

We come to the second of Jesus' messages to the seven churches – this one is to the church in Smyrna.

Let me remind you of the one who speaks – the risen and exalted Lord Jesus. This is what John saw when the Lord revealed himself in a vision: 1:12-16, "12Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."

We are to remember this vision of the exalted Jesus as we read the letters to the seven churches. The weight that we give to the letters is related to our awareness of the transcendent glory of their author. They come from the Lord of the church who is also Lord of the world. They come from the one who is described in the vision of the glorified son of man. And what he says to each of the churches he also says to us – not in the sense that we are exactly like all seven of these churches, but in the sense that we are called to open ourselves up to the evaluations that Jesus makes of these churches and see where and how they apply to us.

Today we consider what Jesus said to the church in Smyrna. What we will do with this letter, is first consider it in its own context and then consider how it applies to us. Verse 8, Jesus says, "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'" In each of these letters when Jesus identifies and describes himself, he mentions part of what John saw or heard in the vision described in chapter 1. And each of the things about Jesus that are mentioned are of special relevance to the church being addressed.

So the church at Smyrna is being encouraged in the face of persecution. Jesus mentions their tribulation and poverty and the slander that they are enduring. He warns them that they are about to suffer – that some of them are going to be thrown into prison and he calls them to be faithful unto death. What about Jesus do these suffering believers especially need to hear? That their saviour and Lord is "the first and the last, who died and came to life." Jesus reminds them that he is before and after time itself. He is the first. He was there before anything else existed. And he is the last. When the dust of world history has settled – he will still be there in his role as Lord of all.

In the light of such transcendent greatness, the people who are troubling the believers at Smyrna are nothing. Their whole lives are like "a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." They are just people. The one who walks among the seven golden lampstands is the first and the last – no beginning and no end – sovereign ruler over all – yesterday, today and forever. And he knows what his people are going through. This is his will for them. It is not that he is helpless to deliver them. It is that his way of delivering them takes them through suffering and death. As Paul and Barnabas taught the churches, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14:22

Jesus also reminds his suffering people that he “died and came to life.” He died for their sins. He rose from the dead the victor over death and sin and Satan. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead means that death is no longer the ultimate tragedy for believers. Death for God’s people is no longer defeat. It is no longer the ultimate dead end. It is now their entrance into the fullness of life. For the people of God, what lies beyond death is not loss but gain. They enter into a sinless life in the presence of God. They experience joys that they only had a taste of in this life.

When Jesus tells his people to be faithful unto death, the one who says that had died and came to life. He had conquered death. He had changed its meaning for his people. What lies beyond death for the people of God is only good – a blessedness beyond anything they can now imagine. And that means that those who are being threatened with death by persecutors can face it with courage. It cannot hurt them. Believers in Christ can never be truly harmed by anything a persecutor can throw at them. They can suffer – absolutely – and we may not make light of suffering - but the one who has conquered death has the power to bring good out of evil and suffering is part of the path that leads to glory.

This is what the exalted Jesus says next to the church in Smyrna. Verse 9 “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” The early Christians suffered a lot at the hands of the Jews. The earliest persecution of which we read in the book of Acts was at the hands of the Jews. The inspired apostles of the early church, guided by the Holy Spirit had concluded that those who were truly Jews were those who had believed in Jesus. Paul for instance, wrote in Philippians 3:3 “We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” He is saying that believers in Jesus are the real Jews.

And so Jesus, here in Revelation, says of Jews who persecuted Christians, they “say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” What appears to have been happening is that Jews were bringing Christians to the attention of the Roman authorities. The Jews had made an arrangement with the Romans that excused them from the demand to worship the Roman emperor. Instead they could demonstrate respect and loyalty to him without actually having to do something that could be construed as worship.

Originally Christians were seen to be a category of Jews and so they shared in the exemption to worship the emperor. But as time went on, the distinction between Jews and Christians became more pronounced and some of the Jews, at least, showed their hatred for Christians by pointing out to the authorities that Christians were required to acknowledge that the emperor was Lord. It was this that was most often the trigger for persecution in the early church. Christians would be required to acknowledge that Caesar was Lord. But to do that was to deny that Jesus was Lord. And so faithful Christians refused and suffered for it.

Anyway, Jesus’ words to the church at Smyrna indicate that Jews had a hand in the persecution of Christians. We see that cooperation between Jews and Romans in persecuting Christians all the way back to the death of Jesus himself.

This is not a reason for anti-Semitism. There is a history of anti-Semitism in the church, but that is wrong and unchristian. Jesus said that we are to love our enemies. Any kind of racism is evil and unchristian. The hatred of Jewish people is a blight in the history of humanity. It is a terrible evil. The Bible often points out the sins and failures of Jews and we must deal with those passages, but there is never any justification in the NT for anti-Semitism.

So the Christians of the church in Smyrna were facing tribulation, poverty, slander. Some of them were going to be thrown into prison. Jesus urges them to be faithful unto death. Persecution often has financial implications. Persecution often leads to poverty. Those who are put in prison are often the breadwinners of their families. People who are beaten may be not able to work for a time or permanently depending on the severity of the injuries. Persecution is often expressed by the destruction of property which has financial implications. And it may be that Christians have a hard time finding work because they are hated by the community in which they live. There are also certain kinds of work that Christians are not able to do because of their convictions. For various reasons one of the aspects of tribulation for Christians is poverty. Persecution and poverty often go together.

That was the case for the members of the church at Smyrna. They were poor. The hatred of community in which they lived made it difficult for them to make money or they suffered costly losses – whatever the precise reason was – they were poor.

Jesus knows about their poverty. Jesus knows about their struggles to pay their bills – perhaps to have a place to live or to have enough to eat. This has often been the lot of the people of God. In Hebrews 11:37-38 we read of some of the OT saints. “They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

But clearly Jesus has a different perspective on poverty than the world has and that we might have as well. He tells the believers at Smyrna that even though they were experiencing financial hardship because of their faith, in a more important sense they were rich. “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich),” he says to them. Jesus’ way of thinking about riches and poverty is very different from the way that we tend to think of about riches and poverty. The believers in Smyrna were poor financially, but in Jesus’ eyes they were rich in blessings.

Jesus’ way of thinking about life is quite different from the way that the world thinks about life. In Matthew 16:26 he says, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” You can have all the money in the world, but if you lose your soul, you are very, very poor concerning what really matters. Paul reflects this perspective when he describes himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

The book of Hebrews has a couple of verses that express this idea clearly. Hebrews 10:34. The author says to the believers he is writing to, “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” When Christians lose their earthly property they are still rich because they have a better possession which will last forever. The text is speaking about the hope of eternal blessedness in the presence of God. Hebrews 11:26 says of Moses, “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” To be reproached because of Christ is worth more than all the money in the world – again because of glorious future that God has in store for his people.

The fact is that belonging to Jesus is worth more than anything that this world apart from Jesus has to offer. Paul says in Philippians 3:8 “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” The most pleasurable things that this world has to offer are rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

That is why Jesus considered the believers in Smyrna to be rich – even though they were living in economic poverty. They had Christ. They had salvation. They knew and loved God. And they were headed for the fullness of life in the new creation. That made them rich with what matters most even though they were money-poor.

So Jesus tells them not to fear. Verse 10, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Jesus tells them not to fear. The persecution was going to increase. But they were not to fear. They were not to fear because of the reality conveyed by the vision of the exalted Jesus Christ walking among the seven golden lampstands – the churches. Jesus was with them. They were rich with riches beyond anything this world could give them because of their relationship with Jesus and the hope of eternal life. They were to look at their situation from perspective laid out for them in the book of Revelation. The suffering that they were enduring and would endure was allowed by Jesus himself and part of his perfect plan for them. And so they should rest in the unseen reality of Jesus’ perspective and not be afraid.

Jesus says that the devil was behind the persecution. The devil is defeated and yet he is still allowed to be active in the world for the time being. The book of Revelation will tell about the final imprisonment of the devil in the lake of fire, but until that happens, he is given the space to persecute the saints. Jesus here knows that the devil is going to throw some of these saints in prison and he is not stopping it. He tells them that the suffering will be a test for them. This is one of the biblical perspectives on suffering. God allows Satan to cause suffering, but when his people are involved he uses Satan’s acts for his own good purposes. God will allow the devil to put some of Jesus’ people in prison. The motive of the devil is to tempt believers to forsake Jesus. But

Jesus' motivation is to test his people. Persecution is a test for the people of God. And Jesus tells them that ahead of time. You may be tested.

The testing will be short. Jesus says, "for ten days you will have tribulation." Ten days is symbolic for a short period of time. God's people often have to suffer persecution, but Jesus assures them that it will not last long. That does not mean that it may not seem long. There are people who suffer persecution for many years. But life as a whole is short in biblical perspective. And then the suffering will be over for the people of God.

And then Jesus promises a reward to those who persevere. "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life. ... The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." The crown is "the laurel wreath of victory" according to the ESV Study Bible. Those who are faithful unto death are the victors and they receive the crown of life. And the second death will not harm them. The second death is the ultimate death which will be the destiny of all who side with the devil against the Lord. Those who remain faithful to Jesus will not experience that second death.

I want to take some time now to think through how this passage applies to us. Our situation is very different from that of the believers at Smyrna. There are many Christians in the world today who are poor because of persecution. But we are not. There are some situations in which Christians in our society might suffer financially because of Christian convictions. And that may become more common in the future. But mostly we are not poor and if we are toward the poorer end of the spectrum, persecution is not the reason.

What does this passage say to us who are relatively well off compared to most of the people in this world? We can apply this passage to our situation by asking whether we would be willing to become poor if that was the cost of faithfulness to the Lord. If our situation changed so that we were required to sign a document saying that homosexuality is not a sin in order to be able to work in Canada, would we be able willing to be plunged into poverty in order to be faithful to Jesus?

But even though we are not required to make that kind of stand at the moment, we are required to have the attitude to money and wealth that would be necessary to take such a stand. The question that we must ask our lives in the light of this text is - is my relationship to Jesus more important to me than the level of prosperity that I now enjoy? Is my attitude towards money and the things that money can buy consistent with loving God with all our hearts and seeking first the kingdom of God? Whether or not we are called to embrace poverty in order to be faithful to Christ, we are all called to love God more than money and things. We must have the same attitude towards money as the believers at Smyrna who were willing to be poor rather than deny Christ.

From a spiritual perspective our situation is not all that different from that of the believers at Smyrna. Again, I do not in any way want to minimize the reality of the kind of persecution they were facing and which many Christians are facing today. But the devil is after us no less than he was after them. The devil uses persecution

to try to get people to deny Christ. But he also uses prosperity for the same purpose. Listen to how Paul speaks of this in 1 Timothy 6:9, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” In an earlier verse in 1 Timothy when Paul uses the word “snare” he speaks of the snare of the devil. I think we can say that Satan doesn’t care much how he gets people to deny Jesus as long as they do. And the weakness of the church in the west suggests that perhaps prosperity is a more effective tool for him than persecution.

So the question that this text asks of us is this: is our attitude towards money and prosperity such that if we were in a situation similar to the church in Smyrna would we be willing to give it up in order to be faithful to Jesus. And we get some insight into the true answer to that question by thinking about our present attitude towards the comforts and pleasures that we currently enjoy. The question is - how important they are to us right now? We certainly may enjoy our homes and our cars and our comforts. But God is to be more important to us than all our earthly pleasures and if that is so it will show in our thoughts and our desires and our priorities and in our giving and in our generosity. God gives us many things to enjoy. And it is right that we enjoy them. The proper way to enjoy them is to enjoy him in them – keeping the gift and the giver together in our enjoyment. But that will also mean embracing the restraint that God calls us to. We are to remember that we are to use our all of our money to the glory of God – as stewards using God’s money according to God’s instructions and priorities. Certainly God give us gifts to be enjoyed. It would be a lack of gratitude not to do so. But at the same time, greed and covetousness are forbidden. Money is useful for missions and other forms of Christian witness. Money is useful for helping the poor. There is a place for pleasure in a life that glorifies God. But there is also an important place for self-denial and sacrifice and restraint.

Jesus’ call to be faithful unto death also applies to us. In Luke 9:24 “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” To be a Christian is to give up our lives for Jesus. That may mean martyrdom. But whether it comes to that or not, the Christian life is about giving our lives for Christ. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:15 says that Jesus, “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” The Christian life is about not living for ourselves but for Christ.

So Jesus’ words to the church in Smyrna are relevant for us even if our situation is very different from theirs. We must have the same attitude towards money as they did. We must give our lives for Christ whether that means martyrdom or other forms of sacrifice. Behind the willingness to die for Christ is a willingness to live for Christ.

This does not mean perfection. This does not mean works-righteousness. The Christ who demands our all gave his all so that we might have life in him. This is the life for the forgiven. This is the life of those who are right with God through faith in Jesus. This is the life of those who are moving in the right direction – not those who

have arrived. The ones who have arrived are in heaven. We are still in the fight. We fight as those who are righteous in Christ.

But we must fight. These letters to the seven churches underscore how serious the Christian life is. It is a battle and we might fight. In this case we must fight against living for money – living for pleasure – living for self. Before us Jesus holds up the crown of life. But the way to that crown is faithfulness unto death. This is the narrow way that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 7. “[T]he gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” Are on the narrow way? That is what our text is asking of us.

May the Lord enable us to walk the narrow way financially as we live in this culture of materialism and self-indulgence.