

1. Introduction

- a. We are continuing to look through the 7 letters Jesus gives to the early churches. The letters are a way for us to diagnose our own hearts.
 - i. In the letters, Jesus is showing the churches—and us—that if we put our hearts on anything other than the grace and mercy of God shown through the good news that Jesus died for us to save us then we will always have something wrong with us.
 - ii. Jesus is commanding these churches—and us—to reevaluate what we have set our hearts on and to preach the Gospel message to ourselves again and again, new each day.
 - iii. The letter to the church of Smyrna is unique because it is 1 of only 2 of the letters where Jesus doesn't expose a problem within the church. He has nothing bad to say about them. They were doing all the right things and, unlike the church in Ephesus, they don't seem to have misplaced their true devotion and first love of Jesus.
 - iv. But Jesus tells them that they are about to go through an intense persecution exactly because they've been so faithful to him.
 - 1. He foretells of their suffering (v. 10 says there will be 10 days of suffering and trial which is another way of saying "complete" suffering).
 - 2. He uses the Greek word for suffering *thilpsis*. This word means intense, heavy pressure bearing down and crushing the sufferer. Image of a boulder
 - v. What is the purpose for their suffering? What is the result? Why is Jesus exposing them to this intense, painful suffering? We learn from this letter to Smyrna that suffering tests our faith, suffering tests our fears and suffering ultimately tests our crowns—where we find comfort and security along with our beauty

2. Crowns Through Suffering

- a. Suffering doesn't just test if we believe but suffering really tests why we believe—it reveals what we really rest in for security and comfort.
 - i. V. 9 mentions the "synagogue of Satan" and this has been often translated as (wrongly) being anti-Semitic.
 - 1. The Jewish population of this time was granted certain freedoms under the Roman government (tax exemption, military service exemption, and some religious freedom).
 - 2. But some in the Jewish population knew that they freedoms could be easily taken away if they were somehow associated with the growing Christian minority.
 - 3. So many in the Jewish community were betraying their Christian convert friends and family in order to distance themselves from the Christians.
 - 4. The Christians in Smyrna were therefore losing friends, family members, business colleagues, money, etc. all because of their faith.
 - 5. For them, the suffering would make them ask the question "Why do I believe in this faith?"
 - ii. Smyrnan people would have found their value in their wealth (cf. v 9) and the reputation their city held—the rights and privileges they had "earned" but their suffering will reveal this as they are "tested" (cf. v 10)
- b. Jesus is essentially saying to them "if you rest your value and worth—if you find your happiness in anything other than me, it ultimately will leave you during the dark times of suffering in your life. And then what will you lean on for support? What will form your identity and sense of self-worth when everything is stripped away from you?"

3. Crowns Through the Gospel

- a. Consider all that these Christians were subject to suffer. How can they not be afraid? Summon up courage? No!! The opposite of fear isn't courage. It's perfect love.
 - i. Have to know we are loved if we are ever going to defeat the fear. Where do you find this love?
 1. Look at the way Jesus introduces himself in v. 8 and 9—I know. I have died. I am alive.
 2. Every letter he introduces himself differently. This is key for each church to relate to him in a particular matter.
 3. Why does testing and suffering occur in the lives of Christians? Jesus doesn't give an answer.
 - a. He gives a relationship. He has known suffering.
 - b. Jesus angered over death. He takes your suffering personally.
 - b. Ultimately, Jesus gives the Smyrnan church, and us, a rather unique promise (v. 10, 11).
 - i. No second death. Everything said becomes untrue at the point Jesus comes back.
 - ii. Also, they get the “crown of life”
 1. This was a paradox to what Smyrna was known for where the “crown” of the city's buildings was their source of pride and comfort
 2. But Jesus inverts this understanding of how you and I tend to “crown” ourselves
 3. He gets the crown of thorns. He was the true king mocked for you.
 4. What then can you not endure? He got the painful crown of thorns we deserved so that we get the crown that lasts forever.
 - iii. What pulls us away from him will be the need to crown ourselves. And suffering reveals what we've truly crowned ourselves with!
 1. But the gospel gives us an entirely different crown.
 2. The cross is about losing power and giving up the need to crown ourselves.
 - iv. We get the crown that Jesus deserved. This crown of life being given to us while Jesus gets the cross of death tells us "you are infinitely more broken than you ever could imagine and yet infinitely more glorious and loved than you could ever dream" and we know this to be true because our God was the only God who says "I'll not remove your suffering, but I'll show you that I went through the ultimate suffering so that when you go through your suffering you'll know it's a shadow of the ultimate suffering that you never have to go through (the second death and complete abandonment by God)."
 - v. Is our crown built out of our good deeds, our accomplishments, our achievements, our own worth? Or is our crown built out of the free grace of God that calls us beautiful and promises to never abandon us in our times of suffering? When tests in our life expose where we hold our “crown”—what do we find? The crushing weight of suffering? Or the gracious gift of God's face?
 1. Martha Snell Nicholson:

I stood a mendicant of God before His royal throne
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.