

Revelation 2:8-11. To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

We have lasting hope and joy in the promises of God.

1. The Lord crowns our days with his presence.

2. The Lord gives us the crown of life

“Hang in there. Keep your chin up, things will turn around.” We use such phrases to encourage each other when times are tough. The law of averages seems to teach us that things can't be tough for too long. After a long strew of misfortunes some things finally have to go our way, right? We look for the silver lining. We try to stay positive.

This is a way that can we support each other and this is something that we do to keep our own morale up, but these phrases can end up to be lacking, can't they? What about when things don't turn around for a long time? What then?

Thankfully the Lord gives us more than the law of averages and wishful thinking. In his grace the Lord promises his believers the crown of life. We have lasting hope and joy in the promises of God; for from his word we are reassured that the Lord crowns our days with his presence, and Jesus gives us unending treasures and eternal victory. Our faithful God and Savior promises to give his believers the crown of life.

Starting in the second chapter of Revelation, the Lord Jesus, instructs the apostle John to pen seven short letters to seven very different congregations. Each congregation has its own unique character. Each one has its own unique faults and strengths, blessings and challenges; and therefore Jesus has specific words for each congregation. Sometimes it is words of encouragement. Sometimes it is words of praise. In some cases words of rebuke are necessary. But finally, Jesus gives words of promise for each congregation.

The church in Smyrna, is the second of seven congregations addressed by our Lord. In this short letter we can see that this congregation was surrounded by difficulties and hard pressed by suffering. Even though the city of Smyrna was well known for its lovely trees and hills, even though it was city paved with stone and rich with wealth and beauty, these verses speak of extreme poverty and affliction for the Christians there. They were also verbally abused and maliciously slandered by their Jewish neighbors. In fact, Jesus has some extremely harsh words for these supposed sons of Abraham. ***I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*** These Jews were not true sons of Abraham because they did not believe the promise that was passed down through Abraham. They had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and now they were doing all that they could to harass and discredit those who believed in Jesus. Jesus makes no bones about it: these

people were wicked. He called them a ***synagogue of Satan***, a gathering of wicked people that Satan was using to bring affliction upon those who believed in Jesus. The devil planned to use these wicked people in Smyrna to pressure and abuse the Christians in this town, in the hope that these believers would give up the faith. The slander that these Jews were spreading about the Christians in Smyrna very like contributed to the poverty of these Christians. A certain stigma was created and lies about this group of believers and individuals of this congregation were spread so that gainful employment for a Christian in Smyrna was, no doubt, hard to find.

So of course Jesus would step in and bring justice. In his letter to this congregation he would certainly tell them that everything would be alright, and he would come swiftly to deliver them, right? Wrong. In fact, Jesus tells the church in Smyrna, that while he was well aware that things were difficult for them, he tells them that things were going to get worse. ***9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.***

The Lord Jesus was preparing his people for what lay ahead for them. In these words the Lord Jesus delivered words of encouragement, and even comfort, but perhaps these words are hard to recognize as such because it is not the kind of comfort and encouragement that we might expect in such a situation. The Lord Jesus was preparing these Christians for even darker days so that would be prepared and not be overcome. These Christians would suffer even more than slander, malice, poverty, and deceit. They would be thrown in prison and suffer persecution. Some would even die on account of their faith. But God would be with them. He would keep them in the faith, and finally he would bring them to their eternal home.

As we take a closer look at these words Jesus reassures these Christians that he had not forgotten about them. For isn't that one of our first thoughts when trouble comes our way. The Christians in Smyrna must have certainly had such thoughts run through their minds. *Lord why? Lord, have you forgotten about us?* He had not. He, who is the First and the Last, the one who had power of death and the grave, he was well aware of their afflictions. He had not abandoned them. They had not been lost in the shuffle nor had they been overlooked or forgotten. No, Christ Jesus knew what they were going through and he cared about them. He was there with them. His Word, His promises, His salvation and love had made them spiritually rich even in the midst of their physical poverty and suffering. They had what was important and it was worth hanging onto even if it meant having to go through suffering. Even though their lives would be difficult, Jesus' presence in their lives, his word in their hearts and minds, would crown all of their days with joy and satisfaction.

Jesus also adds this useful nugget of information in which his people could find comfort in as well. Their suffering would not last forever. The book of Revelation is largely symbolic especially when it comes to numbers. And so understanding the style of Revelation and the historical context we know that when God says 10 days in this letter, he does not mean just a week and a half. But rather he means a complete (10 is a number of completeness) and yet ultimately short and finite period of time. And of course, that begs the comparison between the short amount of time that they would suffer, and the infinite reward of heaven given

freely to those who believe in Jesus. There really is no comparison, is there? And this of course, is not just something that is unique to the book of Revelation but rather our Lord encourages us with this message throughout the Holy Scriptures including the book of Romans and 2 Corinthians. The Lord leads Paul to write in Romans chapter 8. ***18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*** And to the Corinthians the Lord speaks these words of encouragement through his apostle, ***16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.***

This life may be filled with suffering, but this life is short especially when compared to the eternity that God gives to those who believe in Jesus. And our comfort in this short life of sin is that God is with us too. As his believers he crowns our days with his presence. He opens his hand and provides for our needs. His eye is attentive to his people and he cares about us. He knows our dilemmas. He knows the trouble that we in Renville County have seen recently. He is aware and He is near. He looks upon us with compassion when we are suffering and then He assures us that we have not been forgotten. He who is the First and the Last, who was with Adam, and Abraham, David, and so many others and saw them through trouble, tribulation, and death; He is also with us. He sees the problems that we face. He knows our grief. He knows our losses. He knows when we are laid off and laid up. He knows when the money is tight and the bills pile up. He knows when tragedy, and violence, and accident effect our lives and leave us shake, but in his goodness he has given us a faith that is more precious than gold a faith that is built on the Rock that does not move, Christ Jesus. Having been brought into this faith by his grace we find rest for our souls and peace and joy for our minds. He strengthens us and sustains us. He forgives our sins. He assures us of his unfailing love that saves us. He gives us the promise of endless joy and life eternal. He crowns our days with his presence and promises us the crown of life.

Jesus is with us, but Jesus never promises that we will suddenly have everything because we are his. Jesus does not come into our lives in order that he might somehow increase our earthly revenues and slash our mortgage or cancel our credit card debt. He does not promise that we will be immune to the pain of disease and the anguish of losing loved ones in death. No, in fact, Jesus tells his disciples that we must carry our crosses and follow him. But he walks with us. In the midst of earthly trials he is there to sustain us and be refuge and our strength. He does not guarantee that our lives will be nothing but smooth sailing and we will suddenly have everything.

Christians are certainly not excluded from having difficult lives, lives of poverty and suffering. In our Gospel for today Jesus speaks of a Christian named Lazarus who never found relief from his life of poverty and suffering while on earth. However, Lazarus died in faith and was immediately given the blessed reward of heaven. For all those who believe in Jesus; no matter what their social status or how much material wealth they possess on earth, *all* those who die in faith will receive the gift of eternal life. Those who believe in Jesus have the riches of God's grace. That's what is truly important in the grand scheme of things, isn't it? We have the forgiveness of Christ Jesus. We have the knowledge that he has defeated sin and death for

us, we have the peace that he brings, and we have this promise from our Lord and Savior. ***Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.***

This is certainly more than Jesus telling us to hang in there and things will be okay. This is the promise of eternal bliss made sure by the sacrifice of Jesus. The eternal God has brought us to faith. In his grace he barged into our lives and saved us. He found his way into his heart through the means of grace. For many of us he made his home in our hearts when we were just a few days old, and then in his mercy he has sustained us through the years of our lives. He daily nourishes and feeds our faith through continued contact with word and sacrament. Through this precious means God the Holy Spirit keeps us in the faith so that one day we receive that eternal reward that Christ has won for us on the cross.

Our faithful Lord and Savior paid the full price for our salvation. The king of kings, the creator of the heavens and earth, the master and Lord of all things, was so generous to us poor sinners. He stooped down to save us. He came not so that we would throw our treasures before his feet, but he came to this world in humility to save us and give us the endless treasure of heaven. In his life on earth our almighty king only wore a robe of purple when he was mocked and beaten as he suffered for our sins. The Lord of all, Jesus Christ, willingly did all of this that so that he might come to our aid and wipe away our unfaithfulness by his holy sacrifice. This is the sure hope that he gives to us that brightens even the darkest of days here on this earth. This is a promise that has real weight attached to it. For those who believe in Jesus, heaven is waiting. He gives to his believers who die in faith the crown of life, a crown of undying victory and peace.

If we face a life of sorrow and struggle we have the assurance that God is with us, he does not forget about us, and one day he will deliver us from this difficult life to eternal bliss. If we have a life that is blessed with material wealth we have the same comfort. Let us not be distracted by the temptations of this world, but let us always see this wealth as an opportunity to help our fellow man and serve our Lord for this too comes from God. Let us not be distracted by such wealth or for a desire to attain more wealth, but let us keep our eyes fixed on the free gift of heaven. For in the end what really matters is not how much earthly wealth we attain, but what really matters is that our Lord and Savior guide us through this life in faith so that we may one day enjoy the eternal riches of heaven. What really matters is that our Savior has made it possible that we will one day dwell with him in the golden halls of the New Jerusalem, and have perfect life of peace and victory and joy for all time.

It is important encourage each other to “hang in there” during these difficult days, but the following is a phrase that has so much more meaning, so much more comfort and joy, attached to it. ***Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*** We thank God, that through Christ Jesus we will overcome. We don't have to be afraid. God will sustain us in this life and we will not be harmed by the second death, that is, eternal death in hell, instead through faith in Jesus we know we will live forever in heaven. In the good days and the bad days, in days of sorrow and grief, in the days of happiness and joy, in the days of struggle and bliss, during all our days here on this earth we have this certainty in Christ Jesus. Through faith in him we will have the constant and endless joy of heaven. Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us lasting hope and joy through his promises. Amen.