

We have seen that Jesus' letters to the churches are to all be heard by the church throughout time. Man's heart doesn't change. I'm always surprised to find that there are people who think man can get his act together. The fallen condition of man is the most empirically verifiable fact of human nature. Without Christ and His transforming power we are selfish, self-focused, greedy, and incapable of loving unconditionally. (Jeremiah 17:9) Regardless of who wins an election, man will be running things and that means more problems. Godly men can turn things for a time, but inevitably the wicked gain power, hearts harden and God must intervene with judgment. Sound too pessimistic? Actually, I'm an optimist. Jesus is coming again! He is going to establish the Kingdom of heaven! (Daniel 2:44)

In the first letter we saw the need to nurture the love we had when we first realized the greatness of God's forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus. (2:4) This letter is to the next large city on the postal route, Smyrna. It is an ancient city on the Aegean coast with an excellent harbor. It was destroyed by the Lydians and was in ruins for centuries. The Greeks rebuilt it in 290B.C. Though not the largest or most affluent, it was said to be the most beautiful city of Asia. From early on it was aligned with Rome, even building a temple to worship Rome. It's most famous street was called The Street of Gold, with temples at each end, one to Cybele and the other to Zeus. It had numerous other temples including one to Tiberius Caesar. It was home of the famous poet, Homer. The city has survived to this day and is called Izmir.

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. Each letter starts with a description of the Lord from the first chapter. We saw before that "the first and the last" is a description of the eternal God of Israel in Isaiah 44:6. Jesus, as God the Son has eternally been with God the Father. He is the beginning and end of all things. There is nothing throughout all time that escapes Him. He knows who will be elected or enthroned and He isn't worried about how things will turn out. He's already on the other side of it all. And to this persecuted church, He is telling them to trust the One that sees everything that happens to them. They are not going through a dark time because God is somehow absent. He will see them through. The promise of Christ is not the absence of trouble, but His presence with us through it.

After all, He was dead and He came back to life. He conquered death. So do not fear those who kill the body but after that have no more that they can do. (Matthew 10:28) Jesus conquered death and hell so that we too could come to life, eternal life, and He is able to raise us up. (John 6:40) This must be a precious description to our brothers and sisters in places like Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea. The government does not have the last word. Jesus does! They can kill us but they can't keep us from being raised!

Commented [notes1]: Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

Commented [notes2]: Daniel 2:44 (ESV)

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever,

Commented [notes3]: Revelation 2:4 (ESV)

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Commented [notes4]: Isaiah 44:6 (ESV)

⁶ Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Commented [notes5]: Matthew 10:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Commented [notes6]: John 6:40 (ESV)

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. E

Fear not! We serve a mighty King who can reign even in the midst of man doing his worst.

⁹ *I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* This is one of only two out of the seven churches that did not receive correction. Jesus begins by saying He is aware of what they are going through. *I know your tribulation.* That is He knows your affliction, what distresses or troubles you. Sometimes we think no one knows or cares about what we are going through, but Jesus does. He knows better than anyone. Sometimes the pain in our heart can be worse than a physical affliction. **Jesus not only knows, He feels it.** (Hebrews 4:15) You will never find a friend like Jesus. It's just not possible. Even a fellow believer that cares about you can't feel the pain like Jesus can.

The church of Smyrna was being slandered by the Jews. Jesus knows that too. That slander would be especially hard for the Jews that found Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. They once considered these fellow Jews as their friends and family. Now they are hearing things from them that are so ugly, so vicious, that it is breaking their hearts. Hurtful words can be more painful than physical injury.

There is a burden that comes from being born again. You genuinely care. But you also know you dare not speak on your own, but must wait on the Holy Spirit. (Proverbs 29:11) And so we often grieve for the people that turn against us, slander us behind our back, and even speak lies about our character. We grieve for them because we care, even more than before, about their eternal souls. They malign us by assigning evil motives to the good things we do from a loving heart. It cuts like a knife. We pray for them, and we pray we can forgive quickly and completely. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus also knows *your poverty*. In these free Roman cities, every guild or trade had a god or goddess that they worshiped and counted on for protection and successful business. When Christians refused to make sacrifice or offer incense or pray to that god, they were expelled from the group, meaning that they could no longer make a living by their trade.

Things have changed very little in that region of the world. Just blocks from where the emperor Diocletian killed hundreds of Christians in A.D. 303-311 is the Protestant church of Izmit. They have been firebombed three times. Though they have only fifty believers, they have an outreach of Bible study by mail. They live with harsh societal prejudice, and the Turkish media often feeds the Muslim fears by claiming Christians are foreign intelligence agents that are intent on undermining the state. Two thousand years earlier Satan was using the same tactics. They may have the low paying jobs, but they are rich!

Commented [notes7]: Hebrews 4:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Commented [notes8]: Proverbs 29:11 (ESV)

¹¹ A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

Commented [notes9]: Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

One of the men that encouraged me in the faith was George Bruland. He had a gift of evangelism. It was just natural to him. He was an unpretentious carpenter who was always ready to pray for people. One day he told me that the Lord had spoken to his heart and told him that he was going to become rich. I told him, "George, you are already rich! You have a gift of evangelism, a love for God, a sweet wife, kids that love you, a job, the family of God, a Savior, and an eternal home in heaven! What more do you want?" I heard him repeat that to people now and then. It must have struck a chord. (Hebrews 10:34) He beat me to heaven. Now he really knows how rich he is!

Commented [notes10]: Hebrews 10:34 (ESV)

³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

That is what Jesus was saying to the believers of Smyrna. They may have lost their better paying jobs and were just living day to day, slandered and persecuted, but they were rich. They had a family of believers, a faith that is truth and not myth, a God who knows their hearts and will see them through, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit to comfort them, and an eternal home in heaven. They were rich. (James 2:5)

Commented [notes11]: James 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

Once again we need to see things not as man sees but from God's viewpoint. The world says that temporal things make you rich. If you've got your gold and silver stashed away, a nice home and car, money enough to retire comfortably, you might be rich. Maybe. You can have all that and be rich, but it is not because of those things. Real wealth is eternal things, your relationship with God, your real family of the faith that will stick with you to the end and on, and your heart knowledge of God's word. **What you see as genuinely valuable is where your heart will be.** (Matthew 6:21) That is where you will invest your time and your heart. What is valuable to you? (Hebrews 11:26)

Commented [notes12]: Matthew 6:21 (ESV)

²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Commented [notes13]: Hebrews 11:26 (ESV)

²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

Jesus had a harsh term for the local synagogue. He called it the Synagogue of Satan. This was not anti-Semitic as some claim. Jesus and John were Jews and probably a good part of the church in Smyrna were too. That is why the other local Jews were so upset with them. Jesus doesn't worry about labels, for He speaks the truth. Of course Jesus can make a judgment like that because He sees their heart. He knew the power that was behind their slander. It was Satan himself. That should have encouraged the church. If you aren't being effective for God's kingdom, Satan won't bother with you. It is an honor to be so successful that Satan would incite the local synagogue to slander you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

Commented [notes14]: Matthew 5:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

^{10a} Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Persecution purifies and strengthens the church. It has always been that way. It is being experienced in much of the world. It must really frustrate Satan that whenever he physically attacks the church, it gets stronger and purer. It happened in Russia and China. It is happening now in the Arab world. The insincere will not stay because of the danger, and the genuine believers grow up fast because they are desperate to be prepared to die. They aren't as distracted as we are in affluent nations. (Luke 6:20)

Commented [notes15]: Luke 6:20 (ESV)

²⁰ And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Remember, Smyrna is an intensely Roman town. They worshiped Rome and its emperors. The believers would no longer worship the Caesar, and if this letter was written during the time of Domitian, that could mean their life. They were called unpatriotic and even called atheists. There was bound to be a clash of cultures, that of Rome and that of the kingdom of God. **There is bound to eventually become a clash of cultures with what America is becoming and the kingdom of God.**

They will suffer, but Jesus tells them not to be afraid. When you know God is all-powerful and omnipresent, and that He loves you as a dear child (Ephesians 5:1), then you don't have to fear what man can do to you. (Psalm 56:11) Jesus will see you through. *The Heavenly Man* is such a great contemporary personal account of Jesus bringing a brother through unimaginable circumstances. He suffered greatly, but God brought him through. The process developed a deep and profound relationship with the Lord. The promise in Scripture is that if we suffer with Him, we will also share in His glory! (Romans 8:17) I can't think of a greater hope than to share in the glory of Jesus. The world sees us as crazy, or as one man said while touring the art downstairs, "Delusional!", but we have a very different perspective, an eternal one. Believers are the only ones that have a reason to fear nothing. They know God who is in control of all things.

They were going to face imprisonment and have trouble for ten days. Ten days was an expression of a short period of time. I don't believe it was meant to be a literal ten times 24 hours. It was the testing period of the four men in Daniel chapter one. (Daniel 1:12-16) Knowing that Jesus promised that their imprisonment and distress would only last a short time would help them to endure. Trouble comes and goes. In the midst of the pressure we must keep our mind on the fact that it will not go on forever. The enemy of our soul wants us to believe that nothing will change. It will only get worse. He's a liar! We read the end of the Book. It gets a lot better! We just need to hang in there. Remember that!

^{10b}Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Endure, even if it is to the loss of life. Endure until the day of your graduation into your heavenly home. Jesus has a crown of life for those who do. Of all the things we put on the list of being a good believer, the one thing that Jesus looks for is faithfulness. Remember that He told the story of the men who invested His resources. To those who did so He said, "Well done good and *faithful* servant." (Matthew 25:21)

The church can get wrapped up in a million different programs, but **God isn't looking for a program. He's looking for faithfulness.** Do what He shows *you*, not what He showed the other guy. Faithfully use the talents and gifts He gave you and don't try to imitate someone else. Faithfully seek to hear His still, small voice and let the Word of God speak to you each day, and act on what you hear. That is being faithful. And keep it up until the day you are home. Then you can know you will receive the crown of life.

Commented [notes16]: Ephesians 5:1 (ESV)

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

Commented [notes17]: Psalm 56:11 (ESV)

¹¹In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?

Commented [notes18]: Romans 8:17 (ESV)

¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Commented [notes19]: Daniel 1:12-16 (ESV)

¹²"Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.

¹³Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."

¹⁴So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.

¹⁶So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

Commented [notes20]: Matthew 25:21 (ESV)

²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

What is this Crown of Life? James said that it was rewarded to those who love Jesus and stand the test by persevering to the end. (James 1:12) It isn't defined more than that. It sounds like eternal life itself. Do you want to be sure you are on your way to heaven? Then you should persevere. Don't give in to temptation. Stay faithful till the day you die and you will be given a crown of life.

¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. We have the invitation again to hear not just what was said to this church, but to the churches. We have to be willing to hear. It seems today this is a quality that is disappearing as hearts harden. I've been told numerous times that if I want to believe something then that is good for me. My response is that there is truth. Truth is good. It is not if I want to believe it. The question is, is it true? Then I get a response about truth being different things to different people. When did people lose their ability to reason? If you step in front of a bus, there is only one outcome. The truth is not what I want it to be. Truth is you'll be squashed like a bug. If you think you can rearrange your atoms to slide through the bus, good luck. Real life has a way of testing the validity of our beliefs.

The Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, or it is just another work of man. It's one or the other, not both. If you are wrong but really believe something, it doesn't make your belief true. If Jesus is the *only* way to God, He is right or He is wrong. It's true or it isn't. If there is a fork in the road and left leads to a cliff and right leads to a place of love and peace, it matters which way you turn and no amount of wishful thinking will change the outcome.

Jesus is telling the church at Smyrna that if they will persevere to the end, they may be killed for their faith, but they won't face the wrath of God for their sins. That is the Second Death. (Revelation 20:14) The Living One guarantees it. **He was dead and is alive. That is why we can believe Him when it comes to the subject of death.**

What Jesus said here is a pretty serious message to those who believe they can say a prayer and live like they want. The promise is for the conquerors, the overcomers. They overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. (Revelation 12:11) The blood of the Lamb paid for their sins, and their testimony says the exchange indeed took place. Do you have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches?

Questions

- 1 Describe Smyrna.
- 2 How does Jesus' description encourage the church of Smyrna?
- 3 What did Jesus say He knew about them?
- 4 What is the pain of slander?
- 5 Who is rich?
- 6 Why were they poor and persecuted?
- 7 What is valuable to you?

Commented [notes21]: James 1:12 (ESV)

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Commented [notes22]: Revelation 20:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Commented [notes23]: Revelation 12:11 (ESV)

¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

- 8 Why is persecution good for the church?
- 9 What is the reward for suffering for Jesus?
- 10 What is God looking for in you?
- 11 How do we conquer?