

Persecuted: The Church at Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

MPS Jesus is the Sovereign King who has conquered and calls His people to Be Faithful and receive the crown of life.

OBJ Every person should trust in and be faithful to King Jesus because of three qualities for conquering victory.

READ Revelation 2:8-11

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

*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. ¹⁰Do 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. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the 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 2:8-11***

Smyrna is the city of John’s second address. “Smyrna was one of the greatest cities of the region, and indeed disputed with Ephesus for the title ‘First (city) of Asia’.”¹ North of Ephesus along the coast about thirty-five miles, it was also a port city. Though not as large nor as prominent as Ephesus, it also was a city known for great emperor worship. Not to be outdone by Ephesus, Smyrna built for splendor and developed for notoriety. “It boasted a famous stadium, library, and public theater (the largest in Asia). It claimed to be the birthplace of the great epic poet Homer. A famous thoroughfare called the Street of Gold curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor) like a necklace on the statue of a goddess. At either end was a temple, one to a local variety of Cybele, known as Sipyrene Mother (a patron divinity), and the other to Zeus. The acropolis on Mt. Pagus was called the crown or garland of Smyrna. In NT times the population may have been about 200,000. Coins describe the city as “First of Asia in beauty and size.”² In addition to its developed beauty, Smyrna benefited as an early ally by loyalty to Rome.³ [Smyrna positioned itself to be the first city of Asia for the Roman Empire.](#)

TRANS But amidst all of its splendor and notoriety, Smyrna was a hard place for Christians to live.

The Church in Smyrna was struggling. They were faced with three distinct trials, tribulation, poverty, and slander. Jesus wants the church in Smyrna to know that He knows their situation. Tribulation refers to a state that includes physical, mental, social, or economic oppression. Their whole life was heavy in every way. The church lived under severe poverty.⁴ Their impoverishment was not due to some ineptitude of the people, but due to the harsh conditions of the city toward Christians. Commentator George Eldon Ladd describes the reason for their impoverishment this way, “the poverty of the Smyrneans was not due alone to their normal economic condition but to confiscation of property, looting by hostile mobs, and to the difficulty of earning a living in a hostile environment.”⁵ The antagonism of their context intentionally caused their impoverished state.⁶ But in acknowledging their poverty, Jesus states the opposite when He counters “*but you are rich*”, reminding them of true worth, value, and riches, and that worldly riches are fleeting and will not last. And third, the church was vigorously slandered.⁷ This slander came from those who claimed to be Jew, either of ethnic descent or Gentiles who had converted, but Jesus says they are of the “*synagogue of Satan*”. Paul teaches that to be a true Jew is not about outward conformity, but an inward posture of the heart.⁸ Commentators agree that this refers to those who have converted

¹ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 67.

² Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 73.

³ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), 67. Morris notes, “Smyrna was a faithful ally of Rome in the days before Rome was acknowledged in the region, so its loyalty meant something.”

⁴ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), 68. Morris notes, “The poverty of the Smyrneans was extreme.”

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 42.

⁶ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 74. Mounce notes, “In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute.”

⁷ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 75. See Note 11. Mounce records, “Barclay lists six kinds of slander leveled against the Christians: cannibalism, lust and immorality, breaking up homes, atheism, political disloyalty. and incendiarism (1.80–81).”

⁸ Romans 2:28-29



to Judaism to avoid persecution, because the Jews enjoyed a “grandfather status” with the Romans that Christians did not benefit from. And this would be carried out through the next generation as the list of Christian martyrs in Smyrna would compile. Scholar Robert Mounce notes, “This strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was that of the elderly Polycarp, the “twelfth martyr in Smyrna,” who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned.”⁹ The situation for Christians in Smyrna was hard. By these three trials we know it felt like the world was against them (tribulation), they had no resource to change or address their status in this world (poverty), and the people of the world hated them (slander). This opposes far too many people’s understanding of their Christianity, but the reality in this passage remains. [Life in Smyrna was filled with hardship for this one reason, because they were Christians.](#)

TRANS But of greatest significance for the Church at Smyrna is that God holds nothing against them. [What does Jesus tell them?](#)

Jesus tells the Church, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer.” He doesn’t tell them that they won’t suffer. He doesn’t promise that He will stop nor prevent the suffering. Rather, one could hear His words as a guarantee of just the opposite. They are going to suffer, be thrown in jail, and some will die. But no matter how far it goes, if even to death, their suffering will have a limit.¹⁰ [For the one who is faithful even unto death, their reward will be unlimited!](#)

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Christians don’t seek out suffering. We don’t intentionally create situations that cause suffering. But in serving Christ and advancing the gospel, we do not avoid hardship nor forsake our mission because of the threat or reality of suffering. We recognize, such that we anticipate, that serving Christ faithfully is accompanied by suffering. We are told this.

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,”

Philippians 1:29

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” **1 Timothy 3:12**

Please understand; suffering is not our mission. Not all suffering proves beneficial. Sometimes we suffer because of our sinfulness, and at other times because we acted unwisely, (aka stupid). Our hope, even in these times, is that though suffering may have been produced from wrong actions, because of Jesus Christ, He can bring good and benefit for us from it when we repent and trust in Him.

Christians hold the mindset that we suffer FOR the mission, and often IN the mission. We don’t calculate the ‘potential for’ nor the ‘severity of’ suffering to determine whether we serve or not. We serve the Lord in faithful obedience to His command, knowing suffering is likely to meet us at any time, in a myriad of places and ways, and potential for varying degrees, yet we look to Him to remain steadfast. [Suffering should not threaten nor stop us because of the One we worship is sufficient!](#)

[WHAT is so great, so glorious and strong, that it would enable us to withstand suffering in this world?](#) Jesus. This is the whole point of this passage, of the New Testament, and the whole Bible. He calls His people to faithfulness in this world, even unto death, because He is sufficient to sustain us beyond this world. [The Christian hope in Jesus transcends this world to strengthen us for any and every reality we face in this world!](#)

OBJ [Three Qualities of our Conquering King that compel Christians to Not fear and Be Faithful.](#)

TRANS First, the Name or title by which John introduces Jesus for each church matters for the situation they are facing. Therefore, we must consider who it is that is speaking.

⁹ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 74.

¹⁰ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 76. Mounce recognizes ten days as, “a prolonged but definitely limited period.”



1. The One who Speaks. .8-9

'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 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.

The One who speaks is the eternal, sovereign One who demonstrated His power over life and death; He conquered death, Hell and the grave. There is no where He has not been, nothing He has not faced, and in all He has conquered and is victorious. *There will never be anything in this life, or after, that you will encounter that Jesus has not conquered.*

God knows the church at Smyrna. The One who has conquered says, *"I know your...situation, every last part of it, every substance that makes it and nuance that resonates from it. And I tell you it is NOT as the world says. It shall be as I command."* *What greater comfort could there be, then to know that God knows, sees, and cares? The glory of Christianity is that the One we worship is not only known by us but knows us. Have you settled this in your mind so that it settles your heart? Are you giving priority to this truth in your life, so you live with urgency in obeying Christ faithfully?*

If you are a Christian, God knows you too. If you are facing persecution and suffering, even unto death, there is only One that can provide a promise that matters; the One who has overcome death. Be sure you are known by Jesus, and not just know about Him, because His promise goes out to those He knows. You don't get through suffering by gritting and bearing it. You don't survive suffering by ignoring it, and hoping it'll go away. Suffering brings you to the end of yourself. It shows you the limits of your resource and capability. And at the end of yourself, if you don't have someone or something else to draw from, you do not overcome. And for some, as the text states, suffering ends in death. *Is that which you are filling your heart with, which you have your hope consumed by, sufficient when this becomes the end of your suffering? You only need to worry about the outcome if that which you are trusting is not sufficient to conquer whatever your suffering may bring. The One who speaks, who is "the first and the last, who died and came to life", He is sufficient! Is your hope, your strength, your whole life consumed by trusting in Him? Jesus, the Sovereign One who knows your situation inside and out, is the One who speaks.*

TRANS When we look to the One who speaks, then we hear the Word He commands.

2. The Word He Commands. .10

"Do Not Fear...Be faithful unto death"

ILLUS I remember years ago when watching Tiger Woods on the cusp of winning yet another major championship. The commentators were discussing how good it was to watch him after a season where he really struggled. And the reason he gave for his return to success was his mental focus he sought help for and was able to regain during the game. After that time, sports psychology became a field of major emphasis across professional athletes.

Setting your mind did not originate as a sports psychology technique; **it is the command of our Sovereign One.** He commands that we might set our minds on His truth for obedience. ^{Colossians3:2} Here His command to the Church in Smyrna is two-fold; *"Do Not Fear...Be faithful unto death"*. Conquering fear comes by the exercise of faith to obey. Jesus know this because he *"learned obedience through what He suffered"* ^{Hebrews5:8} Jesus has been to it, and He's come through it. And by faith in Him, so shall you conquer because of Him. *When you know the One you worship is the Sovereign One who has conquered, you trust His Word that commands.*

In my father's last sermon he would ever preach in this world, drawing from Proverbs 3:5-6 from this pulpit on the last Sunday before we entered the most trying time in our lifetimes, he stated, "If you have fear, you do not have faith. If you have faith, you do not have fear." Fear only wins when faith and faithfulness are abandoned. Faith in the One who was dead and is alive always conquers fear, even unto death. Fear may threaten you, regularly and continually, but it does not have to have you. The way you know that you do not have fear is to not let fear have you! *Faith in Jesus to obey conquers fear that threatens to have you. Is "Do not fear, be faithful unto death" your mindset, Christian? Jesus, the Sovereign One who has conquered, commands the Word, "Do not fear...Be faithful unto death"!*

TRANS And the Word Jesus commands comes with the promise of His reward.

3. The Reward He Promises. .10b-11



...and I will give you the 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.

Jesus tells the church at Smyrna they will receive the crown of life. The crown of life is the victor's crown.¹¹ The victor's crown is the wreath awarded in athletic competition to adorn the champion in victory. John contrasts the victor's crown of life against the glory on display in Smyrna by the Street of Gold that wrapped around Mt. Pagus and ascended 500' high. Though that must have been a glorious sight to behold, it pales in comparison to the victor's crown that Jesus promises! Against the city of Smyrna's claimed victory and having developed itself to be crowned as "first", Jesus promises His people ultimate and eternal victory with a far more glorious crown for those who remain faithful.

These parallel truths from Jesus hold our hope, Christian. Jesus' reward is more glorious than the world's glory, and more worthy than any sacrifice's demand. Jesus' promise is more true than the reality of our experience, the lack of resource in the face of great need, the deep pain of our suffering, the hard tribulation of our struggle, and the piercing sword of slanderous lies. No one avoids physical death. But all who conquer by faith in the One who conquered will not be touched by the second death. James (1:12) echoes the same promise: "*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.*" **Jesus, the Sovereign One who has conquered, promises the reward only He can give, victory and the crown of life to the one who believes and trusts in Him!**

Jesus is the Sovereign King who has conquered and calls His people to Be Faithful and receive the crown of life.

CLOSE There is NO GOOD reason NOT to believe in Jesus, not to trust Him. **Are you adorning your life with faithfulness to Jesus Christ, or accessorizing it by the temporary pleasure and fleeting promises of this world? Are you storing up to trust the resource this world, or investing in the eternal riches of His glory?**

¹¹ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 69. Morris explains, "Crown (stephanos) means a wreath or chaplet, and is to be distinguished from the royal crown (diadēma). The stephanos was the trophy awarded to the victor at the games, and the same word was used of the festive garland worn at banquets by all the guests. Here it is plainly the victory wreath, which would be specially appropriate in Smyrna, a city famous for its Games. The believer who remains faithful even when it means death will receive the trophy of victory. His crown is life."

