

We have seen that Jesus' letters to the churches are to all be heard by the church throughout time. Man's heart does not change. I am always surprised to find that there are people who think man will one day 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, greedy, and incapable of loving unconditionally (Jeremiah 17:9ⁱ). Regardless of who wins an election, man will be running things and that means more problems. Godly leaders can turn things for a time, but inevitably the wicked gain power, hearts harden, and God must intervene with judgment. That is the cycle of the history of mankind. Sound too pessimistic? I am an optimist. Jesus is coming again! He is going to establish the Kingdom of heaven on earth (Daniel 2:44ⁱⁱ)! But in the meantime, by faith we enter the kingdom now, not a kingdom of this world, but a heavenly eternal one where Christ reigns in our hearts (John 18:36ⁱⁱⁱ; Hebrews 12:22^{iv}).

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^v). 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. It was one of just a few cities that had a planned layout before it was built. From early on it was aligned with Rome, even building a temple to worship Rome. Its 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 the home of the famous poet, Homer (not Simpson). The city has survived to this day and is called Izmir. It has several Christian churches.

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.’* Revelation 2:8 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^{vi}. The expression tells us Jesus is one with God. Jesus, as God the Son has eternally been with God the Father (John 1:1^{vii}). 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 is not worried about how things will turn out. He is already on the other side of it all. And to this persecuted church, He is telling them to trust the One who 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^{viii}). Jesus conquered death and hell so that we too could have life, eternal life, and He is able to raise us up (John 6:40^{ix}). 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 cannot keep us from being raised! Fear not! We serve a mighty King who can reign even amid 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.* Revelation 2:9 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. The Greek word means a crushing burden. 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 hearts can be worse than a physical affliction. Jesus not only knows, He feels it (Hebrews 4:15^x). You will never find a friend like Jesus. It is just not possible. Even a fellow believer who cares about you cannot feel your 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 who 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^{xi}). And so, we often grieve for the people who turn against us, slander us behind our backs, and even tell 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 like we have been forgiven by our Lord (Matthew 6:14,15^{xii}).

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. Or it could have been the confiscation of their goods by Jews taking advantage of Christianity being illegal at the time Revelation was written. Leon Morris tells us that, *When Polycarp was martyred at Smyrna somewhat later, the hostility of the Jews toward the Christians came out in their zeal in setting forward the execution. Though it was the sabbath, they gathered wood for the fire in which the martyr was burnt.*^{xiii} Their rage against believers caused them to violate their own sabbath rules.

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 Izmir. 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 who are intent on undermining the state. Two thousand years earlier Satan was using the same tactics. They may have low paying jobs, be slandered, and struggling financially, but they are rich!

One of the men who encouraged me in the faith was George Bruland. He had a gift of evangelism. 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^{xiv}). He won our race to heaven. Now he really knows how rich he is!

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 true, 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. That is true wealth (James 2:5^{xv}).

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 have 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, your heart knowledge of God's Word, and His love for you. What you see as genuinely valuable is where your heart will be (Matthew 6:21^{xvi}). That is where you will invest your time and your heart. What is valuable to you (Hebrews 11:26^{xvii})?

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 does not worry about labels, for He speaks the truth. Of course, Jesus can make a judgment like that because He sees their hearts. He knew the power that was behind their slander. It was Satan himself. They were a gathering of Satan's people. That should have encouraged the church. If you are not being effective for God's kingdom, Satan will not bother with you. It is an honor to be so successful that Satan would incite his people to persecute and slander you (Matthew 5:11,12^{xviii}).

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. Revelation 2:10a 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 Iran and Afghanistan as well as other places. 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 are not as distracted as most of us are in affluent nations (Luke 6:20^{xix}).

Remember, Smyrna is an intensely Roman town. They worshiped Rome and its emperors. The believers would no longer worship Caesar, and that could cost them 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 were going to suffer, but Jesus told 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^{xx}), then you do not need to fear what man can do to you (Psalm 56:11^{xxi}). Jesus will see you through. The book *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^{xxii})! I cannot 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 our Christian art display, "Delusional!" But we have a very different perspective, an eternal

one. Believers are the only ones who have a reason not to fear. We know God who is in control of all things will bring us safely to our heavenly home where we will be overwhelmed with the beauty of His holiness.

They were going to face imprisonment and have trouble for ten days. *Some will be imprisoned, and this is ascribed to the devil. But God is supreme. Even through the devil and evil men he works out his purposes.*^{xxiii} Ten days was an expression of a determined period of time. I do not 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^{xxiv}). Knowing that Jesus promised that their imprisonment and distress would only last for a set time would help them to endure. Trouble comes and goes. Amid 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 and lean on those everlasting arms. It is important that we remember that!

^{10b}Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Revelation 2:10b 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 earnestly did so He said, "Well done good and *faithful* servant" (Matthew 25:21^{xxv}).

The church can get wrapped up in a million different programs, but God is not looking for a program. **He is 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 do not try to imitate anyone but Jesus. 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 (1 Kings 19:12^{xxvi}). 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.

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^{xxvii}). It is not 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. Do not give-in to temptation. Stay faithful till the day you die, and you are promised to receive a crown of life.

¹¹He 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.' Revelation 2:11 We have the invitation again to hear not just what was said to this church, but to the churches. We must be willing to hear. It seems today this is a quality that is disappearing as hearts harden. I have been told numerous times that if you want to believe certain truth, that is good for you. 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 speeding bus, there is only one outcome. The truth is not what I want it to be. Truth is you will 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 is one or the other, not both. If you are wrong but really believe something, it does not make your belief true. Jesus' declaration that He is the *only* way to

God is right or it is wrong. It is true or it is not. 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 will not face the wrath of God for their sins. The word “not” here is an emphatic negative, “you will not no way be hurt” by the second death which is the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14^{xxviii}). The Living One who was dead and is alive forevermore guarantees it. Because He passed through death, we can believe Him when it comes to the subjects of life and death.

I imagine that a letter from Jesus to our congregation would be so prized that each generation would see that it was posted in our meetings and even memorized. In A.D. 177 a servant woman by the name of Blandina was held by the Romans and accused of incest and cannibalism. Romans thought the way the Christians called each other brother and sister and celebrated communion implied these crimes. Her mistress asked for prayer because she feared that in her weakness, she may make a false confession. Blandina set an example for her. She was tortured from dawn to dusk in multiple ways. She grew strength from declaring again and again, “I am a Christian woman and nothing wicked happens among us.” The torturers finally said she had beaten them. Even *one* of the many tortures they applied to her caused men to break. They gave up and released her for execution. Eusebius, an early church father wrote “... *glad at her departure as though invited to a marriage feast rather than cast to the beasts... and the heathen themselves confessed that never before among them had a woman suffered so much and so long.*”^{xxix} Jesus’ message to her church was taken seriously and kept her through that horrific night and her final moments. Her relationship with Jesus was greater than her fear of pain and death. She wears the crown of life. How deep is your relationship with Him?

Persecution is still happening in the same city. In 2007 two Turkish converts to Christ and a German man were working on translating a study Bible when five young Turks tortured them and then killed them by stabbing them multiple times. Days before the police were informed of the plot but did nothing. The wife of one of the martyrs, Semse, later said she had no regrets. She had seen fifteen people come to faith in three years. She said, “I see my family as victorious!”^{xxx} Semse took the letter to Smyrna to heart. She knows her husband did not love his life even unto death. She knows he was not hurt by the second death. The letter to Smyrna was from Jesus to her, and to you, and me.

What Jesus said here is a serious message to those who believe they can say a prayer and then 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^{xxxi}). The blood of the Lamb paid for their sins, and their testimony says that they were new creations. Their love of Jesus is greater than their love of this temporary life. They know He was victorious over death.

We will all die if the Lord does not return first. Will we be leaving behind the things we love or going to the One we love? Will we be leaving home or going home? Do you have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches? Be faithful unto death and our Savior, Jesus, will give us a crown of life!

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

ⁱ **Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)**

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

ⁱⁱ **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,

ⁱⁱⁱ **John 18:36 (ESV)**

³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

^{iv} **Hebrews 12:22 (ESV)**

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

^v **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

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

^{vi} **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.

^{vii} **John 1:1 (ESV)**

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

^{viii} **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.

^{ix} **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."

^x **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. (sympathize is from the compound Greek words "feel" and "with." It could be translated commiserate.

^{xi} **Proverbs 29:11 (ESV)**

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

^{xii} **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.

^{xiii} Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 68.

^{xiv} **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.

xv **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?

xvi **Matthew 6:21 (ESV)**

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

xvii **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.

xviii **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.

xix **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.

xx **Ephesians 5:1 (ESV)**

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

xxi **Psalms 56:11 (ESV)**

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

xxii **Romans 8:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ and 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.

xxiii Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 68.

xxiv **Daniel 1:12-16 (ESV)**

¹² “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then 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.” ¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At 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. ¹⁶ So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

xxv **Matthew 25:21 (ESV)**

²¹ His 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.’

xxvi **1 Kings 19:12 (ESV)**

¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

xxvii **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.

xxviii **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.

xxix Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.55–56, Loeb Classical Library, 153:433–435.

xxx As reported in Christianity Today 2016, January edition

xxxi **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.