

SESSION 2

STEADFAST IN DIFFICULTIES

Leader pages on pp. 106-109

THE POINT:

WE NEED NOT FEAR
BECAUSE WE ARE RICH
IN GOD'S GRACE.

REVELATION 2:8-11

⁸ "Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life: ⁹ I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

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¹⁰ Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

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¹¹ "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death."

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MEMORY VERSE

ISAIAH 41:10

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with my righteous right hand.

KEYWORDS

Synagogue of Satan (v. 9) –

The synagogue was a gathering of Jewish men to study Scripture and worship God. Because they were slandering the Christians in Smyrna, they were an assembly doing Satan's bidding.

Crown of life (v. 10) – An eternal reward given by Jesus for

enduring the trials and tests of life, even to the point of death.

The second death (v. 11) – The eternal destiny of the wicked following physical death and the final judgment; a place of separation from the blessings of and fellowship with God.

HOW DOES THE GRACE OF GOD EMPOWER US?

What would you say if I told you fear was created by God? Would you look up the over 300 Scripture verses that reference it? Probably not. Still I declare; God created fear. More than that, fear has a perfect purpose.

Have you ever been scared to the point you feared for your life? If you have been, you probably took steps to save yourself. With this you must agree that fear's purpose is to alert and prepare us to act. Who else, but God, could install in us a built-in alarm system?

Although God created it, fear should not be a constant. This knowledge is important as we live in uncertain times. Persecution may one day be passed out like candy, and Satan intends for us to be afraid. However, Jesus warned His followers of coming persecution.

In the message Jesus gave to the church at Smyrna, we will learn that standing strong in the face of fearful situations is possible because Jesus is with us, lavishing the grace of God upon us.

Afflicted but Rich // Revelation 2:8-9

Take notice of who is speaking to the church: it is Christ Himself! In a message given with great authority, Christ reminded them at the very beginning that He is “the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life” (v. 8). In this statement of who He is, Jesus identified with them, showing that He too had suffered and been rejected but was victorious in the end.

In times of difficulty, it is good to know God has not forgotten you. Jesus said, “I know your affliction and poverty.” This was not simply Him identifying with falling below the minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs. The word Jesus used is much harsher; it refers to being utterly destitute without anything. He understood on a much deeper level.

WHAT RICHES HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THROUGH YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST?

Also, Jesus more than empathized with the slander being hurled at the Smyrna church.



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The word translated “slander” in this passage is the same word from which we get “blasphemy.” The Jews in Smyrna hated the Christians and spoke blasphemy against God’s people. The Jews may have been Jewish by heritage, but they did not have a heart for God or the people of God. Their blasphemous actions had turned their Jewish gathering place into “a synagogue of Satan.” Much like those who called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Yes, Jesus understood!

The church at Smyrna definitely faced harsh persecution, but they were rich in spiritual blessings because of their relationship and steadfastness in Christ. The same spiritual blessing and richness is ours today as we trust Christ and walk with Him. It’s not enough just to be “religious”; we must have a relationship in order to lay claim to the riches of Christ.

Fearless over Adversity // Revelation 2:10

Jesus told the church at Smyrna not to fear present nor future trials, tribulations, and persecutions. He also commanded them to be faithful no matter what, even to death because the reward was greater than what they were going to face.

They needed those words of encouragement because persecution did come. The Jews hated the Christians as much as the pagans did, and they sought to imprison them and even kill them. The most well-known case was Polycarp, who pastored the church at Smyrna several years after Jesus’ message to the church. Polycarp refused to follow the demands by the Roman Proconsul to recant his faith in Christ and proclaim that Caesar was lord. They threatened to burn him at the stake, and yet he remained strong in his faith. His words to them were, “You threaten me with fire which burns for a little while and is soon extinguished. You do not know the coming fire of judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. What are you waiting for? Do what you wish.”²

HOW DO SUFFERING AND HARDSHIP WORK TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH?

Polycarp remained faithful until he died. Likewise, many of those in the church at Smyrna remained faithful as well. Christ promised “the crown of life” to those who remained faithful to Him even if it cost them their lives. While the church



DIGGING DEEPER NO REBUKE NEEDED

Smyrna’s population consisted of Jews who hated Christians and non-Jews that were loyal to Rome and supportive of emperor worship. The threat of suffering surrounded them on every side. Jesus, knowing this to be so, offers solace. Present is the identification of Jesus as the First and the Last (v. 8). Present is the assurance that His word can be trusted (v.8). Present is the comfort of His personal knowledge of the persecutions they were about to face (v. 9). Present is the intimacy of knowing them (v.9). Present is forewarning of imminent suffering (v. 10). Absent, and notably so, is a rebuke of any kind. The church at Smyrna appears to be an example or fulfillment of Matthew 16:24-28.

Read Matthew 16:24-28, compare Jesus’ words there with the actions of the church at Smyrna. Now compare these verses to your life.



at Smyrna may have wanted a message of deliverance, the word they received was a message of endurance. They received words of encouragement to keep on pressing on.

We need to hear that same word today. Endure hardships; whatever they may be! Be faithful to Christ, no matter the cost! Receive the crown of life for faithfulness unto death!

Conquerer of Death //

Revelation 2:11

Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna ended the same way His message to the church in Ephesus did: "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches." He wanted the churches to be sure and not just hear the words but take them to heart. Parents often ask something similar to their children: "Do you hear what I'm saying?" We ask that question because we want to make sure our audience heard our words correctly and could carry them out in the proper way. The real part of listening is acting on the words and the instructions we were given.

For the church in Smyrna, the instructions Jesus gave them were of the utmost importance. Certainly, anything Jesus says is important, but

He underscored that and called them to pay careful attention to His words for living if they wanted to receive the reward promised to them.

You may be familiar with the old story of a man who was applying for a job at the telegraph office. As he entered the office, he saw the sign on the wall telling him to fill out the application and take a seat until he was called in for an interview. The man filled out the application and sat down among several other applicants. In a few minutes, the man stood up and walked through the doors where the interviews were taking place. After a brief time, he came back along with the manager who announced the job had been filled.

Needless to say the other applicants became upset and complained that they were never given a chance to be interviewed. Besides, the man who got the job was the last man to fill out an application. The manager told them that, if they had been listening, they would have heard the telegraph ticking out a message: "If you understand this message, come into the office and the job is yours." It pays to listen!

Jesus finished this letter by telling them they do not need to fear death: "The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second

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death." Unless Jesus returns in our lifetime, we all will face physical death. Jesus was not referring to this death, but a second one: a final, eternal death that comes after the judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). That judgment will be a time of separating those who had a relationship with Christ during their lives on earth from those who rejected Him. None of us knows how we will die in this life, but those who know Christ and have a relationship with Him know that second, eternal death will not be ours (vv. 6,14).

This message was given to the church in Smyrna, but it is a message that is relevant to us today. Hear what you have been told in this passage. Stay strong; stay faithful in your relationship with Christ no matter the cost.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS OUR CHURCH IS LIKE THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA?

DID YOU KNOW?

Fear, an effective alert system, signals the brain and triggers a hormone release. According to "The Very Well Mind" here's what happens:

Dilated pupils: In times of danger, the body prepares itself to be aware of its surroundings; dilation of the pupils allows more light into the eyes and results in a better vision of the surroundings.

Pale or flushed skin: Blood flow to the surface areas of the body is reduced while flow to the muscles, brain, legs, and arms is increased. Paleness or alternating between a pale and flushed face as blood rushes to the head and brain is common. The body's blood clotting ability also increases to prevent excess blood loss in the event of injury.

Rapid heart rate and breathing:

Heartbeat and respiration rate increase to provide the body with the energy and oxygen needed to fuel a rapid response to danger.

Trembling: The muscles tense and become primed for action, which can cause trembling or shaking.³

Based on the above facts, what role should fear have played in the lives of the church at Smyrna?

LIVE IT

How can you banish fear and instead focus on your wealth in God's grace today?

Satan manipulates fear and uses it to keep believers in bondage. Fear of death and persecution have many of us paralyzed to the point that we cannot live our lives. God has a different plan in mind. Through the message Jesus gave to the church at Smyrna, we learn that we can stand strong in the face of fearful situations. We truly are rich in the grace of God. Here's how you can access it.

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- **Be sure.** Christ tasted death for us so that we would not have to experience the second death. Have you made a faith profession? Turn from your sin and trust Christ to save you. Read Romans 10:9-10.
- **Think.** Change your outlook on death from it being a final ending to the beginning of forever. Christ followers leave their earthly bodies and go to heaven. There we will experience true paradise.
- **Endure.** Revelation 2:10 gives a specific length of time for Smyrna's suffering. Be encouraged by that because it indicates each of our suffering has an end date. That knowledge empowers endurance.

DAILY READINGS

I. GOT PERSECUTIONS? // JOHN 16:33

Some would have us believe that knowing, loving, and serving Jesus, in that order, will eradicate trouble, conflict, and pain. However, the exact opposite is true. Jesus tells us so. You *will* (special emphasis on will) have trouble, persecution, opposition, and more. If you don't have these issues, one of two things may be true. Either you are dead, or you might not be living for Christ. So, check your pulse. If your physical heart is beating, then check your spiritual heart. Are you living for Jesus? Yes. Then you are going to have trouble, persecution, and opposition in this world!

But do not fear! Christ has overcome every one of these. Plus He provides strength and peace so we can live through them.

2. "PERIODT"! // COLOSSIANS 3:24

The word "periodt" has become a popular in-your-face type of slang word to use. Any thought that ends with the speaker saying "periodt" indicates that it is a fact with a strong confident emotion, and/or an end to the discussion. The ending portion of Colossians 3:24 has the feeling that the slang "periodt" is implied. "You serve the Lord Christ. Periodt." The writer is encouraging believers to work heartily for Jesus, but his words indicate so much more. He wants us to confidently keep our focus on Christ. There is also an understanding that no matter what occurs around us, including encountering adversity, we must continue working for the Lord, knowing that our Savior empowers the fight.

And if that is so, fear is a non-factor. Periodt!

3. LOSING WINNER // MATTHEW 16:24-25

The process of passing from this earth to eternity is somewhat unknown and may prompt fear. We know that dying is gain, because we will be with Christ in glory. But the thought of losing our lives, especially as a result of physical persecution, leaves us leery.

Let us hold on to this truth: salvation guarantees we are winners, even in death. We must accept death as a part of life and remember it is not the end of life. One day, maybe not today, we will lose this physical body, exchange grace for glory, and see our God face-to-face.

One day we will lose the earthly, but we will win the eternal.

4. IN HIS NAME // 1 SAMUEL 17:45

The Old Testament contains some of the best heroic tales. First Samuel 17 has some that place at the top of that list. It includes stories of David as a young teenager. In one of those stories he poised himself to defeat Goliath, a nine-foot warrior. Young David walked into the battle confident of victory. His confidence was based on one uncompromising truth: he came to slay the giant in the name of God. What a testament for us all! As followers of Christ, our battles should be faced and fought from a place of victory and assurance, because our all-powerful Savior is with us. We have victory in Jesus over fear of defeat and the assurance that whatever battle we are facing is won.

Reflect on these truths so that they will become wedged in your mind and heart and catapult you to boldness.

5. BELT ME // EPHESIANS 6:13-14

Old school parents did not do a whole lot of talking. Instead, they allowed the belt to speak for them. Correction administered with belts had the power to reveal hidden truths, right wrongs, and change atmospheres. However, those belts do not hold a candle to the belt of truth in Ephesians 6. This belt is the foundation of success, shines light on hidden things, and brings reward from God. Without it, lives are shattered, hopelessness abounds, and Satan's illusions appear real.

Be sure to belt yourself with biblical truth lest your world be shaken in these troubling times.