

We Can Afford to Be Poor!

⁸ **“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 about 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 life as your victor’s crown.**

¹¹ **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.**

There is this story that dates back to the Middle Ages. In those days pilgrims would visit prominent religious sites throughout the world. Some Christians were traveling in the Middle East. They heard about a wise, devout, beloved, old believer, so they went out of their way to visit him. When they finally found him, they discovered that he was living in a simple hut. All he had inside was a rough cot, a chair, a table, and a battered stove for heating and cooking. The visitors were shocked to see how few possessions the man had, and one of the blurted out, “Well, where is your furniture?” The aged saint replied, “Where is yours?” The visitor, sputtering, responded, “Why, at home, of course. I don’t carry it with me, I’m traveling.” “So am I,” the godly Christian replied. “So am I.” Get it? This secluded Christian considered himself traveling in this world with heaven as his home.

I am not suggesting that you or I adopt a hermit style of life to be better Christians. There is nothing wrong in having furniture. David lived in a palace. I am suggesting we copy this old man’s view of this world. We are only pilgrims in this world. Heaven is our home. It doesn’t matter if you have a lot of furniture or basically none. It doesn’t matter if are well off, doing fine, or lose anything. Jesus Christ and the inheritance he gives us means we are so rich, we can afford to be poor. That is the message he gave to the church in Smyrna, and that is the message he gives to us.

You know what a red letter edition of the Bible is? It is a Bible where all the words of Jesus are printed in “red letters.” If you have a red letter edition, then you will noticed that the words of our Epistle reading for today are in red because it is Jesus speaking. He may be using John as his tool, but Jesus is speaking to a particular church in Smyrna. And they needed to hear him. Smyrna is in modern day Turkey. I guess you can say that Smyrna loved being a part of the Roman Empire. They were one of the first in the region to erect a temple to the emperor. No, not a monument, but an actual church or temple to the emperor. Rome considered the emperor a god and it was law that you worshipped him as such. Smyrna was quick to do that.

But there was a problem. The Christians living in Smyrna refused to bow down and worship the emperor. They were not the first. Remember Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego in the book of Daniel? They refused to worship a false god and were thrown into the fiery furnace for it. Or Daniel who was thrown into the lions den.

They refused to worship the emperor as a god. And the patriotic citizens of Smyrna took exception. A persecution against them broke out. We don’t have the details, but it was severe. Afflictions here literally means to press down like you press grapes into wine. These Christians were under a lot of pressure. I can imagine folks ridiculing them, avoiding them; maybe there were protests, I don’t know. But the pressure was mounting.

And then they experienced poverty. Now, there are many Christians who live at the poverty level. Remember the church in Philippi? The folks there didn’t have much money. I don’t think that this is the kind of poverty experienced in Smyrna. Smyrna was not some place below the median income for the area. I think these Christians were being driven into poverty for their Christian faith. Imagine the citizens of Smyrna refusing to shop at Christian stores, like a boycott. Imagine they refused to hire Christians or fired them if they had worked there. The text seems to connect persecution with poverty.

And there was more. **I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.** The New Testament, especially the book of Acts, describes how many of the Jews rejected the message of Christ. And often that rejection was physical in the form of riots and arrest. It may be unbelievers or the Roman government or the city council of Smyrna who do the persecuting, but it is the devil behind it all. So, the known church at that time, the synagogue, turned on these Christians.

And it wasn’t going to get better. **I know about 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.** A wider, more aggressive persecution will break out. It says for “ten days.” That is symbolic language. The number “ten” indicates a period of time that will end some day. So this persecution will last for a while, maybe a long while, but it will end one day.

What can Jesus say to such a church? He says a lot. First, look at how he began his message. ⁸ **“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.** This is Jesus speaking. He is first and last. He is God, eternal and unchanging. Nothing comes before him and nothing comes after him, and everything in between is under his supreme control. He also explains to them the basis for their faith. He died for them and came to life again for

them. God entered history to change the history of sinful man. Romans 4 explains it more: **He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.** He saved us from our sins and he saves us from all the world throws at us.

And he knows what they are experiencing. ⁹ **I know your afflictions and your poverty.** God knows. He knows what went on in Smyrna and he knows what goes on in your life. He knows the number of hairs on your head. The devil will whisper to you that God doesn't know or care. But he does.

⁹ **I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!** The Christians in Smyrna had less money. They had less of everything. The persecution made sure of that. But if they lost it all, they are still rich. This Jesus, this first and last, this one who died for them and rose again, has stored up for them a treasure in heaven that neither moth or rust can destroy. And the persecutors can never take that away.

So the persecuted Christians had the advantage. 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 life as your victor's crown.** It is an endurance test. Like a runner straining tired muscles on the last lap, Jesus tells them to hang in there just a little bit more. Yes, it will get worse. Prison is waiting for some of them. But be faithful. The root in faithful is "faith." Trust in God. Even if he lets them get away with more, trust in him. That is how we endure.

And what will happen? We will wear a crown. This is not the crown of royalty. This is the crown of victory. Today we hand out medals and trophies. Back then, they placed a crown on the head of the winner. ¹¹ **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.** The second death is the death that follows physical death. It is real. It is eternal. It is punishment for sin. It is hell. But they will not be hurt by this second death. This Jesus died for them and rose again to give them life. They may hurt them with persecution. They may take away all they had. They may throw them into prison, even kill them. But these believers will not be hurt when it counts, the second death.

¹¹ **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** This section may have been written to a suffering congregation in Smyrna, but it is intended for every believer of every age. We are surrounded by false gods. Only today's gods are more devious. They are in the form of money, power, prestige, conforming or else, not merely tolerating sinful behavior, but coercing you to speak well of it. Some social media platforms will censor you if you say that certain sinful lifestyles or behavior are sinful. Maybe we can relate to the Christians in Smyrna.

And there is persecution. I am not afraid of police taking down our license plate numbers in the parking lot. But persecution is still real. I know of Christians being denied jobs because they believed in creation. I know of folks fired or even framed because they refused to follow the bosses order to lie to the bank. I know of Christians mocked and ridiculed because they don't join in the sexual craze out there. Remember this. Persecution is voluntary. When we believed we signed up to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses and follow Jesus. Persecution threatens us to stop. To shield ourselves from it, we would have to voluntarily deny Christ and deny the faith.

And what does Jesus tell us? The very same things. He is the beginning and the end. He is the Lord of the universe. He doesn't sugar coat it. Suffering is certain, so don't be surprised by it. But suffering is also limited, so don't fall into despair. He is the Lord who died for your sins and rose to give you life so the second death will never hurt you. He has made us rich. You are richer than the celebrities. You are richer than any of the athletes or computer gurus out there who live in beachfront mansions. We are so rich we can afford to be poor. We can afford to lose our possessions. We can afford to lose friends. We can afford to lose our freedom. We can afford to lose our lives. We have a mansion not made by human hands waiting for us.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. Hang in there. It will all soon be over. Strain the muscles just a little bit more. Be faithful. Trust your God. And picture yourself wearing that crown of victory Jesus won for us. Amen.