

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. (NIV84)

Theme: Be faithful and you will receive the crown of life

“86 years I have served (Christ) and he never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” Those are some of the last words of Polycarp, the highly revered Bishop of Smyrna, the congregation to whom our text for today is addressed. In the 150’s the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, began to persecute the Christians. When Polycarp’s captors came, he did fight or flee, he made them a meal so that he could spend more time in prayer. Because of his old age the proconsul had mercy on him and begged him to offer incense to the Roman Emperor, thus worshiping him and indicating that he was a god, and he would be set free. That is when Polycarp spoke those famous words, “How can I blaspheme my king who saved me.” And so Polycarp was burned at the stake. According to legend, when the fire didn’t touch him, he was stabbed to death with a spear. But not before he prayed to the Lord to take him to heaven. Persecution wasn’t something that was new for the Christian Church—even for the congregation in Smyrna. The persecution that Polycarp faced was the fourth major persecution that the early Christians faced at the hands of the Roman Empire—and there would be many more. They were persecuted because they despised the false Roman gods, and because they misunderstood what Christ’s kingdom was—thinking that the Christians would try to start their own earthly kingdom by rebelling against the Romans.

Jesus, through John talked about this persecution in verse 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.** The city of Smyrna had a population that was heavily dedicated to Rome as well as many Jews. The Jews hated the Christians because they rejected Christ as the Promised Messiah. By the hands of these two groups the Christians suffered much, they were arrested, beaten, and sometimes killed—they had afflictions of all sorts. Because of their faith, they were poor—perhaps they were fined for some reason, stolen from, or lost their jobs because of Christ. The Jews spread lies about them, hurting their reputations and perhaps causing legal ramifications. The Christians in Smyrna suffered a great deal.

The struggle they faced was in remaining faithful to God, staying in his Word, worshiping and receiving communion, and so on. If they remained faithful, they could expect more persecution—more afflictions, more poverty, more slander, and so on. Or they could reject Christ, renounce him and go back to the way they used to live, then those troubles would simply go away. The Jews wouldn’t slander them any longer, the Romans wouldn’t cause affliction, and they could scrape their way out of poverty. The temptation was real—did they want a comfortable or even an enjoyable life on earth, then all they had to do was reject Christ.

Polycarp remained faithful and we look forward to meeting him in heaven. He was a student of John the Apostle, to whom Jesus made known this Revelation. He was in his twenties when this book was written and probably talked to John personally about it and about Christ. It seems as if the Church in Smyrna remained faithful to Christ. In the seven letters that Jesus writes to the Churches, Jesus mentions the sins of each congregation except the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia.

What about you? In many parts of the world, even today, experiencing suffering and tribulations because of Christ is a daily part of one’s life. We thank the Lord that this is not the case for most of us, and that the stakes of our decisions aren’t nearly as steep. And yet, countless times a day we have an opportunity to be faithful to the Lord or to follow our sinful nature. Do we deny ourselves and follow God’s Word, or do the

enticements of a comfortable life, a fun life, a life free to do what pleases us, get the best of us?

At times, really, many times a day, we must admit that we fail to be faithful to Christ. Instead we often choose the things of this world, an easier, more comfortable, more fun life, rather than living our lives in Christ. I could worship the Lord, read the Bible, and attend Bible study or I could sleep in, get some work done around the house, or hang out with my friends and family. I could give generously to Christ and his church or I could buy a new phone, a new car, or go to that restaurant I've always wanted to try. I could tell someone who is feeling down because of troubles in his life about Christ and his love, or I could keep my mouth shut, my faith to myself, and not risk putting myself out there. The temptation is to not to be faithful to the Lord, but to live our lives focused on the temporal. And Paul says in Romans 8, **if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.** Be faithful and you will receive the crown of life? That's a problem, because none of us our all that faithful.

But here is the good news. We may often struggle to be faithful, but not Christ. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2, **if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.** We have one who was faithful in all things. Not once did Christ sin—he was faithful to the Lord in everything. And his faithful life is given to us. So now are considered faithful to the Lord, because Christ's perfect life is ours! And we aren't alone in this struggle to be faithful. Jesus knows all about it. He lived on this earth for 30 years, just as one of us. He was tempted in every way just as we were. And he faced persecution of all kinds—his disciples betrayed him, his own countrymen rejected his teachings, the people he was sent to save put him to death after inflicting punishment upon him, and his own father rejected him as he became guilty of all our sins. As God, Jesus didn't have to go through all of that pain and torment, but he did willingly—choosing us over his wants, so that he could save us and so that we could live with him in heaven forever.

Jesus hasn't only "been there" before, but he knows everything that we face. Notice what Jesus said to the congregation in Smyrna—I know you, I know your afflictions, your poverty, and the slander by the Jews. He knew everything they went through, and he knows everything we face as well. He knows the temptations; he knows the

enticement of an easy and fun life. He knows the troubles and difficulties we may face because of our faith. And he understands that it is all too easy for us to choose this life instead of the life to come.

But Jesus doesn't just know the difficulties we face, he actually did something about it! Here Jesus is called the First and the Last, similar to calling him the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He rules over all of human history. Jesus is the first because he is eternal—as God he has always existed and participated in creation. He is also last, being eternal means that he will live forever—and as God, he is able to help us.

And that is true even though Jesus died. For three days after he willingly died on the cross he rose from the dead. He defeated death and showed that as God he has complete control over all things. He willingly died on the cross because he knew that he would rise from the dead. So the one who watches over us and knows the pain and afflictions we face is the one who controls the world and has power over death.

And what does he promise us? He promises us eternal life! He says in verses 10 and 11, **Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life...He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.** Because Jesus lives we know that he too will rise from the dead. We will live with him forever. Even though we die, our souls go to heaven, and on the Last Day our bodies will rise to live forever in heaven. A perfect and holy life forever awaits. The second death refers to eternal death. The first death is physical death—which will come to all of us because we are all sinners. But the second death, eternal damnation in hell, has no effect over us because Christ has paid for our sins and has defeated death. We will live even when we die!

Those who stand firm to the end will receive the crown of life. This crown is the type of garland or wreath that was given to the winners of sporting events, like the Olympic Games. Those who stand firm to the end, those who fight against the temptations of the world, those who remain in the one true faith, will in the end, receive the victor's crown. And so no matter what would happen to the Smyrna Christians, and no matter what would happen to us—it doesn't matter, we will live for our Savior forever!

The victory has already been won by the precious blood of Christ and he has given to us his victory by a gift of his grace. This gift is worth more than any amount of gold or silver. It is more precious than anything on this earth. It is through faith that we receive this precious gift the Lord has given us.

And so, no matter what you have as far as earthly gifts are concerned—whether you have a lot or a little, you are rich! Through faith you have received everything that Christ has won for you. He has forgiven your sins; eternal life is yours. You have something worth more than everything on earth combined. It is won for you by the precious blood of Christ. So it doesn't matter how much you have or don't have. It doesn't matter if you lose your job or lose out on extra hours at work. You are more than happy to give your firstfruits to God. Why? Because you are rich in Christ for your salvation is given to you for free!

So we strive to be faithful, to live for Christ instead of living for the things of this world; we look toward heaven and the life to come instead of on earthly things. To be sure, they are not mutually exclusive. God doesn't force his children to be poor, many of us don't face much persecution because of our faith—just because you are a Christian doesn't necessarily mean that you don't have money, or can't enjoy the things that God has blessed us with on this earth. But God also expects us not to choose those things over him and his Word. He expects to be first in our lives—to be faithful to him over everything.

And yet, we aren't always faithful. The problem is that we are often focused on what we can see, and what we can feel. We know what makes us happy—we know the things that money can buy. We also know that we want to avoid pain, or discomfort. And so we often fail to be faithful to God; but we chase after what our sinful nature desires. The story of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, from our gospel this morning, shows us the danger of rejecting Christ in favor of the things of this world. Elsewhere Jesus said, **What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?** What good would it be to be rich but not rich in faith; or to avoid troubles, hardships, or persecutions while on this earth but give up eternal life? The answer to us is obvious.

It was for Polycarp too! The 86-year old could have lived the rest of his life in peace and quiet, if only he had offered that act of worship to the Roman Empire. But he remained faithful to the end and he received the crown of life. He exemplifies what Paul says to the Philippians, **for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.** May we do the same for we aren't saved because of our own faithfulness, but because of Christ's who gave us his victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Later on in Revelation John hears a voice proclaiming the victory of Christ and his angels over the devil. And that voice says,

**“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,
and the authority of his Christ.
For the accuser of our brothers,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.
They overcame him
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death.
Therefore rejoice, you heavens
and you who dwell in them!” Amen.**