

Revelation
The Seven Letters
to the Seven Churches

Smyrna
The Crowning Joy

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The Church at Smyrna

The book of Revelation can only be fully understood in a context of suffering and persecution.

If suffering is the key to understanding the book of Revelation, then yielding ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord who loves us is our best response, opens even the hardest heart, and crowning our lives with grace and glory.

Revelation is a message from God's heart to the churches in all generations, but especially to churches that find themselves under pressure. In that sense, Revelation could be described as a 'manual for martyrdom.'

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering (Hebrews 13:3).

Read aloud, or invite a participant to read 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. 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. 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.

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.

Supplies List:

- § Bible
- § Handouts (for further study if not all material is to be used in the session)
- § A crown, non-flammable basin and surface, matches, and water (see below)
- § Pencils or pens for all participants
- § 3 x 5 cards or slips of pre-cut paper for all

*OPTIONAL VISUAL/WORSHIP FOCUS:

Provide, or have a group member bring, a crown as a prop. Choose a small wreath of leaves, a tiara, something created, or borrowed from a theatre's costume shop, or even a (free) paper crown from a local Burger King. A Christmas cracker hat is better than nothing! If it features the suggestion of diamonds or other jewels, so much the better!

Place the crown near a shallow metal bowl or pie pan, placed on a large trivet or ceramic tile. (For safety's sake, have a supply of water nearby.) Arrange all on a small table in the centre of the worship space, or on an empty chair designated as "throne."

Open the meeting with a worship chorus or hymn ("Crown Him with Many Crowns," for example), or a relevant passage from Scripture. Offer a brief prayer expressing corporate willingness to embrace the Lordship of Jesus more deeply.

Note: The "crown" will be used again later in the session for an interactive consecration activity.

Into the Past

Culturally, in the once-lovely city of Smyrna, when the citizens wanted to see beyond mere pagan customs, people had tended to look to the Jews as occupying the moral high ground. The Jewish community, which was both large and influential, hated to see the Christians as their competitors. As in so many other places at that time, many of the Jews – in cahoots with the Romans – stirred up the authorities to persecute believers.¹ So intense was

¹ The apostle Paul, a "Jew among Jews," was continually opposed by his own peers, who often raced after him to the new cities he was preaching to, in order to stir up the people against him. We see this occurring at Antioch (Acts 13:50), at Iconium (Acts

this persecution that it is no surprise to hear the thundering denunciation of the Jews as a “Synagogue of Satan.”

Geographically, Smyrna was located a few points clockwise from Ephesus and refreshed by a gentle, westerly zephyr that blew through its streets. Commonly considered the most beautiful city in Asia of its time, it was ideally situated to command the trade of the fertile Hermus Valley. With its small and safe harbour in the middle of the city, Smyrna was a great trading centre. It had been completely rebuilt about 200 B.C. after a previous disaster had left it uninhabited for centuries. Great, straight-sweeping streets with excellent paving showcased famous temples that stair-stepped the famous ascent of Pagos Hill.

Again and again in these letters we find the Lord demonstrating His knowledge and care about local matters. Here He describes Himself as being *He who was dead and is alive again.*¹ There is a parallel here with the city itself, which had been ‘dead’ for 400 years before being rebuilt.

The temples that lined this hill were known as ‘The Crown of Smyrna.’ Smyrna’s ancient architecture also suggests a spiritual parallel for us today, in that the Lord spoke about giving the Crown of Life to those who showed themselves loyal unto death.

Of all the cities in Asia, Smyrna was the most loyal to Rome, the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the Spirit of Rome. It also erected famous domes in the stadium, a magnificent public library, a music hall and a renowned theatre. Everyone in the city was eager to exalt the Municipality. It is significant, therefore, that Christ called himself *The First and the Last*. He did not want people to compare Him to that which is merely manmade – He wanted to be first in people’s lives.

Recreationally, Smyrna’s games were famous all over Asia, and so the concept of the laurel crown would have been a familiar, beloved image for its population, and one that was very much present in their thinking. In the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell knows that he is called to missionary work in China, and that before he goes it is right for him to compete in the Olympic Games. As he put it, *God has made me fast. I feel His pleasure when I run.* Despite some opposition from people who regarded running as too secular a pursuit, he knew that this was a major part of God’s purposes for his life.¹ We too are called to so run the race of our life that,

14:2 and 5), at Lystra (Acts 14:19) and at Thessalonica (Acts 17:5).

¹ When he discovered that the heat for his race was to be run on a Sunday, Liddell refused to compete. The deadlock was broken by a fellow athlete generously offering him his place in the 400 metres. Before running, an American masseur shoved a note

at the end of it, we receive the spiritual equivalent of rewards bestowed upon champion athletes.

Politically, Nero was the first emperor to launch brutal persecution against the believers, which hardened into institutionalised policy under his successor, Domitian. The early Christians refused to worship him and were sentenced to die by the thousands.

These rulers misused their “crowns” in flagrant abuse of power. Christians who lived during their reigns were fearful much of the time, much as believers in many Muslim countries are to this day. At any time, and for any trumped-up reason, authorities could throw them in jail or sentence them to death in the “Games.”

Diabolos (Slanderer)

In Revelation, the devil is consistently seen as one who stirs up persecution against the Saints of God. He is the *Slanderer* – always on the lookout to level accusations against believers. He used six particular lines of attack against the believers in the Smyrna region:

- They were cannibals, because they used the words ‘This is my body . . . this is my blood.’
- Their Agape love feast was a gathering for orgies of lust and immorality.
- They broke up homes and family relationships. Taking the decision to follow Christ often put people at odds with their family members.
- They were atheists because they did not have any images of their gods, as the pagans did.
- They were seen as disobedient citizens: potential traitors and revolutionaries because they did not proclaim Caesar as Lord.
- They stirred up trouble because they foretold the end of the world – in flames and disintegration.

Although the devil's tactics vary according to local culture, similar things continue to happen to this day as he seeks to oppose the work of God. In what ways have you experienced this? Remember Revelation 2:10, which speaks to both John's generation and ours:

‘Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.’

into his hands: “It says in the old book that *those who honour Me I will honour* says the Lord.” To great acclaim Liddell won the race holding the piece of paper, setting a world record in the process.

Suffering

Four-year old Corrie Ten Boom looked up searchingly into her father's eyes. "What is it like to die, Daddy?" she asked. "When we go into Amsterdam," replied her wise and godly Father, "when do we buy the tickets?" "Just before we get on the train, of course," she replied. "Then in just the same way, the Lord will give us what we need when we need it."

The devil, knowing that we fear pain, loves to plague our minds with images of us – or our loved ones – suffering badly. Dread makes us forget that God gives grace as and when we need it. Like the wondrous manna of old, we cannot stockpile grace for the future. Corrie Ten Boom emerged from the horrors of Belsen concentration camp able to declare from profound experience,

"There is no pit so deep that Jesus isn't deeper yet."

The word used for "affliction" in this passage is *thlipsis* (2:9) signifies immense pressure, such as being crushed beneath a weight. The pressure that was on the church came from two directions: not only the outward hostility towards believers, but also from their grinding poverty and destitution. Like the caste system that used to hold sway in India, Christians tended to occupy the very bottom ranks of society.

Stripped to the basics, and often penniless, there was no way that these Christians could afford to get caught up in unhelpful entanglements. It really was a case of trust and depend, or fall by the wayside altogether. To their great credit, they did not allow the pressure to make them keep silent about their faith. Instead, they *counted it pure joy whenever they faced trials of many kinds, because the testing of their faith was developing perseverance* (James 1:2-3). Like Eric Liddell, they were running for the crown of life.

James tells us that God deliberately chooses the poor to be rich in faith (James 2:5). Paul speaks of the Christians at Corinth as being *poor yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything* (2 Cor. 6:10). In that sense, we could say that the Lord has an innate bias towards the poor (Luke 6:20). Think of what He is doing in places such as Mozambique! He delights to compensate for the hardships we face in this world, and to make a mockery of the so-called wisdom of the wise.

Meanwhile, however, the Christians suffered violence and ruin when heathen mobs wrecked their homes, helping themselves to such possessions as they had (cf Hebrews 10:34). The same thing happens to this day in various parts of the world, including provinces in Indonesia and India.

When the ‘communists’ came and the missionaries left, the Chinese church numbered little more than half a million. Today, 50 years later, there are more Christians in China than there are people living in the British Isles. Yes, the Devil is the author of our testing, but God allows it for our growth and the benefit of others. Trees grown in the most extreme weather conditions often prove the strongest. (Mike Breen, *The Body Beautiful*)

The Lord Jesus warned us:

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Tim. 3:12-13)

Suffering can ambush us on beautiful days as well as grey ones! Like the melancholy drone of bagpipes beneath the melody, “death for the faith” underscored life in Smyrna – as in much of the Early Church.

The Lord warned His people that there would be periods of imprisonment ahead. The ten days mentioned here are not necessarily literal, so much as a warning of trouble ahead. In those days, Barclay says,

A Christian was a man who lived with a sword poised over his head. The terror of being a Christian was the uncertainty.’

Trouble hung over Christian men and women, day after day after day. During times of intense, continuing stress, it’s good to remember that

‘Courage doesn’t always roar.

*Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying,
I will try again tomorrow.’ (Connie Larson Miller)*

If we take literally the idea that persecution was going to last ten days, it may not sound too bad, but let us be under no illusions. A prison sentence was often effectively the prelude to a death sentence.

As a prophetic example of the persecution that was to come, Smyrna’s most famous martyrdom occurred many decades later in AD155, when Bishop Polycarp was presented with a straight choice: either to declare ‘Caesar is Lord’ – in which case he would be allowed to live – or to persist in affirming that Jesus Christ was Lord, in which case he would be burned at the stake.

Before he was arrested, Polycarp had a dreamlike vision wherein he saw the pillow under his head burst into flames, at which point he knew he was

going to be burnt alive. When the time came, he died heroically, making this famous declaration before the Proconsul:

'Eighty and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?'

There are many stories associated with the death of Polycarp, of how the flames refused to consume him and how he had to be stabbed to death. As he entered the arena he heard a voice from Heaven saying, 'Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man' – words that Protestant martyrs would remember in this country nearly 1500 years later, when they too were burned at the stake for their faith in the Word of God.

How do we cope when we are suffering unjustly?

Do you grumble and complain about minor setbacks? May the Lord help us to declare with Paul, 'I consider our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Romans 8:18). Even if we have to suffer greatly, the Lord loves us and is still in control.

***Option: Consider. Who have you known who has experienced this *thlipsis* level of suffering? How have they handled it?**

The people of Smyrna loved their city and were prepared to defend what they considered to be 'the queen of cities'. In doing so, they fell prey to human pride. Jesus is introduced by many names in the Book of Revelation, all of which are specifically chosen to illustrate aspects of His Lordship. Here we find Him declaring, *I am the First and the Last* (cf. Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12). It is as though the Lord is saying, 'This is my great promise to you: If I am for you, who can be against you? Therefore do not be afraid.'

Christ Himself has experienced the worst that life and evil can possibly do to Him, enduring the agony of the cross. As we saw in week two, when looking at the meaning of the word *huponome*, the Book of Revelation calls us to overcome through enduring patiently. (See Rev. 14:12). Because of the strength the risen Lord gives us, we can remain loyal – even unto death, if that is required. The challenge is to make sure that we allow no-one and nothing else to take His place in our hearts.

The call to suffer [we find in the book of Revelation] comes as a healing balm to those of us seeking vision for our new church. It has taken years for many

of us to recover from the destructive teaching we received which insisted that people of faith will not suffer privation or harm in any form. How freeing it was (and continues to be) to know that pain and faithfulness go hand-in-hand. Suffering is actually a sign of the depth of our love, not the lack of our faith. (Scotty Smith and Michael Card, *Unveiling Hope* Thomas Nelson)

Exercise

It is worth checking the areas of our life that matter, and asking how loyal we are to Christ. Do we insist on saying, *I* intend to do this or have the other, or are we truly prepared to deliver all our decisions to the Lordship of Christ? There are many rewards promised in these letters and, most appropriately, it is the Crown of Life that is offered to the Christians in Smyrna. Paul speaks of the Crown of Righteousness in Timothy 4:8 and of the Crown of Rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:19), and Peter speaks of the 'Crown of Glory' in 1 Peter 5:4. It bears a comparison with the image of the fading crown of laurel which the winner of the Olympic Games would win. Furthermore, the Greek word used here, *stephanos*, refers more to victory and joy, rather than to the *diadema*, which means a royal sort of crown.

Interactive: Into the Heart

Invite members to quiet their hearts, then write, on pre-cut slips of paper, something they wish to submit, or re-submit, to the Lordship of Christ. Slips should be placed in the non-flammable container near or beneath the crown, and then prayed over. If so led, confessions of those things which have become idols could be penned instead, and the slips of paper burned as a song like "Refiners Fire" is sung.

Note: These are only suggestions; adapt as needed for setting, fire codes, and participants.

Into the World:

Prophets have always looked in horror and amazement at devastating events that occur on earth (invasions, oppression, famines, earthquakes, etcetera) and then sought the mind of God concerning them. This is what we see Habakkuk doing in the opening verses of Habakkuk 1. The Lord tells

His prophet the very thing he least wanted to hear: that the Lord was raising up the Chaldeans to be the scourge of Israel. At this point he has to steady himself, before finally coming through to a place of great trust and acceptance.

Reflecting on the horrifying events that had occurred in both Rome and in Jerusalem, John is now shown a picture of an anti-Christian state intensifying the pressure against the Church, backed by an anti-Christian religious outlook.

Just think of all the pressure there has been in the past one hundred years against the Saints of God. More believers have died as martyrs in the bloodthirsty twentieth century than in the preceding nineteen put together. In a land like Russia, for example, the atheist state exiled and killed so many, and at times, the Orthodox itself leveraged enormous pressure on evangelicals.

Amnesty International reckons that 300,000 people were killed during the eight years of Amin's rule in Uganda. Some of them were killed because they confronted Amin and refused to deny the truth. Many of them went to their death trusting in the Lord and knowing His compassion and forgiveness. The firing squads were often bemused because, instead of being filled with rage, these men were filled with peace and radiance. Many of the soldiers in the firing squads could never shake off the reality of what they saw – the glory of God in the faces of dying men.

How can anyone believe that God is good and God is love if He allows such suffering? Look at Jesus. Jesus paid the price that love demanded. He accepted the wickedness of human nature and all its consequences, and overcame them by His goodness. He looked hate in the eyes, and He looked back with love. He destroyed the power of sin, and conquered death. (Bishop Leslie Brown)

Only be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life, promises the Lord.

The crowds reciting the Lord's Prayer and praying in Romania, Czechoslovakia and East Germany were instrumental in bringing down the corrupt communist governments. God will not finally be thwarted. These remarkable words were written by a Jewish woman on a wrapper at Ravensbrück, the terrible concentration camp for women.

Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they inflicted on us. Remember the fruits we have borne. Thanks to this suffering, our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the

greatness of heart which has grown out of this and when they come to judgement, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. Suffering is therefore almost the normal environment in which many Christians have lived. That is why John says to the people of Smyrna, be faithful to death and I will give you a crown of life. If we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him. May He therefore give us the courage for His praise and glory.

Often, before a wave of great suffering comes, God sends a special strengthening to prepare His people. We saw this in a move of the Spirit in Cambodia immediately before the Killing Fields. It is part of God's mercy to strengthen His people for extreme difficulties.

Satan himself is unable to invent anything, but he is highly skilled at perverting what has been ordained and instituted, in order to create havoc and lure people away from God. As Scotty Smith said,

If Satan is not successful in destroying the message of the gospel from without, then he will resort to perverting and subverting the gospel from within the church.

Occasionally governments seek to function under divine authority. We have seen this recently in Burundi, where the godly leader (once a rabid murderer but now a repentant believer) has appointed many Spirit-filled Christians to his cabinet, and has led many times of prayer for his nation. More governments however, act as if *they are* a divine authority!

There are so many ways in which this manifests itself – not just extreme examples, such as when the Germans elected the Nazi government to power and so began the worst period in its history – but again today. For example, the German government is heavily opposing the small number of people involved in setting up home-school organisations. This ranks low in comparison with past abuses, but they have actively been freezing people's funds to immobilise them. There are many such abuses of power.

The Book of Revelation points out that God uses even the forces of evil and the consequences of human sinfulness, as well as the suffering of the Saints, to accomplish His eternal purposes. We saw in the example of Habakkuk how astonished the prophet was that God would use an 'unholy' instrument – namely the Babylonian nation – to fulfil His holy purposes. We see the same thing throughout the book of Revelation.

In God's eyes, our sufferings do not pass unseen. They are far from meaningless. It may look as though the followers of the King of Kings are small, insignificant and heavily pressed, but we are not fighting a losing cause.

Ultimately all who follow Christ the King will be vindicated. The Lord has already overcome and therefore we will be overcomers – even if that means ‘loving not our own lives so much as to shrink from death’ (Rev. 12:11)

Hebrews 1:23 says, *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for He who promised is faithful.* Someone once said, ‘Suffering colours life, doesn’t it?’ to which the instant retort was made, ‘Yes, but I propose to choose the colour!’¹

God created the concepts of community, marriage, the family, economic activity, government and the state (see Romans 13:1-7, 1 Tim 2 1-2) to bless and protect us. When government acts persecutingly, Christians must pray for the state, courageously endure, and patiently accept the consequences of obeying a God whose image and seal they bear (Mark 12:16-17, Acts 4:19). They must do so in the confidence that after their sufferings they will reign with Him (NKJV). That is why I prefer to spell suffering as a compound word: ‘suffer-reign’ (2 Tim 2:12).

To this day, at least one-in-ten of the world’s Christians can be said to be living under persecution. That is why it is so important to know about, and to support, movements such as Open Doors and Barnabas Fund. Take a few minutes as a group to discuss your growing awareness of this as well as any involvement you have had with The Suffering Church.

Close with prayer – for instance for Zimbabwe, which has been through such agonies. May the Lord turn the tables and restore the nation..

***Option: Prepare a list of reputable Web sites for ministries that serve the persecuted Church. It is important to know about their work and to support it. The following would make a good starting point:**

www.barnabasfund.org;

www.csw.org.uk (Christian Solidarity International) and

www.opendoorsuk.org

Remember, Suffering makes people either bitter, or better.

¹ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, (SCM Press)