of cold water given in his name shall not lose its reward. He does not forget your work and labor of love, however little the world may regard it."

Oh, Christian, oh, church of little power, tired and weak saints of the Lord, Jesus knows your works. Your works. He sees beauty and excellence in your works how long will our hard hearts refuse to believe it. The world may disregard your labor of love but the Savior will not. Know today that the Lord

sees. That the Lord rejoices over you, that the Lord commends you for your works. It's the first observation, it is a church with little power.

Second, it is a church faithful to the truth.

This has been our theme throughout this conference, and we see it here again in verse 8.

"I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

In the midst of cultural opposition, a world of lies and pressure to abandon the truth Jesus says, "You believe my word. You love my word. You obey my word and you proclaim the truth about me, even when it's costly."

That's what matters, that you're standing fast on the truth because the essential mission Christ has given to the church is to proclaim this word, to apply this word, and to be faithful to this word of truth.

The measure of our success is not how winsome we appear to the world. The measure of our success is not how influential we are in culture. Faithfulness to God is everything to us, and the faithful church, the faithful pastor, is one that keeps the word of Christ and does not deny the name of Christ.

As pastors, we need to remember, and you do this well, we need to remember our God-given mandate. The job God has given us as pastors - shepherds of the flock, ministers of His word.

There was an expression made famous through the internet some time ago, it's "you had one job."

"You had one job" is a phrase used to call attention to the fact that someone failed in the sole task that they were responsible for and so you see this as a heading over a lot of images.

For example, there is a picture of a metal plaque with the following words engraved on it.

The plaque says in beautifully engraved print, *"I do not want any engraving. Just leave the metal plate blank. No engraving."*

You had one job. Don't engrave the plank.

There's a calendar with with inspirational Bible quotes on each page and has a flower with a verse written on it, *"If thou therefore will worship me, all shall be thine, Luke 4:7."*

...Which is actually the words of Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness and is slightly less inspirational for Christian living... once you know who said it.

You had one job and that's to not turn to Satan for inspiring words for Christian living.

Pastor, this is your job. The pastor's job description, what is it is? You've heard it already: to hold fast to the word of truth and to help others do the same.

A founding generation of - my dad, Ken Mellinger, and so many others - a founding generation of faithful pastors who have done this so well. They have built on the truth. I cannot wait to see the crowns that these men receive when the chief shepherd appears.

We look to the future and we know it's not going to get any easier. Already there are those once among us who abandoned the truth.

I want nothing more for our churches than for this commendation, this one from the savior to be spoken over a second and third, and fourth generation of Sovereign Grace. May it be said of each of the churches represented here and of every future church that is either planted or adopted: "you've kept my word, you haven't denied my name".

By the grace of God, in Sovereign Grace Churches, we will take our stand where God has spoken. We resolve to speak courageously on the points of scripture that are under attack.

We will stand against the devil's lies.

Yes, we are always gracious and respectful, but we refuse to soften offensive truths and we are prepared to stand alone against all the world in a generation where so much is shifting with lies on every side.

This is our divine mandate.

Pastors, keep the word of Christ, be faithful to the word of Christ.

In the words of verse 11, hold fast what you have.

That which we are to keep is specifically the word of Christ, the scriptures and that's important.

I want to make a point here because, at least in America, increasingly there is the expectation that pastors will be experts in everything. Sociology, culture, statecraft, medicine, economics, and more. It's really bad news for a guy like me who doesn't know much.

The point is not that Christians should be ignorant or indifferent to these things, but the question for the pastor is, as always, do we have a clear word from the Lord? Is it in the book? Is it a matter of faithfulness to the word of Christ?

Because we hear, and there are pastors today voicing their opinions on all kinds of complex cultural and political matters, tax rates, school choice, reparations, voting, and on and on to which we can only say, "what happened to preaching the word of Christ?". The pastor's communication is not an opinion piece. We're not commanded to devote ourselves to personal opinions and hot takes, but to devote ourselves to the apostolic teaching. We are ministers of the word. We are heralds of the truth of God.

This is another area, yes, where we can learn from our collective historical hero, Charles Spurgeon.

I want to share with you a quote here, what pastor and historian Alex DiPrima says regarding Spurgeon's ministry. He says,

"Spurgeon jealously guarded the pulpit against all extraneous infusions and carefully stewarded the preaching ministry of his local church."

The pulpit is designed for the preaching of the word of God.

For Spurgeon, this meant that he had to exercise self-control and restraint and had to commit himself to stay on task. He was not at liberty to say whatever he might think or wish about contemporary events or political developments. He was in that pulpit to preach the Bible and to proclaim the truth. For pastors today, the assignment has not changed. The work of the preacher is to proclaim the word of God for the sake of God's people. Preaching is a "thus sayeth the Lord" enterprise.

May God help us to continue to stay on task so that Christ would continue to look at the churches of Sovereign Grace and say, "Well done. You've kept my word. You have not denied my name. A church faithful to the truth."

Third observation about the church in Philadelphia, it is a church marked by suffering.

The church in Philadelphia teaches us to expect suffering, sorrow, and opposition in the present age even as the gospel advances in power.

The book of Revelation teaches that until Christ comes again, we are, as Chapter 1:9 says, "Partners in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus."

In our text in Chapter 3:10, Jesus says that because they have been faithful to keep His word about patient endurance, He gives them this promise: He will keep them from the hour of trial that is coming upon the whole world.

Christ keeping us is not an escape from trial, it is a protection in trial. It's not a promise that the church will avoid hardship, but that we will endure hardship as those sustained and spiritually protected by Christ. Jesus promises His persevering grace, His sustaining grace to you in the midst of every trial present or future because you've kept His word, He's going to keep you whatever may come.

We need to hear that because some of you in your life and ministry have endured--ah, some of you have suffered far greater than I ever have and some of you are presently suffering, but what I want you to know is that I see and others who know you see God sustaining you. We see that sustaining grace of God at work in your life. He is keeping you and He by His grace is preserving you.

Perseverance is one of the hallmarks of Sovereign Grace pastors. It is something that I love about you.

This marks our pastors, this marks our wives.

There is a patient endurance, there is a resilience, there is a faithful plotting, a steady strength that doesn't back down, that doesn't go away even through suffering. Our ministry partners in places like Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Sierra Leone in West Africa are leading the way in teaching us what it means to be faithful in the midst of suffering. Some of you are suffering greatly. For some of you, this year has been incredibly difficult - it's brought opposition, slander, sickness, loss.

The conference has been and is sweet, but you already are fearing the return.

Friend, Christ has these promises for you today. He says, "I am with you." He says, "My power will keep you. My grace will strengthen you."

One day, verse 9, vindication will come, those who oppose you will acknowledge that you are loved by God. One day, the church militant will be the church triumphant.

Christ promises in verse 11 in reference to His second coming, "I am coming soon".

Friends, what we must understand is that until that day the church is by theological definition the church in exile. We have a pilgrim status. We are living in Babylon as strangers and aliens, sharing in the suffering of Christ. Ed Clowney says,

"We are not now called to build the kingdom of glory but to carry across in the kingdom of grace."

The eschatological framework of the entire New Testament involves present suffering and future glory.

In this age, in its entirety, we share in Christ's sufferings and in the age to come we share in His glory.

Richard Gaffin in the book *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* says this. He says,

"Over the inter-adventival period in its entirety (so from Christ's first coming to his second coming) from beginning to end, a fundamental aspect of the church's existence is to be suffering with Christ. Nothing the New Testament teaches is more basic to its identity than that."

The point here is not just suffering as individuals but the suffering of the church - suffering as a mark of the church. Suffering is basic to the identity and mission of the church in the world. Adjust your expectations accordingly.

Several of my co-workers at Covenant Fellowship, dear brothers whom I love working with every one of them on the team - I can't believe it - several of them several years ago went to Africa for an evangelistic event that was organized by Wilbroad Chanda in Ndola, Zambia. Wilbroad is a beloved brother who has since gone on to be with the Lord and Wilbroad was a giant in sound doctrine.

At this evangelistic event, there was a popular Christian singer who was performing and while introducing a song, the singer assured the crowd that coming to Jesus would solve all their problems and that they would no longer suffer.

Doug Hayes tells the story that just then a big booming baritone rang out from the front row, "You will suffer."

At least three times as the singer continued, Wilbroad persisted, "You will suffer."

I take that story with me of Wilbroad shouting from his seat, interrupting the lies of the prosperity gospel, "you will suffer".

When poverty, slander imprisonment, and death approach, when cultural opposition intensifies, when it appears that darker days are ahead for the church, whenever we fall into expecting a life of comfort and approval and victorious living, we do well to hear Wilbroad's voice reminding us, "we will suffer".

I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, I learned this insight from Carl Truman, in fact...

To be truly cross-centered means that we apply a theology of the cross to the identity and mission of the church. Ours is a cruciform ecclesiology.

Here's what Carl Truman says about this,

"The theology of the cross is not simply an example of how God is gracious. It is also the basic pattern for understanding how he is at work in and through us, his church. Suffering and weakness are not just the way in which Christ triumphs and conquers, they're the way in which we are to triumph and conquer too. A cross-centered church understands the true theological status of weakness. The church was born in weakness, born from the death of one who was weak, despised, and hated, who by all outward earthly standards was an abject failure at the moment of his death. Is the church weak and despised by society at the moment?"

Well, that is sad but on another level, who cares? We are not meant to be respectable, to have political influence, to be an organization that those outside admire for our slickness and our savvy. We are meant to be those who preach Christ to the world around us. I find it worrying when evangelical success comes to be measured by the categories of worldly success for precisely this reason. We

are not meant to be successful by worldly standards. We are meant to be faithful by biblical standards.

The example of Christ indicates that these two things are at the end of the day, implacably opposed to each other.

We follow a savior who was despised and rejected. A man of sorrows who bled and died for sinners on an old rugged cross and the church is called to go to Him outside the camp and to bear the reproach He endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."

Hebrews 13 - you will suffer.

Even more emphasized in the text, you will suffer and you will be upheld by the strong arm of Christ and the power of His grace who will keep you until He returns or calls you home.

One more observation, it is a church grounded in heaven.

Each of the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 moves toward the promise of eternal life and the hope of heaven. That hope is one that shapes the identity and mission of the church here and now. In verse 11, Jesus says, "I am coming soon". Speaking of his second coming, his return.

In verse 12, to the one who conquers, He gives this promise, "I will make Him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven and my own new name".

Three names written by Christ upon his people that will signify you are mine forever. Jesus is saying here you are the true Israel. The temple of God is your eternal home.

The sanctuary that matters most is not the one you've been kicked out of but the temple that is to come, in which the dwelling place of God will be with his people forever. There the weak, unimpressive, greatly shaken people of God will be made as stable and as permanent and as beautiful as pillars in the temple of God.

When Jesus says, "I will write on you the name of the city of my God", that is a reference to our heavenly citizenship and the permanence of our belonging there.

Jesus is reminding the church of its identity, calling His people to a hope that is grounded not in this life - grounded not in this life but in heaven.

Church of little power, fix your eyes upon your heavenly home, fix your eyes on the final reward, the glory of his appearing.

GK Beale commenting on this verse says this, he says,

"If they are not heavenly minded and focusing on their final reward, they will be tempted to conform themselves to earthly circumstances around them."

That's why this matters for the mission of the church. Without this heavenly-mindedness, the concerns of the church will become earthly, national and cultural issues will become all-consuming. The glorious church of Christ will be reduced to another poultry social or political group that looks and sounds just like the world.

Jonathan Lehman says,

"To say the mission of the church is to transform the culture or to redeem the nation is to fall for a prosperity gospel."

How so? It puts people's hopes in temporal things, not eternal ones.

I'm concerned that there are too many Christians today putting their hopes in temporal things, not eternal ones. Decades ago we sang a song, I sang it growing up in Living Hope Church, the Sovereign Grace Church where my dad pastored, where Ben Kreps now is. Some of you sang it as well.

"My hope is not in this life nor this passing world's reward, but my hope is in a life that will never fade."

That's the question, where is your hope?

Where is your hope?

Christians today have this modern obsession with culture. Cultural engagement, cultural relevance, the cultural moment, fighting culture wars, pursuing cultural transformation. Too often it's all because our hearts are set on culture and our hopes are set on a vision for our nation rather than having our hearts set on heaven.

Ed Clowney, he wrote this over 40 years ago. He lamented the church is in Babylonian captivity to secular goals and values.

“The church of Christ is in Babylonian captivity to secular goals and values. This is evident on the left and on the right, secular progressivism and secular conservatism.”

We will never understand the times in which we live unless we understand that this Babylonian captivity continues to this day. There is a cultural, social, political, national passion in our day and it is not an exaggeration to say that the things that most concern many Christians and churches are cultural trends, election outcomes, social justice, public morality, and the future of our nation.

Here's the thing, I want to say this, sometimes those who become the most culture-centered and earthly-minded are those committed to standing against cultural evils. It is certainly good to stand against cultural evils. It is essential, but we must not allow culture to dictate and determine so much of the agenda and message and identity of the heavenly Church of our Lord Jesus Christ whose kingdom is not of this world.

One way to put this concern, why is it that so many Christians today feel a greater solidarity with unbelievers who share their views on culture and politics than they do a sense of solidarity with fellow blood-bought Christians who have differing perspectives on those things? I will tell you the reason for it - it is because so many have abandoned the gospel centrality they profess. They have lost sight of the things that are above and are in Babylonian captivity to secular goals and values.

Gone is the ultimate importance of the glory of God and the study of His attributes. Gone is the captivating majesty of the cross of Christ by which the world is dead to us and we are dead to the world. Gone is the urgency of evangelizing the multitudes that are now perishing apart from Christ. Gone is the aroma of heaven and the exalt and hope of Christ appearing. It threatens the mission of the church.

It threatens any sense of biblical proportionality concerning these great realities of the faith and, in place of all of it, captivity to secular goals and values.

I'm not advocating withdrawal. Yes, the gospel confronts and transforms culture, but too often a disproportionate focus on culture has resulted in a church that looks just like the culture.

Brothers and sisters, the church in her message and mission needs to reclaim the biblical emphasis on the spiritual and the eternal.

That is exactly what Jesus is doing here.

Read all of Christ's letters to the churches, study the prayers and the letters of Paul. Look at Acts, look at the entire New Testament, and then cultivate that same sense of spiritual and eternal proportionality in your passions.

Jesus said, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."*

He said, *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."*

That's not gnostic dualism, that's biblical distinctions. Kevin DeYoung says this, and he wrote this in the context of critiquing what he calls dangerous ideologies on the right, he says,

"We should remember that there are much bigger problems than national and civilizational collapse."

The much is his italics.

We should remember there are much bigger problems than national and civilizational collapse - like sin, flesh, and the devil like death and hell.

Friends, pastors, let that inform your passions and priorities. Let that inform our mission. As Christians, our citizenship is in heaven.

Christ says, "I am coming soon," and we are called to set our hope fully on the grace to be brought at His return and not on anything sooner. His appearing alone is the blessed hope of the church.

Titus 2 - We look forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Hebrews 11 - We set our minds, where? On the things that are above, not on things that are on earth because you know that your life is hidden with Christ in God and that when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

We are the church grounded in heaven. As we labor, as we serve, as we worship, as we make disciples, baptizing them, teaching them to obey Christ's commands as we evangelize, as we plant churches.

Thank you, regional evangelists.

Thank you, church planting group and church planters.

As we do these things, we are not gradually ushering in God's kingdom, we are patiently setting our hope on Christ's return.

When the new Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven and Jesus makes all things new, and on that glorious and long-awaited day that will soon come hold onto your hope, let hope be your anthem. On that day the church with little power will be the conquerors and overcomers.

That's the future of the church.

Brothers, I am sure that the church you serve is the church Christ commands, and this is your future. The one who conquers.

Dennis Johnson says this,

"What appear to the naked eye on the plane of human history to be weak, helpless, hunted, poor, defeated congregations of Jesus's faithful servants prove to be the true overcomers who participate in the triumph of the lion who conquered as a slain lamb."

We are the church of little power and we participate in the triumph of our Lord.

Christ in His great love has opened a door that none will shut. He will vindicate you before every foe. He will hold you fast in every trial. The day is indeed coming when Christ Himself will make you a pillar in the temple of God. Let the people of God rejoice. Even as we travel through this world of suffering and hardship, let the people of God shout for joy. For we know that the purposes of God for His church cannot fail.

One day our toil and tribulation will be no more. One day the king will return for His own, to gather and perfect His church from every tribe and tongue and nation as a people of his own possession. On that day, we will join with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, saying, "To Him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory,

and might forever and ever. Praise be to the lamb who was slain. Blessing and honor be to His name forever."

Christ will build His church. Christ will keep us to the end. He is worthy to be praised.

Amen.