

Keep Going in Weakness to be Welcomed and Kept (Philadelphia)

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[0 : 00] I wonder, have you ever tried to imagine what it would be like to be a Christian in another country? And I wonder, have you ever asked yourself, would I be a Christian in certain places in the world? Certainly, we face challenges here in Scotland as Christians today, but we have the great benefit of living in a place that has a great Christian heritage over many centuries. The Christian faith, the scriptures, have formed and shaped the values, the ethics, the worldview of our society. Only very recently have the basics of our culture become unstuck from the Christian faith. But in lots of places, there is no Christian history, there's no Christian heritage. The church has sprung up out of fresh soil. And so to become a Christian in many of those places, to identify with Christ, can bring great social stigma and great personal loss. We partner as a congregation with Wycliffe Bible Translators. They send out regular updates.

I was reading this week about a guy who's a Bible translator in a country somewhere in West Asia. They couldn't say, I would guess, maybe one of the stans. He was raised a Muslim, but when he became a Christian, his wife disowned him, so that now he has to live in a separate part of the house on his own. And he has to work in secret. He gets rough drafts of manuscripts from a man who lives in another city, which he then works on. He works with other Christians locally. He works with commentaries. He speaks to other experts to refine those translations.

He says he works from first thing in the morning to the last thing at night. It is what preoccupies him. And one of the most striking things he wrote about in this update was the difference, he said, between martyrdom and suicide. So to speak openly about his work in Bible translation, he said, would be suicide. But if it came about that he was found out and one day put to death for his witness, well, that would simply be in God's hands. But as long as he could use his gifts behind the scenes, he says, he is serving others who will be able to use that and take the word out to lots more people in the country where he lives. It's extraordinary, isn't it? I wonder if you can put yourself, even imagine yourself into that position, faced with a choice between carrying on serving Christ in a life-threatening situation or being put to death. That is a reality for millions of Christian brothers and sisters around the world tonight, like this translator. And it was a reality for the saints back then in Philadelphia, a church like all of these churches that had sprung up out of fresh soil where to be a Christian in that first generation of Christians was to be disowned.

I know that you have little strength, says Jesus, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name. They, like many others today, are patiently enduring suffering for their trust in Jesus.

And Jesus' message to a church like that is, keep going in your weakness and you will be welcomed and kept. Keep going in weakness and you will be welcomed and kept. This is a wonderful, wonderful word encouragement tonight for a church under pressure. That encouragement comes in three points for us.

[4 : 01] The first encouragement for this church is that Jesus welcomes weak witnesses. So let's look at that commendation in verse 8. Again, I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name. So notice he states their faithfulness both positively, you have kept my word, and negatively, you have not denied my name. They've been faithful in what they have done and in what they have chosen not to do. And both are relevant to Jesus. Both are part of the Christian life. We often think of our sin, don't we, as doing things that Jesus says not to do, what we might call sins of commission. But we can also sin by not doing what Jesus says we should do. That is sins of omission. We commit what's wrong and we omit what is right. Now, with a kind of narrowed and watered down view of sin, we might have commended the church in Philadelphia for not denying Christ's name. But would we have commended them for positively having kept his word. You know, I guess it would be a bit like that translator. He could have said, couldn't he, well, it's enough for me just to kind of get by and keep under the radar as a Christian in my society. As long as I don't deny Christ, I'm fine. So the best way of not denying him is just not saying or not doing anything that might put me in that position, that might get me caught.

No, instead, he actively serves Christ, keeps his word by translating his word into that language for others to read and hear in their homes. Yes, he does it behind the scenes, but he isn't content with simply not sinning. He positively wants to live by Jesus' teaching and serve him as he can in that context. And Jesus recognizes that faithful witness and commends it. I wonder, brothers and sisters, are we content only not to do what Jesus says not to do? Or do we not also desire to do what Jesus says to do? Perhaps we want to, but we feel there's just too much pressure, too much pressure to conform, too much pressure from within our own desires competing within us. Or Jesus knew how very weak this church was. We don't know in what sense they were weak. They might have been small in number.

Certainly, certainly they were a very tiny minority in their city. They were under pressure, weren't they, from not only the local culture, but the local synagogue as well. Yet, despite their little strength, they kept Jesus' word. Perhaps we feel weak tonight as we follow Jesus.

Perhaps the prospect of keeping his word this week just seems out of reach. Maybe you feel weak in your context, in your workplace, or your class, or in your family, in your home, among your friends.

Certainly, as a church, we're hardly a small congregation by Scottish standards, but compared with our city and its surrounding area, we together are a drop in the ocean, aren't we? Perhaps we feel that being a Christian puts us on the back foot, and we feel weak, vulnerable, or threatened. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't positively give ourselves to keeping his word, serving him, witnessing to his death and resurrection, as the Christians in Philadelphia continued to do. It's really tempting, isn't it, to think that we could live a quiet and an unobtrusive and under-the-radar life, free of risk. Does anyone really need to know that I'm a Christian? But God always calls us to that, doesn't he? And he always gives us opportunity to serve him where we are, even if it means, like, that guy on his own out somewhere, who knows where, just beetling away at his computer day and night in his room to translate the Bible.

[8 : 45] You, some of us in Keswick a few weeks ago heard a bit about the church in North Korea. Perhaps you didn't know there was a church in North Korea. Unsurprisingly, it's the hardest place on earth to be a Christian. But there were a few guys there who'd actually fled North Korea. One of them said, if someone even in your home was to kind of catch you praying, they could report you, and you could be punished by the state for praying on your own in your house. It's unbelievable, isn't it? But, they said, faced with food shortages across the country, the underground churches are urging Christians to share what little they have with their neighbors. It's a really radical, a really distinctive way that the Christians are responding to their national situation, how, by keeping Jesus' teaching about not being anxious about what they'll eat and what they'll drink, but trusting God with it and being generous and sharing what he has given. And they said, that is being noticed in those communities among their neighbors. Think how weak those brothers and sisters must feel. Think how utterly helpless they must feel in not denying Christ and keeping his word. It's impossible for us to imagine, isn't it?

How much more then can we, with our freedom and even in our weakness, keep Jesus' word and not deny his name?

Brothers and sisters, Jesus loves weak witnesses. And he welcomes us. See, he says, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. He started back in verse 7, speaking of a key that he holds. He's referring back to chapter 1, where he says he holds the keys of death and hell. What he opens, no one can shut. What he shuts, no one can open. And he has put in front of these weak witnesses an open door that nobody can close. They have free access to God that nobody can deny them. They have a welcome from Jesus that nobody can take back. Just think what security that promise gives to Christians in, say, North Korea, to think that the governing party with all of its power can't take away their welcome from God.

You can think of all the powerful and important leaders of the world throughout history just pressing their weight against that door to slam it shut, but they are not able. Jesus has opened a door for weak witnesses that cannot be closed with all the world's power because he welcomes them.

Secondly, he adds he will keep the keepers of his word. He says in verse 10, since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. So notice that parallel, since you have kept, I will keep. He keeps the keepers of his word. Now we've looked a bit at keeping his word. Here he says specifically his command to endure patiently. But what does it mean for Jesus to keep them? Well here I think it's a sense of protection. He says he will keep them from the hour of trial. They won't have to go through the great tribulation that the rest of the world will have to go through. Notice he's speaking about something that's going to come, not something that's here now. So there in verse 10, he's promising future protection. Now as we heard, read from Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks often about the cost of following him right now, but he also speaks about a time of unprecedented testing and distress in the run-up to his coming again. Now to be clear, sometimes you hear people speaking about signs of the times. What they're really speaking about often is the ordinary brokenness of the world. So says Jesus in Mark 13, when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed, such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Wars are going to happen.

[13 : 24] But, says Jesus, don't read anything into that. You're going to be put on trial and thrown in prison. You're going to be disowned by those close to you. People are going to try to deceive you.

All of that is suffering as normal in this age as a Christian. That's what Jesus says. They're not signs of the end, but something will happen that will trigger, he says, days of distress, unequaled from the beginning when God created the world until now, and never to be equaled again.

Those days will be so trying, he says, that if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. Then, he says, people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Now, we'd be not within our rights to try and map this onto some kind of timeline, but I take it then that there is tribulation here and now, and then there is the great tribulation. We can't say much more than that. It's one of these things that the Bible touches on but doesn't linger on. That's one way that God tells us not to get too far into it. Another reason for us not to get too far into it is because Jesus offers his protection from those days to those who stay true to him to the end.

What does he say? Those who keep his word about patient endurance, he will keep from that hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test its inhabitants. Again, we're not told in what way, but he promises that he will. He gives us his future protection, and with that comes a sense of vindication. You notice in verse 9, he says, I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews, though they're not, but are liars, I'll make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. So, in addition to that protection, those who make life really hard for them now will, in the end, recognize that the church was really loved by Jesus. Again, we're not given a time frame for that. It could be within the next few years for this church in Philadelphia, but it could be, couldn't it, in the end, when they stand before Jesus as judge on his throne and the truth is revealed. We're told then that every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, some gladly, others through clenched teeth.

[16 : 15] And just as those who stood against Jesus will then see who he really is, so they will fall down before his church and acknowledge who God's people really are. So, that vindication could be here and now, back then, for that church, but for what it's worth, I think it's probably in the end and tied in with the future protection Jesus will provide for those who stick with him. So, that this promise, what does it do? It neutralizes the threat of those who would threaten the church, doesn't it? They are piling on the pressure, but Jesus says, it will all come out in the wash. I will hold you to the end.

The big thing to take away from these verses is that Jesus promises to keep those who keep his word. Again, just think of that Bible translator or the saints in North Korea or the church that we heard about recently in Iran, and you can see what that would mean to a church like Philadelphia. One day, their oppressors are going to fall before them and say, you were right all along.

Of course, they and we would much, much rather that that day came sooner rather than later, wouldn't we? Wouldn't we much rather that those who persecute the church today recognize Jesus as Lord and turn to him for his forgiveness and see that he has loved his church?

One of the most shocking things I think Jesus teaches us to do is to pray for those who persecute us. Do we do that? Pray not only for the persecuted, but for the persecutors.

But even if they don't turn to Christ now, as we would love them to do, we know one day they will recognize that we really were loved by Jesus, even though on that day they will hate it all the more.

[18 : 25] Doesn't that give us courage then to endure patiently to the very end? If you knew beyond doubt that you would win the eternal court case, would you not keep on witnessing and bearing testimony?

Would you not see the case through to the end knowing that you would be victorious? Whatever it costs you to get there, would you not keep going?

That is what Jesus promises, the confidence that he gives. If we trust in this ultimate protection and vindication, what could stop us from keeping his word? There is nothing, brothers and sisters, that we cannot face for his name when we stand on his promises.

The church in Philadelphia back then and brothers and sisters around the world who faced persecution, they are a living proof of that. His final encouragement and his promise to the church tonight then is in verses 11 and 12, that he will never lose those who hold on.

I am coming soon, says Jesus. Hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown. Now, we have heard this call before in these letters to hold on to what you have.

[19 : 45] Remember, Jesus gave no other instruction to the church in Thyatira, the faithful Christians, except to hold on to what they had. The difference here is in what Jesus promises, or I should say the way that he makes his promise.

Because it is amazing to think, it only occurred to me this week, you know, it is amazing to think that Jesus in these chapters tells us seven times and in seven ways what eternal life will be like.

Isn't that amazing? That he promises in each letter, he expresses it differently, but he is speaking about the same thing, isn't he? The experience of his people in his eternal kingdom.

At the end of each message, we get another little taste, don't we? Some of them are surprising, all of them are thrilling. To the church in Philadelphia, he says eternal life will be like being a pillar in the temple of God.

Now, that's a surprising one. Is it thrilling? Let's see, the pillars in the temple of the Old Testament, so the physical pillars, we read were about eight meters high, five and a half meters circumference.

[20 : 57] I'm not a math whiz. You can correct me about this. I worked out that's about one meter seventy-five across in diameter, in thickness. It's maybe about the length of this table in thickness, these pillars.

And they were cast from solid bronze. So we read in 2 Kings that between the pillars and everything else that was made of bronze in the temple, it was so much that it couldn't be weighed.

So to say that you couldn't remove the pillars from the temple sounds silly, doesn't it? Of course, you couldn't lift these things up and take them away from the temple, except that that is just what happened when God's enemies came to the temple, and they broke down the pillars, and they took them away back to Babylon.

Even bronze pillars that high and that thick and that wide, it turns out, could be taken away from the earthly temple.

But Jesus says the pillars in the new and ultimate and heavenly temple of our God cannot be removed. Never will they leave it.

[22 : 08] God's enemies will never, ever come to take the pillars out of his eternal temple. They can't. Jesus' people will be like that.

They will be irremovable fixtures in the presence of God. You can think about this as the kind of the reverse of his promise at the beginning. At the start, he said, a door is open before us that no one can shut, but once we are inside, the door will be closed so that no one will open it again.

That is how secure Jesus' promise is to those who hold on to him and his gospel. Hold on to what you have, he says, so that no one, no one will be able to take your crown.

No one will take you away from him. No one will take eternal life from you. And he says he will write three names on us. Now, I don't think we're meant to understand that as being kind of physical writing on our bodies, but in the sense that we will then belong in a new way to these three, to God, to our heavenly home, and to Jesus himself.

There's a thought about what it means to write your name on something. A story came back to me from a long time ago. Growing up, me and my brother and sister, we were quite young.

[23 : 34] And my sister was going on a school trip, and she had a new raincoat. And it was all busy, we were rushing to get out the door, and my mom shouted down the stairs, make sure you write your name on your new coat.

Now, I guess she meant on the inside, on the label. But being young, my sister misunderstood and got a marker and wrote her name on the front of the coat in the place of a kind of name badge.

Now, everyone knew who that coat belonged to. But it didn't only tell us who the coat belonged to, it also told us the identity of the wearer.

Her name written on it told us the ownership of the coat and who she was. And that is what these three names are for, written on us. We belong to God, to the God and Father.

We meet in and through Jesus, the creator and king and redeemer of the cosmos. We will eternally belong to him. We belong to the city of our God. Our permanent residence will be the new Jerusalem.

[24 : 45] That will be our home. From then on, a new world, a new creation. And we belong to Jesus himself. We will have his new name written on us.

It's hard to know what that means. It could mean Christ's name newly written on us. It could mean Christ writing a new name upon us, giving us a new name.

It could, of course, be, in some mysterious sense, his new name. What do we find at the end of Revelation? Revelation 19 depicts Jesus returning with a name written on him that no one knows but him.

But what we do know is that we will belong to him in a whole new way. More holy, more purely, more perfectly than we ever have before.

And in those three names, not only our ownership, but our identity is found. Our true identity, who we really are, comes from God.

[25 : 49] It will be revealed in the new creation. And it is found in Jesus. Brothers and sisters, those three names, they make us who we are.

And that will be revealed on the day when he comes again. So hold on to what you have, says Jesus. Hold on. And do not let it go.

Endure patiently. Whatever we lose in this life, we will not ever be lost to him. If we keep his word in this life, he will keep us on the last day.

If we witness to him in our weakness, we are welcomed by him into his kingdom. Those are three wonderful encouragements for us going into a new week, aren't they?

To keep going with Jesus, even in our weakness, even under pressure, to that great and glorious and eternal end.

[26 : 48] That we will never be taken away from. And that can never be taken away from us. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Lord, how we thank you again for these precious, precious words spoken by you so long ago, but living and real and life-giving words.

Lord, we pray that by your word and your spirit, you'd uphold us, Lord, in our weakness. Lord, we feel it in so many different ways. We're compromised within by our sin and without, Lord, by temptation and pressure to conform.

Lord, we thank you for your great and very precious promises. And we pray, Lord, that we would hold them dear. Lord, when we are tempted to compromise, we pray that we would set our sights on that great and glorious day when we will be owned by you as never before publicly.

Lord, we pray that day would come soon. We pray with the church through the ages, come, Lord Jesus. Lord, we pray that on behalf of brothers and sisters who suffer much worse than we do for his name.

Lord, we pray that their suffering would be brought to an end. Lord, we pray for their peace and security and safety. But more than that, we pray for their perseverance. Lord, you and your providence have ordained these days for them and for us.

[28 : 30] And we pray that you would hold us all fast, Lord. Keep us close to Jesus, we ask. Keep our witness clear and bright until the day that he comes.

For we ask in his name. Amen.