

The Spiritual Formation of the End Time Remnant (Part 3)

Let's start by reading our next section in Revelation 2:8-11;

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until 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 by the second death.'

It's difficult for us to relate to living in this kind of environment, but this is where Smyrna was. We'll see, in a minute, how this context helps in our interpretation of certain phrases in this section.

Another historical element of the Smyrnan environment is brought out by Hal Lindsay,

"The Smyrnan believers were victims of the "ten percenters." These people reported Christians to the Roman government and were rewarded with ten percent of the "heretics'" property. The believers were thus often wiped out financially, and many ended up martyred or in prison. Eventually the Christians were given only one choice - bow to Caesar as Lord, or be put to death."

So that we can better feel what Smyrna felt, let me share some examples of the types of persecution each of these believers faced:

"Polycarp was the pastor of the church in Smyrna at that time and was seized by his opponents. Since he was already eighty-six years old, they could not bear to put him to death and were especially lenient toward him. If he would only say, "I do not recognize Jesus of Nazareth," they would set him free. But he replied, "I cannot deny Him. I have been serving Him for eighty-six years, and in these eighty-six years He has never treated me wrongly; how can I deny Him for the love of my body!" Hence, they carried him away. While he was dying, he still could say, "Thank God that I have the

opportunity today to give my life for Thee.” There was also a sister in the church who was told that if she would only bow to Diana (the idol Artemis in the city of Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 19), she would be released. She replied, "Do you ask me to choose between Christ and Diana? The first time I chose Christ and now you want me to choose again – I still choose Christ. And she was executed.”

It’s into this context of suffering and that our Lord sends His letter. And remember that the interpretation of *any* epistle has to be done with the circumstances, the context, of that letter in mind.

The believers in Smyrna were just like us; they had fears and doubts, just like any of us would have when under this kind of pressure.

In the opening sentence of His letter, Christ reminds them that He is the Resurrection and the Life. Even if we die physically, we’ll be raised to life because we are in Him.

Acts 2:24 tells us that death can’t hold Christ – so, death can’t hold us.

As the Lord said in Jn. 14:19, "Because I live, you shall live also".

The nature of the church is resurrection – the life we have received from Christ can swallow up death in all its forms.

As Watchman Nee writes,

"Perhaps when you encounter trials and temptations, prayer ceases and it becomes difficult to read the Word. The brothers all say that this time you are finished, but not long after, you rise, and the life of God comes forth from you again. The church has a basic principle; she is able to pass through death; she cannot be buried."

We can see Smyrna in North Korea, China and Iran. About three-fourths of the Church globally is under severe persecution. This letter is as relevant in most of our world in this generation as it was in the first generation.

You may have noticed when we read through this letter that there is only one requirement given to them; “Stay faithful . . .”

And, again, faithfulness is not based on how well we think we'll do at the end, but on trusting that God will provide the strength we need, when we need it.

The Lord also told them that even though they were poor, they were rich (the opposite of Laodicea who thought they were rich, but were poor).

The principle is simple: the greater our detachment from this world, the nearer we are to the heart of God.

In his commentary on Smyrna, Joseph Seiss said,

“A poor Church, in the midst of persecution and suffering, cannot be expected to do much. To endure steadfastly is, then, all that can be looked for, and is worthy of highest commendation.”

And as C.A. Coates once wrote,

"It has been known in days of persecution that saints were disappointed when they were reprieved. Some very touching letters of the martyrs were written by those sent back to prison to their companions who had been sentenced to die. They manifested real sorrow as feeling deprived, for the time, of the privilege and honor of suffering death for the Lord. In some cases, they had afterwards the privilege which they coveted. It shows the power in which the Lord can comfort and sustain what is of Himself even under the extreme violence of the adversary. *In this connection it may be well to remember that in many cases those who spoke very confidently before they were tested failed when the persecution touched them, but those who had been timid, and had feared lest they might fail, were often the ones to go through triumphantly.* Nothing will really carry saints through such testings but the strength of the Lord." (Emphasis mine)

Fortunately, it is His faithfulness, not our determination, that ultimately matters most.

We don't have the strength for these trials now because we don't need it. But the same God Who said He would never leave or forsake us, will meet us in our suffering with the gift of His strength.

In the meantime, we walk by faith in the midst of the trials we have now, learning how to trust Him – how to count on Him for what we lack.

Just like “first love” (priority love) which we saw as the need in Ephesus, “endurance” is the characteristic we are presented with in Smyrna.

This letter said that they would only be tested for ten days.

The ten days is not literal - “10” is the number of responsibility. For example, the 10 commandments, the 10 plagues in Egypt, 10 virgins, 10 lepers, 10 talents, and a 10% tithe or income tax for Israel.

For Smyrna, they have a season of responsibility related to faithfulness that may end in martyrdom.

And so that we don’t move into a self-introspection, self-judgement mode, examining our own history of “endurance” and becoming discouraged because of how inconsistent we’ve been, let’s make sure we know what this means in the context of suffering.

Faithfulness under pressure is granted *only* to those who have no confidence in themselves.

2 Cor. 4:14-16;

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is sufficient for these things?”

In other words, if our lives are going to shine forth with triumph, endurance, and glory, who’s going to make that happen?

In the same letter, in chapter one verses 8 & 9 Paul wrote,

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death

within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.”

If the pressure is sufficient, if, and only if, it’s beyond our strength, it will bring us to the place where we feel we are sentenced to die.

Then in that place of emotional death, we learn experientially to “*not* trust in ourselves, but in God Who raises the dead.”

The Lord takes us again and again, over and over, into death for the express purpose of showing us our weakness, so we won’t “trust in ourselves, but in God.”

And that releases Him to be our strength.

I realize that we sometimes *believe* we are weak, but there is a huge difference between knowing this intellectually or theologically, and knowing it to the core of our being.

That’s why experience trumps information.

When God has completed this work in us, Christ is not simply acknowledged as our sufficiency, He *becomes* our sufficiency.

Then in 2:11 we are given the promise to the faithful “Overcomer”

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

Since all of the believers in Smyrna were overcomers, this isn’t a threat, it’s simply an encouragement and reminder that physical death is the only death they will face.

Remember the context of this letter.

Suffering, poverty, and martyrdom; and this atmosphere was being breathed daily by this church.

All of our Lord's statements to Smyrna emphasize life over death.

Those facing martyrdom need to know that physical death is the only death that will hurt them. Listen to Watchman Nee’s comments on this passage,

"Here it clearly says that not only will you escape (the second) death, but you will not suffer the hurt of that death. Tribulations are severe if you have not been in tribulations; you never know how terrible they are. Poverty is oppressive; if you have never been poor, you do not know the taste of it. It is as if every encounter drags you into death, but as you pass through, you prove that resurrection is a fact. The Lord came out of the grave, and we too will come out. His resurrection life today cannot be drowned; so, we dare say that we too cannot be drowned."

We sometimes fail to realize that each of these letters sent by the Lord was sent to those He loved – they were very personal; He wasn't just teaching church-age doctrine, He was writing to those He deeply cared about and encouraging or warning depending on their specific need, with the intent of helping all of them.

Reminding Smyrna of the power of the Resurrection Life of Christ was the greatest encouragement that could have been given to this church. That is *exactly* what they needed to hear.

Also, if you think about it, there is a major problem with interpreting "overcomers" as being the only saved ones in a mixture of saved and unsaved.

First, you would be saying that people who were thrown into prison for their faith and then recanted under pressure, are sent to hell.

How would you like that hanging over your head while you sit in jail waiting for whatever's coming next?

The clear context of this letter to the Smyrnan church is one of pure encouragement to a faithful church. There is no hint of criticism or threat.

Listen to these comments by Barnhouse;

"Since we know that all things work together for our good, why should we fear? Has not every bit of suffering been measured out by the hand of love more carefully than the mother portions out the milk that goes into the bottle for her infant child? No formula was every so carefully followed as that of the love of the risen Savior toward those who are to share some of the suffering He knew. "

Since nearly every word in this letter was in some way an encouragement to “not fear” we can easily assume that the Smyrnan believers were struggling with fear.

Yet all of them were identified as overcomers.

Fear does not cancel faith; it simply amplifies our determination to place our trust for the outcome of our lives in Christ instead of in us. We’re afraid; but He is faithful – we don’t trust in our faith; we trust in His faithfulness.

Now, let’s look at what these Christians were promised as a result of their faithfulness.

Vs. 10; “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

He’s not promising them eternal life; they already have that. Life is a gift of grace. The crown of life (again stressing the throne – in some passages called “kingship”) is given to those the Lord allows the privilege of sharing in His sufferings.

Just in case you’re wondering if the only people who will receive this crown are martyrs, James adds another group.

James 1:12; “Blessed is a man who perseveres under testing; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

At this point, I want to show how important this issue of the “crown” is to the Lord and how important it should be to us.

As we’ve seen in past studies, crowns are related to government; ultimately to the throne of Christ.

I’ll introduce what I want to talk about with some comments by Sparks that motivated me to explore this further;

“The book of Revelation is a gathering up of everything unto the end. But when we have said that, and have recognized it as true, one question arises; is there one thing that interprets and explains everything in this book (in reality, everything in the Bible)? And the answer is yes. There is one all-inclusive issue running from beginning to end. It is the purpose of God as to the eternal government of this universe and this earth in particular. It is the issue and question of the government of God's creation through eternal

ages. That explains everything that is here. You have to read backward of course, from the end of the book, for all has moved toward that. Steady movement through every phase and aspect unto that one end, "I saw the holy City, new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven". Here you have the metropolis, the center of government; that is the end - the government of everything established, again in a symbolic representation, in the holy City. Well, that implies government; everything in the book moves toward that and you have to read everything from beginning onward in the light of that final, wonderful issue. Who is going to govern God's created universe through all ages of eternity? How is that government going to be reached? And what is the nature of that government? Those are the questions that are answered in the book of Revelation."

We know from the account of creation, that God's original plan was to place humanity on the throne of this world. This is summarized in Psalm 8:4-8

"What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have *crowned* him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet."

This was God's plan for the human race. Then something went wrong. A will and a purpose other than God's will and purpose entered into creation. In Isa. 14:13 we read this;

"You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north . . .'"

Lucifer set his heart on the throne, the government of this world; and through deception, he stole it away from Adam.

This is why when the writer to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 8, he adds something to it;

“You made him a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor and placed everything under his feet.” When God subjected all things to him, He left nothing outside of his control. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor. . . .”(Heb. 2:7-9)

In Adam, the throne was lost; in Christ, the Representative of a new humanity, the throne is restored. Human history from the fall to the intensified battle we see in the book of Revelation is the recovery and establishment of God’s original plan.

This is the central theme of all of history and of all that’s written for us in the scriptures. Who will govern creation? Who will share the throne of Christ? And how will they attain that position?

Our entire life as God’s children is the Lord’s arrangement of our circumstances and the Spirit’s working in our hearts and minds to prepare an overcoming remnant of the new creation to be placed in the position God had originally intended for Adam’s race to have in the Kingdom of Messiah and on into eternity.

We were created for governance from the very beginning. This has always been God’s plan and is the explanation of all His dealing with us throughout our lives.

The New Jerusalem is a symbolic representation of the final center of God’s government.

The book of Revelation is the final summation of all God’s plans and desires fulfilled in the establishment of the New Jerusalem as the government of God over all the works of His hands.

The oversight of literally everything God has created is represented in the destiny of this city.

And the incredible, unceasing battle between God and Satan is over this one issue – who will ultimately reign as sovereign; who will be worshipped as the King of creation? Christ or Lucifer?

This is the purpose of God in creation. This is the one thing that has occupied His thoughts from before time; and it is the one thing that has occupied the thoughts and commitment of men and women who understood the heart of God.

It's the reason there is such tremendous spiritual pressure on us at this time in history – the final battle is reaching its consummation. There are only a few years left until the King of Kings returns to the city of David and Satan is bound in chains for a thousand years.

We have got to fight for an eternal perspective; we have to go deeper into the eternal councils of God or we will never rise above the shadowlands that contemporary Christianity lives in.

The revelation of God in Christ has been given. It's finished and it's complete. For us the issue becomes, 'what are we going to do with what God has shown us?'

We need to take passages like the following much more seriously than seeing the crown as simply one of the potential rewards believers may receive at the Bema Seat.

Rev. 3:11; "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

We can forfeit our place in this incredible, eternal purpose of God by making our interests, our sin, or our Christianity, more important to us than God's interests.

Imagine the shock when the Lord returns and every believer who has ever lived has the scales removed and they see eternity in the light of what the scriptures *really* taught.

'I just thought being a good Christian was going to church, learning the basics, witnessing when I could and throwing money in the plate. I thought we were *all* overcomers. I had no idea that such an immense, universal, cosmic issue was at stake.'

And now it's too late.

Just as, for the unbeliever, it is appointed unto man once to die and after this face the judgment; for Christians, each of us must stand before Christ at the judgement seat to receive or lose sharing in His throne.

This is exactly what Paul meant when he wrote these two passages;

Phil. 3:14; "I continue to press toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus."

1 Cor. 9:27; "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

When you and I, as God's faithful remnant, bow our heads and feel the Lord place the crown of life on us; there is nothing we have gone through here that will not have been worth that moment in His presence.

Rom. 8:18; "For I am certain that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."