



## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

*"Sticks & Stones May Break My Bones  
But The Second Death Will Never Hurt Me"*  
2:9-11

The believers in Smyrna may have anticipated their letter more than the saints in any of the other seven churches. They were desperate to hear a word of encouragement from their Lord.

**Revelation 2:9** "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

The word **works** does not appear in most of the ancient manuscripts. They simply read, **I know your tribulation**.

The **tribulation** of the believers at Smyrna initially involved two things: **poverty** and **blasphemy**.

**Poverty** is the word used of destitute beggars. It wasn't just that they were poor and had little; they had nothing and were reduced to

beggary. If a person refused to offer a pinch of incense to Caesar, he would be excluded from the trade guilds and couldn't work to earn a living. As supposed traitors to Rome, their goods would be confiscated - perhaps even given to the "loyal" citizens who turned them in to the authorities.

Christians are commanded to obey the government - even if the government is ungodly. They are also commanded to obey God rather than men. Thus we obey the government, submitting to its laws, unless it asks us to violate our conscience in an area clearly condemned by Scripture.

Jesus says of them **but you are rich**. They were rich in the commodities of the kingdom of heaven. Listen to these verses:

**Matthew 6:20** ... lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

**James 2:5** ... my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Your true wealth is measured in spiritual terms. You are a pilgrim on your way home, just passing through this life.

The believers were also the objects of **blasphemy**:

**Revelation 2:9** "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

The Jews of the first century were the instigators of persecution against the church. Jesus had encountered their **blasphemy** many times in His public ministry. One time they accused Him of having a devil; another time they called Him the illegitimate son of Mary. Now His followers were being similarly blasphemed.

Christians were accused of all sorts of wild things. For example: The Christians celebrated communion and spoke of partaking of the body and blood of Jesus. The Jews told Rome that Christians were cannibals!

Two cannibals met one day. The first cannibal says, "You know, I just can't seem to get a tender Missionary. I've baked them, I've roasted them, I've stewed them, I've barbecued them, I've tried every sort of marinade. I just can't seem to get them tender."

The second cannibal asks, "What kind of Missionary do you use?" The other replied, "You know, the ones that hang out at that place at the bend of the river. They have those brown cloaks with a rope around the waist and they're sort of bald on top with a funny ring of hair on their heads."

"Ah, ha!" the second cannibal replies. "No wonder you're having trouble... *those are friars!*"

There is a wonderful comfort in the choice of the word **blasphemy**. Normally you think of someone blaspheming God (or Jesus). **These Jews were thus treating the saints just like their Lord!**

Jesus calls these Jews **those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan**. This is similar to what He told the group of Jews in the eighth chapter of John who accused Him of being illegitimate. Physically, they were Jews - the blood descendants of Abraham. But spiritually they were of their father the devil. They were the devil's tool as he sought to stamp-out the testimony of Jesus Christ. Religion is one of the devil's greatest tools!

Get ready for something heavy: Jesus told these suffering saints that the worst was yet to come!

**Revelation 2:10** "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Notice these key phrases: **things which you are about to suffer**, **the devil is about to throw some of you into prison**, **you will have tribulation**. **Poverty** and **blasphemy** were just the beginning of their **tribulation**. It would get much worse. Some of them would be called upon to **be faithful until death** - to die for their testimony.

How is this a word of comfort and encouragement? Let's realize four things about **tribulation**:

1. First, **tribulation** can be satanic in its cause. When it is we can take the Job-approach. God has reviewed the devil's strategy and has approved it with significant changes. He has set and limited the scope of it. What the devil meant to destroy you God uses to develop and disciple you.
2. Second, **tribulation** is spiritual in its effect. In verse ten Jesus says it comes that you may be **tested**. Job put it best when he, being crushed by suffering, said, **When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold** (Job 23:10).
3. Third, it is short in its duration. **You will have tribulation ten days**. There is always something to look forward to.

The exact meaning of **ten days** is in dispute. It could mean one or more of these three things:

1. It could be a way of saying "for a short time."
2. It could refer to a period of ten particularly cruel years of persecution by the emperor Diocletian.
3. It could refer to ten periods of extreme persecution by ten different Roman emperors. History does record these ten periods; and, remember, one of the interesting things about the letters to the seven churches is that they represent successive periods of church history. Whichever meaning you ascribe to **ten days**, Jesus was saying that the crushing would have a definite, fixed duration. From an eternal perspective, it would be short in duration. Every trial, every affliction, every suffering, is short - set for a specific time by Jesus.
4. Fourth, tribulation is sweet in its release. It releases *fearlessness* and *faithfulness*.

**Do not fear**, Jesus said. What a sweet fragrance is released in your life and from your life as you face danger and difficulty with no fear.

Literally Jesus said, **Stop being afraid**. If you were a beggar, being blasphemed, about to be thrown into bonds where you would be killed, and your pastor said, *Stop being afraid*, what would you think?

We need tough love. Not harsh; *never* harsh. But speaking the truth in love doesn't mean we have to beat around the bush. We need to

be more straightforward about Christian courage in the face of our **tribulation**.

**Be faithful unto death**, Jesus said. Some of the believers at Smyrna, and later under the reign of Diocletian, and later under the reign of each of the Caesar's who persecuted the church, would die.

We pray for and expect to be delivered out of our tribulations. There's nothing wrong with our expectation as long as it is tempered by a "Not my will but Yours be done" philosophy.

1. In the Book of Acts both James and Peter were imprisoned. James was martyred; Peter was released.
2. In the Book of Hebrews, in chapter eleven, after discussing God's miraculous deliverance of many saints the writer goes on to relate the martyrdom of others.

How are we to put that into perspective? The apostle Paul said it best:

**2 Corinthians 4:17** For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

Part of the **eternal weight of glory** is our potential crowns. The various temples scattered around Smyrna were called "the crown of Smyrna." It was similar to the volcanoes scattered around our region that we call "the ring of fire." In a play on words, Jesus promised them **the crown of life**. It appears to be a special reward for those who are **faithful unto death**.

We think of kings and queens but really this is the **crown** given to those who were victorious in an athletic competition. It is more what we would call a garland or a wreath.

There are several such crowns mentioned in the Bible: the crown of righteousness for a godly life (2Timothy 4:8), the crown of glory for faithful shepherds (1Peter 5:4), the crown of gold that seems to be for all the redeemed (Revelation 4:4), the crown of rejoicing (1Thessalonians 2:19), and the incorruptible crown for self-control in the race of life (1Corinthians 9:25), and the **crown of life** for martyrs.

Revelation 2:11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

As we've pointed out before, this phrase **he who has an ear** makes everything in these letters applicable to any Christian anywhere at anytime. **To the churches** makes the teaching in each letter applicable to any church at any time.

God the Holy **Spirit** anoints and empowers the written Word when it is read or taught. God is speaking to you in these words. I think expectation is important. If I expect to hear from God I probably will.

The **second death** is explained later in Revelation, in verses eleven through fifteen of chapter twenty. The **second death** is the judgment of all unbelievers from all time before Jesus at the Great White Throne. Having rejected eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they are cast alive into the Lake of Fire - into Hell - to suffer for eternity.

Christians have no fear of death, or of the **second death**. Death for the believers is a departure for home. They will never stand before the Great White Throne. Instead they will stand before their Lord who will reward them at His judgment seat, called the *bema* by the Greeks.

The Greek *bema* was a raised platform mounted by steps. It was the official seat of the judge. It was where the victorious athlete was rewarded with his crown.

You and I will ascend similar steps. Each footfall can get easier knowing that we have faithfully endured our suffering on earth.

Yes, we will toss our crowns at Jesus' feet in heaven (Revelation 4:10). **But that only makes me want them all the more!** Their use as an object to honor the Lord increases rather than decreases their value.

When you graduate from high school or college or an academy you toss your cap up into the air. It represents the achievement but also

the joy of its completion. You're gonna want a crown or two in Heaven!

