

Living Life Facing Death

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸ And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things says the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; ⁹ I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and *I know* the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but *are* the synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast *some* of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. ¹¹ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

How should a congregation respond to the following message from Jesus Christ, the Lord of the churches? *"I have personal experience with the crushing pressures you are under and with the abject poverty you are living through. I have also felt the sting of slander from Satan and society, when I knew that I had done nothing wrong – nothing to deserve the painful lash of those lies. But I have news for you: it's going to get worse. You will suffer even more. The devil, that old slanderer, will test you severely by throwing you into prison. You will face more of these crushing pressures – which will seem to take your breath away. In fact, some of your members will be put to death in a cruel manner. But I want you to know that you are rich, and that I – Jesus Christ – will personally give you a crown of life. Listen carefully: though you may suffer weighty persecution and even physical death, you will never be touched by the second death – the fiery torment of the wicked that lasts for all eternity.*

Is warning about persecution and imprisonment just a footnote of an ancient past? No, according to "The Voice of the Martyrs" magazine and website, saints of God are being slandered in the same way today. Zhang Wen Shi worked on the border of China and North Korea to evangelize the North Koreans who visited his country. But in November 2014, he was kidnapped by the North Koreans from his home in Changbai, China, and imprisoned. Christian evangelist, Yousef Nadarkhani was imprisoned in Iran in 2018 for preaching the Gospel. John Cao, who is married to an American citizen, routinely crossed the border from China into Myanmar to help the poorest people in that region in the name of Christ. Suddenly, in March 2017, he was imprisoned by the Chinese for "illegal crossings" of the border. Cao had helped to build 16 schools serving 2,000 impoverished children. So is Christ's message in Revelation 2:8-11 relevant for today? Yes, Christians in China, North Korea and some Muslim countries have personally experienced what happened to the church at Smyrna. And by all accounts, more believers in more nations will soon understand the trials of the saints at Smyrna. As we study this brief message,ⁱ ask yourself: how would you respond to such a message and its prophecy of persecution? How would you live life facing death?

Smyrna: Geography and History

Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey) located on the slopes of Mount Pagus, has a storied history. It came into existence about 3,000 B.C., but it was almost completely destroyed by the Lydian kings. The site figured prominently in the thinking of Alexander the Great, and the city was rebuilt by Antigonos and Lysimachus. Smyrna is about 35 miles north of Ephesus. The city claims to be the birthplace of the poet, Homer. Located across the Aegean Sea from Athens, Greece, the port at Smyrna was strategically placed on the Meles River (today called "Kızılçullu").

Myrrh

The area was well known for the production and export of myrrh and this gave Smyrna its name. This aromatic spice was used in Egyptian embalming and is featured prominently in the Bible. In a Messianic psalmⁱⁱ, myrrh is the cologne of kings (Psalm 45:8). In Song of Solomon, myrrh is the favored aroma of the bridegroom (Song of Solomon 1:13, 3:6, 5:5). This rare spice was chosen as a gift of the wise men to the Christ child (Matthew 2:11). The bitter tasting myrrh was mixed with wine and offered to Jesus upon the cross, but He refused it (Mark 15:23). And Nicodemus anointed the crucified body of Christ with myrrh (John 19:39). One can only imagine whether this aromatic spice still lingered on Him when He rose bodily from the grave, since His body never was corrupted (Psalm 16:10). This precious ointment was produced from the oozing gum of the myrrh tree, a 10 ft. tree with a light gray trunk and gnarled branches. To produce the aromatic myrrh gum, the tree has to be cut and wounded repeatedly. This was a fitting illustration for the saints of Smyrna – wounded to produce a sweet smelling aroma for the One who was wounded for their transgressions (Isaiah 53:5).

Four Millstones of Misery

To the saints at Smyrna, Jesus said, “I know.” The word translated “know” means “knowing by personal experience.” During His time on earth, our Master experienced every one of these miseries.

Tribulation, v.9

The word “tribulation” in verse 9 means “a crushing weight.” It refers to extended affliction brought on by intense pressure. Picture the way that an olive press crushes the olives in order to press out the olive oil. Or the way the grapes are crushed to press out the juice. The Lord told the Christian congregation at Smyrna that they would be pressed out by a crushing weight of oppression.

Poverty, v.9

The word used for “poverty” in verse 9 refers to abject poverty. Being impoverished was particularly difficult because they lived in a large commercial center. They were likely poor in the first place, and they were robbed during the intense persecution. In the society at Smyrna, the worship of the Roman Caesar and other pagan gods figured prominently. But the Christians would have refused the demand to burn incense to Caesar nor proclaim, “Caesar is Lord.” By Roman decree, the Jews were exempted from this demand. But as we shall see, the Jews insisted that Christians comply. It was difficult for the Christians to carry on a trade because they would not yield to the governmental mandates nor the religious demands of their trade unions. So they were impoverished.

Do you think of greatness in terms of wealth and influence? The saints at Smyrna had neither. Yet Jesus said, **“But you are rich!”** (v.9). Yes, Paul admitted in 1 Corinthians 4:13, that saints proclaiming the Word are treated like the scum of this world. But Jesus proclaimed that His loved ones are wealthy – with riches that last forever. How is that possible? Paul proclaimed the Lord Jesus this way: **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich”** (2 Corinthians 8:9). Our Lord left His riches in heaven in order to be born from the womb of a humble, peasant virgin. For that, He was slandered for the rest of His earthy existence. He lived in poverty, without an earthly home, in order to preach the way to Heaven to every listener. With a pure heart, He lived a perfect life on earth, but then allowed Himself to be punished by the hatred of the sinners for whom He died. And our Lord bestowed confident hope on every one of His followers when He

rose again bodily from that dark tomb. Dear friend, **“He became poor that you, through His poverty, might be rich!”** Do you choose to be rich in the fleeting treasures of this world? Or will you be rich through tested faith in the world to come?

Slander, v.9

“... and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” The Judaizers, spreading their false Gospel of “Galatian-ismⁱⁱⁱ,” persecuted the congregation at Smyrna. The Jews were exempted from the Roman demands for emperor worship; but the Jews denounced Christ’s saints, insisting that they were not part of the synagogue. Verses 9 and 10 tell us who is behind all this: Satan a.k.a. the Devil. The name “devil” refers to him as a slanderer. “The synagogue of Satan” slandered the saints at Smyrna. For instance, they denounced the celebration of the Lord’s Table as the feast of cannibals – eating flesh and drinking blood.

Imprisonment and death, v. 10

“... behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days...” How would you live life facing death? Jesus predicted that the old slanderer would cast some of them into prison under false charges. They would be severely tested; verse 10 includes the words, **“unto death.”** The description “ten days” has been taken by some to mean “of great intensity.” But others have pointed out that it refers to the limited duration of the persecution. Certainly it is limited in the words of 2 Corinthians 4:17, **“Our light affliction which is but for a moment works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”** Hebrews 13:3 commands us to remember those believers who are imprisoned. Remember that the slanderous persecution at Smyrna is a reality for impoverished saints around the world today. But remember the true description of these believers according to Hebrews 11:37-38, **“...being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy)...”** So how should saints of God live their lives when they are facing death?

In light of these things, what should we remember, and how should we respond?

Remember Your Faithful Master in the Midst of Your Misery

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; these things says the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;” Jesus re-introduced Himself to the 7 churches of Revelation in different but significant ways. In each case, we can study the great need of a church and find that need fully met in the all-sufficient Christ. The congregation at Ephesus had left its first love; that church needed a fresh, passionate acquaintance with the presence of the One who holds the seven stars in His hand and walks among the golden lampstands. The persecuted, impoverished church at Smyrna needed the reminder that Jesus is “the first and the last” (and, by implication, everything in between!). This phrase identifies Him as the Eternal God, “the first and the last” (see Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). But He also introduced Himself to the saints at Smyrna as the One who **“was dead, and is alive.”** He is the God of the Resurrection, but much more; He is the Resurrected Lord. How could the Eternal God experience death? How could He know death intimately? As we come to the time that we celebrate Christmas, we know the answer: Immanuel, “God with us” – God became a man. He did so **“...for the suffering of death...”** (Hebrews 2:9). When we face death, we will already know that Jesus dove into death and came forth alive. Just as surely as you were terrified of the water until you learned to swim, you were once terrified by death. But when you came to know Christ – your Savior and “ultimate Lifeguard” – you came to understand the power of His

resurrection. Many of our folks are wrestling with Covid-19 right now. Others of you have faced crises where you did not know if you would emerge alive. But think about the way you learned to swim. If you were taught well, you were taught to put your face in the water and blow bubbles, or hold your nose to go under and come right back up. Then the day came when you could go off the diving board with the complete confidence that you would come back up out of the water. And so each one of these experiences with severe sickness, or even watching that passing of others, is a reminder of how Jesus went through death for us. And perhaps one day you may die and find your Lord and Lifeguard on the other side of your plunge into death. And in that moment you will know the power of the resurrection of the One who was dead and is alive! This is how you can live life facing death!

Christ reveals Himself; He speaks to us as the Eternal God and Resurrected Lord. He endured the curse of the cross of Calvary, and His borrowed tomb became the womb for all those who would be born anew, reversing their curse (Galatians 3:13).

The Response of the Righteous in Light of the Resurrection: Fear not!

Jesus knows. This is the Lord who has personal experience with tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment and death. And He commanded, “Do not fear any of these things.” He went through them all, and emerged alive forevermore. When you are tempted to fear suffering, captivity, testing, and insults, “Fear not!”

The Response of the Righteous in Light of Eternal Rewards: Be Faithful!

Jesus the Faithful and True Witness, was dead and is alive. He commanded, “**Be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life**” (v.10). He commanded us not to be fearful; He commanded us to be faithful. To those who obey His command, Christ will give a crown of life when He comes to reward His own. Consider the testimony of Polycarp. “Polycarp, venerable bishop of Smyrna was a personal friend and pupil of John the Apostle. When he was age 86, he was urged by the Roman proconsul to reproach Christ and be set free. “Eighty and six years have I served Him and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”^{iv} Polycarp was faithful through a martyr’s death.

The Response of the Righteous in Light of this Revelation about Eternity: Be an Overcomer!

“**He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; He that overcomes shall not be hurt of [by] the second death.**” Knowing the truth about eternal destinies, how do you intend to live life? Will you live life fearing death and shuddering before the second death? Or will you live life as an overcomer? Will you live life, facing death, knowing that you have eternal life? He who has an ear, let him listen carefully to what the Spirit of God said to Smyrna. Be faithful; be the light to those who are fearful of the fiery torment of the second death. With “the second death” in mind, be an overcomer, warning every man and teaching every man that you may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:28).

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ⁱ Under 100 words in the original language

ⁱⁱ See Psalm 45:6 and Hebrews 1:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Faith plus works

^{iv} Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 787.