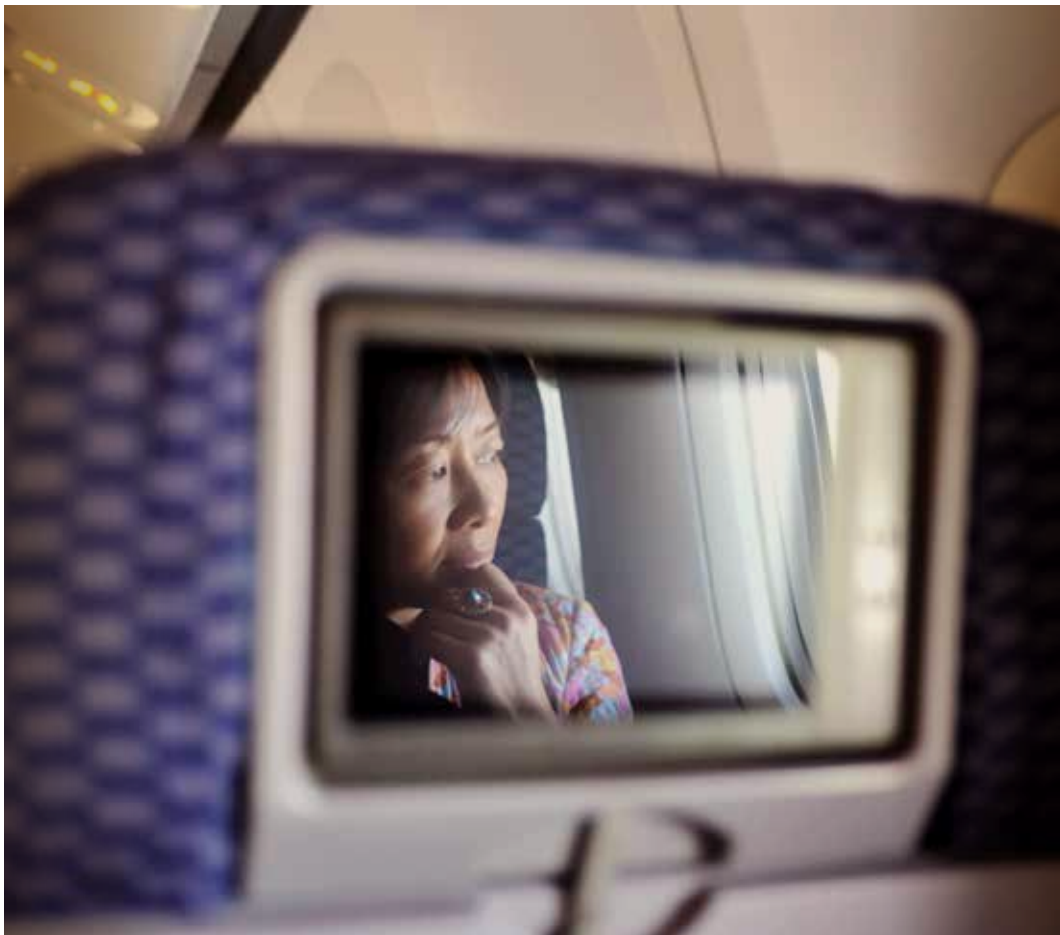


2

Steadfast in Difficulties



QUESTION 1:

What are some fears you've had to overcome?

THE POINT

We need not fear because we are rich in God's grace.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Have you ever been scared? I mean scared to the point you feared for your life. Several years ago I was serving alongside others on a mission trip in London. We were prayer walking one afternoon in an area that was full of mosques, and protesters were in the streets. As we walked and prayed for God to move in that area, we began hearing shouts from a group of men across the street: "Kill the Christians! Kill the Christians!" They were pointing at our little group while shouting those words.

Needless to say, that was a frightening moment for our group. I hurried everyone along and we left the area immediately. As we later reflected on what had happened, we realized we didn't have to be afraid because we were told in the Bible that, for those who follow Jesus, they would face times of persecution but He would be with them.

In the message Jesus gave to the church at Smyrna, we will learn that we can stand strong in the face of fearful situations; we truly are rich in the grace of God.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

REVELATION 2:8-9

⁸ “Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life: ⁹ I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

Take notice of who is speaking to the church: it is Christ Himself! In a message given with great authority, Christ reminded them at the very beginning that He is “the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life” (v. 8). In this statement of who He is, Jesus identified with them, showing that He too had suffered but was victorious in the end.

The church in Smyrna was located in a unique city. Smyrna was a harbor city located about thirty-five miles northwest of Ephesus. At the time of this message, Smyrna was considered one of the grandest cities in the entire Roman Empire, containing beautiful architecture. It was a city with strong ties to Rome because it was the first city to build a temple to the goddess Roma. It also had other temples, including one dedicated to the Emperor.

The word *Smyrna* is Greek for myrrh, an ointment or oil used specifically for the burial of the dead. Myrrh was one of the gifts the Magi brought to the baby Jesus. Myrrh also

was used to anoint Jesus’ body when He was placed in the tomb. Here was Christ’s church in a city whose name was associated with death, and unfortunately, the persecution the church experienced would even bring them “to the point of death” (Rev. 2:10).

In times of difficulty, it’s good to know God has not forgotten you. Jesus said, “I know your affliction and poverty” (v. 9). Our government defines poverty in terms of falling below the minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs. The word Jesus used, however, is much harsher; it refers to being utterly destitute. The church at Smyrna was a poor church with few resources.

QUESTION 2:

What riches have you experienced because of your relationship with Christ?

Even though the church was impoverished and lacking in material resources, they were rich because of their relationship to Jesus. When someone is in a relationship with Christ, nothing can bring greater satisfaction or joy than being in that relationship. We can have all the money and resources in the world, but they pale in comparison to the riches that can only be found in Christ.

Jesus was also well aware of the persecution and difficulties they faced. They were being slandered. The word translated *slander* in this passage is the same word from which we get blasphemy. The Jews in Smyrna hated

the Christians and spoke blasphemy against God's people. The Jews may have been Jewish by heritage, but they did not have a heart for God or the people of God. Their blasphemous actions had turned their Jewish gathering place into "a synagogue of Satan."

The church at Smyrna definitely faced harsh persecution, but they were rich in spiritual blessings because of their relationship and steadfastness in Christ. The same spiritual blessing and richness is ours today as we trust Christ and walk with Him. It's not enough just to be "religious"; we must have a relationship in order to lay claim to the riches of Christ.

REVELATION 2:10

¹⁰ "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Jesus told the church at Smyrna not to fear what they were going to face. They had faced tremendous trials, tribulation, and persecution in the past—and more was still to come. We are told repeatedly in Scripture (about 365 times!) not to be afraid, and Jesus reminded the believers in Smyrna of that truth.

They needed those words of encouragement because persecution did come. The Jews hated the Christians as much as the pagans did, and they sought to imprison them and even kill them. The most well-known case was Polycarp, who pastored the church at

Smyrna several years after Jesus' message to the church. Polycarp refused to follow the demands by the Roman Proconsul to recant his faith in Christ and proclaim that Caesar was lord. They threatened to burn him at the stake, yet he remained strong in his faith. His words to them were, "You threaten me with fire which burns for a little while and is soon extinguished. You do not know the coming fire of judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. What are you waiting for? Do what you wish."¹

OVERCOMING FEAR

Of the churches mentioned in the Revelation, Smyrna was one of two churches without any negative qualities; yet, it experienced persecution. Circle some of the reasons you've seen a church or a believer face fearful circumstances. Then answer the question.

Sin Evil Society Testing

Opposition by Unbelievers Natural Disasters

When have you seen someone substitute faith for fear in one of these situations?

*“He that overcometh shall inherit all things.
God has no poor children.”*

D. L. MOODY

Polycarp remained faithful until he died. Likewise, many of those in the church at Smyrna remained faithful as well. Christ promised “the crown of life” to those who remained faithful to Him even if it cost them their lives. While the church at Smyrna may have wanted a message of deliverance, the word they received was a message of endurance. They received words of encouragement to keep on pressing on. We need to hear that same word today. We need to endure whatever hardships come our

way. We need to be faithful in our walk with Christ no matter the cost. While our churches may have little in common with the first-century church in Smyrna and the persecution they faced, we too must be faithful unto death if we are to get a victor's crown.

QUESTION 3:

How do suffering and hardship work to strengthen our faith?

REVELATION 2:11

¹¹ “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death.”



Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna ended the same way His message to the church in Ephesus did: “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (v. 11). He wanted the churches not just to hear the words but take them to heart. Parents often ask something similar to their children: “Do you hear what I’m saying?” We ask that question because we want to make sure our audience hears our words correctly and can carry them out in the proper way. The real part of listening is acting on the words and the instructions we are given.

For the church in Smyrna, the instructions Jesus gave them were of the utmost importance. Certainly, anything Jesus says is

important, but He underscored that and called them to pay careful attention to His words for living if they wanted to receive the reward promised to them.

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways our church is like the church at Smyrna?

You may be familiar with the old story of a man who was applying for a job at the telegraph office. As he entered the office, he saw the sign on the wall telling him to fill out the application and take a seat until he was called in for an interview. The man filled out the application and sat down among several other applicants. In a few minutes, the man stood up and walked through the doors where the interviews were taking place. After a brief time, he came back along with the manager who announced the job had been filled.

Needless to say the other applicants became upset and complained that they were never given a chance to be interviewed. Besides, the man who got the job was the last man to fill out an application. The manager told them that, if they had been listening, they

would have heard the telegraph ticking out a message: “If you understand this message, come into the office and the job is yours.” It pays to listen!

Jesus finished this letter by telling them they do not need to fear death. Unless Jesus returns in our lifetime, we all face physical death. Jesus was not referring to this death, but a second one—a final, eternal death that comes after the judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). That judgment will be a time of separating those who had a relationship with Christ during their lives on earth from those who rejected Him. None of us knows how we will die, but those who know Christ will not experience the second death (vv. 6,14). As we endure in Christ, we do not have to live in fear of death.

This message was given to the church in Smyrna, but it’s relevant to us today. Stay strong; stay faithful, and the victory will be yours in the end.

QUESTION 5:

What are practical ways to reject fear and embrace God’s promises for the future?



LIVE IT OUT

How will you listen to what the Spirit of God is telling you today? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Trust.** Christ tasted death for us so that we would not have to experience the second death. Turn from your sin and trust Christ to save you. Look on the inside front cover of this book for more about committing your life to Christ.
- ▶ **Thank.** Make a list of all the ways you are rich because of God's grace in your life. Spend time in prayer, thanking God for all the blessings He has given you.
- ▶ **Encourage.** If you know someone who is struggling in their walk with Christ, encourage them to endure and stand strong in Him. Use your example of endurance in the face of difficulties to encourage their steadfastness.

Hopefully you'll never experience a life-threatening situation because of your faith. But it's good to know that you can stand strong because of Christ.

¹ Charles E. Moore & Timothy J. Keiderling, eds., *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship* (Walden: Plough Pub. House, 2016).