

Smyrna was a persecuted church and, unlike the other churches, Christ does not extend any rebuke toward them. Instead He commends them for their suffering for His sake, assures them that He knows what they are enduring and promises to reward them for their faithfulness even if it results in death.

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8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; Christ identifies Himself in two ways: (1) “the first and the last” - speaking of His eternal nature and power; (2) “which was dead, and is alive” - a reference to His death, burial and resurrection. The context of this message is about suffering for Jesus Christ and being faithful to the point of death. By reminding those of the church at Smyrna of His death, burial and resurrection He letting them know that He is victorious over death and the grave. Thus He has the power to resurrect them if they die serving Him. He wants to encourage them that they having nothing to fear from death for He has conquered it and has “the keys of hell and of death.” (Rev. 1:18b)

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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.

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**“I know thy works”** - The Christians at the church of Smyrna may have felt like the things they did for Christ was inconsequential and unnoticed but Christ wants them to know that He has indeed noticed their works. Anything we do for God will not be forgotten. **“and tribulation [applying of pressure; figuratively: distress; affliction]”** - Just as He is aware of their works, Christ is also aware of the persecutions these Christians are enduring for the sake of Jesus Christ. He will never forget what we suffer for Him and He will exact vengeance in our behalf (**Rom. 12:19** “*Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*”)

**“and poverty, (but thou art rich)”** - The Christians at Smyrna were poor and this was likely compounded by the persecutions they endured because of their association with Jesus Christ. It is possible that they had trouble finding/retaining employment because they were Christians and perhaps no one wanted to buy/sell with them or overcharged them for services simply because of being a Christian.

However, their poverty only encompassed their temporal existence and was therefore a temporary situation. In Christ their eternal state was one of great spiritual wealth. **2 Cor. 4:16-18** “*<sup>16</sup> For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; <sup>18</sup> While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.*” Christ said “*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*” (Mark 8:36), informing us that eternal life in Christ is of more value than all the wealth in the world.

I love the second verse of a song we often sing here at church (“Thank You Lord For Your Blessings On Me”): “Now I know that I’m not wealthy / and these clothes are not new. / I don’t have much money / but Lord I have You! / And to me that’s all that matters / though the world may not see / Thank you Lord for your blessings on me!”

**“and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”** - Smyrna had a large and hostile Jewish community and many Jews thought they were serving God by persecuting Christians (**John 16:2** “*They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.*”). As Jews were God’s chosen people they felt duty bound to defend the Mosaic Law and the Jewish religion. Christ Himself was the target of this antagonism during His earthly ministry. These persecutors of the church called themselves Jews, no doubt because of their bloodline as descendants of Abraham. However, Christ did not think of them as Jews for they did not serve God but the desires of their father, Satan.

**John 8:37-44** “*<sup>37</sup> I know that ye are Abraham’s seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. <sup>38</sup> I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. <sup>39</sup> They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham. <sup>40</sup> But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. <sup>41</sup> Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God. <sup>42</sup> Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. <sup>44</sup> Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.*”

Christ’s statement that these false Jews were “the synagogue of Satan” is quite a condemnation because they believed they were serving God’s will when in actuality they were serving Satan’s will. Christ says He is aware of the persecutions by these “Jews” and that they will not escape His judgment.

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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.

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**“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer”** - Notice Christ did not say “Don’t worry, because I will stop your suffering now.” After telling them that He was aware of the persecutions and the persecutors, He does not promise to rescue them from it. Instead He encourages them to not be afraid of it. Why would Christ allow us to suffer when He has the ability to deliver us from it at any time? We cannot know the reason why in every situation but there are various reasons suggested in the Bible. Sometimes He allows us to suffer as a witness to others, sometimes to build our character or prepare us for things coming down the road. There are too many possibilities to explore in this short lesson, but we have to trust that even when we don’t understand the reasons our Heavenly Father is doing what is best and our suffering serves a purpose.

**“behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried [tested; examined]”** - Smyrna was a city steeped in idolatry and emperor worship. Once a year the citizens were required to obtain a certificate showing that they had completed their religious duty to the Roman Emperor. To obtain this certificate the citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on the altar before the godhead of Caesar and say “Caesar is Lord.” It is likely that these Christians would be thrown into prison for their refusal to obey this requirement.

Under the Roman legal system imprisonment was typically not used for punishment. Prison was usually used to temporarily hold criminals until execution or as a means of coercion to compel obedience to the powers-that-be. It seems likely that the purpose of the imprisonment that Christ mentions is to coerce the Christians to obey and burn the incense. Their faith in Christ would be put to the test.

**“and ye shall have tribulation ten days”** - There have been many ideas put forth as to the meaning of the “ten days.” Some believe it to be ten literal days, while others attempt to tie the “ten days” to ten historical periods or the persecutions of ten Roman emperors. Another idea put forth is that “ten days” is merely an expression not to be taken as a literal number but as meaning a short period of time. After telling them not to be afraid, Christ’s intent here seems to be that the tribulation they are suffering will be temporary and that it will not last long.

**“be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life”** - The word for “crown” in this verse does not refer to the crown a king would wear, but to a wreath or other prize to honor the winner of an event. Christians who are faithful to death will receive the honor of wearing the crown of life in heaven in recognition of the sacrifice they made for the Lord. If the Christians of Smyrna are imprisoned in order to compel them to comply with the worship of Caesar requirement, their refusal could likely result in their execution. Christ promises a crown of life if they die as a result of their faithfulness.

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11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

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**“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches”** - This phrase is repeated for each church and expresses the importance of listening to what the Spirit of God is saying to these church. In a natural sense, “he that hath an ear, let him hear” declares that anyone with the physical ability to hear should pay attention to what is being said. However, since the message is “what the Spirit saith” then “he that hath an ear” must refer only to those who have the ability to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying – individuals who have been born of the Spirit of God or lost individuals who are undergoing the conviction of the Holy Spirit for salvation. Anyone able to hear the Holy Spirit should listen to what He has to say to these churches.

**“He that overcometh [to conquer; to get a victory] shall not be hurt of the second death”** - **1 John 5:4-5** tells us that to be someone who overcomes we must be born again through faith in Jesus Christ: *“<sup>4</sup> For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?”*

The “second death” is mentioned four times in scripture and only in Revelation. It is identified in **Rev. 20:14** (*“And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”*) as the eternal state of the wicked. They will be cast into the lake of fire for all eternity. This meaning of the second death is mentioned again in **Rev. 21:8** - *“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”*

We usually think of hell as being the final destination of those who have rejected Christ, but it is actually a temporary place until the white throne judgment where they will be judged according to their works (Rev. 20:11-13). After the judgment those who have rejected Christ will be cast into the lake of fire where they will be forever. Rev. 20:14 and Rev. 21:8 refer to this as the second death.

Christ is saying that those who have overcome through faith in Him will have nothing to fear from the second death, for they will take part in the first resurrection: **Rev. 20:6** *“Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.”*

Someone has said “Born once, die twice. Born twice, die once.” Those who are not born-again will die physically and then again in the lake of fire. Those who are born the second time in Christ will only have to die physically and will live forever in the presence of God.