

8 "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.

"Dear Smyrna..."

IDENTIFICATION (**Thus saith the Lord**)

EVALUATION (**I know...**)

EXHORTATION (imperative)

MOTIVATION (**to him who overcomes**)

He who has ears to hear... (LISTEN!)

APPLICATIONAL OUTLINE:

1. Listen up to the one who is the Source of existence, the Source of circumstances and all of life, and the Master over death.

Don't just listen to Christ, but listen to Him as the Author of life – think through the implications.

2. God understands and empathizes with your suffering.
What does it matter what others think if He's for you?

3. Don't be afraid, be faithful to death.

4. Listen!

5. Overcome!

"Dear Smyrna..."

8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The second letter Jesus dictates to John is addressed to the fellowship in the city of Smyrna.

Smyrna was kind of like this area in that it was a very wealthy city and an exceedingly beautiful place – the most beautiful in Asia Minor. Smyrna had a fierce loyalty to Caesar. For hundreds of years they had literally worshipped Rome as a god.

At this time each person was required to become a citizen, which meant once a year you had to burn a pinch of incense and say, "Caesar is Lord." Upon doing that you would get a certificate. The penalty for not having a certificate was death. (Thomas) And doing that was more an expression of political loyalty than religious worship. It was just the way to express loyalty as a citizen.

The Jews were exempt, because it was known that they were an ancient, established, monotheistic religion. But new religions were illegal. For a while the Christians got by by explaining that they were really Jews. That worked until the Jews began to deny them. (Keener) And the Jews in the city were informing on the Christians. (Thomas)

So even though the Christians were loyal citizens, they couldn't express it in that way. And they paid the price.

Smyrna was likely the most dangerous city for a Christian to live in. The Caesar worship in Smyrna absolutely permeated every nook and cranny of the culture, and so the Christians would run into conflict constantly in every area of city's public life. (Beale)

IDENTIFICATION

Thus Saith the Master of Life

In the last letter, when Christ identified Himself, He emphasized His sovereign control over the fate of the churches and His active maintenance of the churches, because that church was in danger of losing its status as a church.

In this letter, the people are facing persecution and suffering and death for their faith, and Jesus wants to encourage them by promising them the crown of life and security from the second death.

So what part of the vision do you think He is going to emphasize?

8 These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Christ is Master of life in that He is eternal (self-existent) and has conquered death by dying and rising.

Smyrna was a city that called itself "the first in Asia." Christ says, "Thus saith the one who is really first – **the First and the Last.**" Jesus: "Listen folks, before you read this letter, I want to remind you that LIFE COMES FROM ME. It starts when I say it starts, it ends when I say it ends, it is enjoyed by those I chose to give it to, and it is removed from those I take it from.

(And keep in mind that when the Lord talks about life, He's talking about far more than having a pulse. There are people with a healthy pulse who are dead on their feet.

Their bodies function fine, but they don't have *life* in the sense that Jesus talks about life.) Their lives are so hollow and empty and unsatisfying, they it can hardly be called living. Jesus is the Source and Master of not only being alive but of really living.

Now let's look at the evaluation section of the letter, where the risen Christ gives His assessment of the church.

EVALUATION

I know...

9 I know your afflictions and your poverty...yet you are rich!

Life was hard in Smyrna for a Christian. Very hard. The word **afflictions** is the normal word for tribulation. It literally means, "That which causes pain." The root idea is that of pressure. The environment in Smyrna was an instrument of pain that put the squeeze on this church and kept clamping down on them tighter and tighter.

The Christians who lived there were enduring the constricting, suffocating pain that closes in on you with no way out. And one result was extreme **poverty**. I say "extreme" because of the word Jesus chose. *Penes* is the normal word for poverty. It refers to a person who has nothing extra at all – who can just

barely scrape together enough scraps to survive. But this is a different word. You remember it from the beatitude **Blessed are the poor in spirit**. It's πτωχείαν (*ptokos*)

A *ptokos* person isn't one who can barely scrape together enough to survive. He is one who has nothing and can't scrape together anything – someone who will die if someone doesn't have mercy and give him something. He doesn't say what the cause was. Smyrna was a very wealthy city, so this something had to happen for the whole church to be so poor.

Some of it may have been plundering from mob violence – people just breaking in to your home and ransacking it, and taking everything. We know that happened to the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews. (Heb.10:33) Mostly it was probably a situation where they were unable to get work because of the political climate of persecution.

One way or another these people were poor, and it was a poverty that was no fun – it caused pain. It was real suffering. And it's even harder to be poor in a place like Smyrna, which was a very wealthy city.

If everyone is poor, a culture learns to get along with a little. But the cost of living in Smyrna was high. The people were rich. The city was rich. And poverty in a context like that would have been especially hard.

It also makes it harder because envy creeps in. It just doesn't seem like you should have to suffer when everyone around you is doing so well.

It's easy to live without a hot tub if no one has one, but if all your neighbors have one, and all your friends have one, it begins to be a hardship not to have one. Same thing with a nice car or a house with enough room.

So imagine it's not a car or a hot tub, but food and some shoes to put on your feet. Everyone around you is getting hot tubs and new cars and big houses, and your kids are malnourished, and there is no food in the house, no money, and no prospect for work.

I could stand up here and easily give you 14 theological points about the value of poverty and affliction, but even so real poverty is hard, and Jesus says, "I know. I know what it's like." And He does. For Him this is the knowledge of experience.

yet you are rich!

Jesus says, "I know your poverty..." but He doesn't go on to give them tips on investing in real estate or budgeting techniques. He owns the cattle on a thousands hills, but He doesn't include a cash gift with the letter.

How does He solve the problem of their poverty? He just tells them they are rich, and then moves on to another point.

"What do you mean, Jesus? We are rich in what way?" He doesn't say. Jesus wants them (and us) to think about what is truly valuable and why.

Suppose I handed each of you a pad of paper and told you to write out a list of your big problems. 99% (if not 100%) would essentially be this: "I need a certain circumstance, and can't have it." "I need more income, I need my marriage situation to improve, I need healing, I need relief from emotional struggles, etc." And we go around thinking the only solution to the problem is to get that thing we need.

But very often Christ would offer a different solution. His solution is to tell you 3 words: “You are rich” and then leave you to figure out what that means. Because in figuring out what that means you think through some very important things.

You can start by reading Eph.1. And if you don’t immediately get 20 right off the bat, you aren’t even trying. Then do the same thing in 1 Peter 1 and Romans 8. And then start thinking about the things on that list. And spend more time thinking about those things than the things you want but don’t have.

Do that and 99% of your problems will be solved.

Jesus takes that approach, because He knows that if He just gives you all the things you want, 0% of your problems will be solved. They will just morph into different problems.

Because if I’m not satisfied with the riches I have in Eph.1, I certainly won’t be satisfied with a higher salary or different house or different relationships or less suffering.

I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

This is talking about people who were ethnically Jewish, but not true Jews, because they did not follow in Abraham’s footsteps of faith. (Ro.4:12)

Rom 9:6 **For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.**

Ro.2:28 **A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly,**

Only those who bow the knee to Christ are included in what Gal.6:16 calls **the Israel of God**

There was a large and hostile Jewish community at Smyrna, and they didn’t go away. They were still around 6 decades later when Polycarp was burned at the stake in Smyrna. (Barclay, *Seven Churches*, p. 31).

Just like we see so often in Acts, they hated the Christians, and persecuted them.

One form the persecution took was in false accusations. They were very unfair in their accusations. For example, they accused the Christians of immorality, because they greeted each other with a holy kiss and had love feasts. That sounds ridiculous to you, but the fact is, the people believed it.

Do you know what it’s like to be slandered? Misrepresented? Lied about? And then to have people believe the lies, and not to have the ability to set the record straight?

Have you ever experienced what it’s like to have someone with a larger platform than yours mislead people about you leaving you no recourse to correct the lie?

In their case those lies resulted in them being mistreated and becoming destitute.

That’s hard to take. It was happening to these people, and Jesus says, “I know about that. I know the truth.”

Again – He doesn’t solve their problem by giving them tips on how to get the truth out there in the public square, and how to get on the op-ed pages, and how to get a voice in the community...

He doesn’t tell them to assert their rights or give advice on improving their PR. The solution to the problem of people slandering you, and other people believing the lies is this: just know that Jesus knows the truth. The Christian response to unfair slander is not a crusade to set the record straight. We leave that in God’s hands.

Our response is to look to Christ and say, “Your opinion, and Your opinion alone matters to me.” This church and Philadelphia receive no rebuke at all, so let’s go on to the exhortation section, and see what the Lord tells them to do.

EXHORTAION

The Command

Jesus gives them two commands. See if you can you pick them out as I read.

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.

#1. Don’t be Afraid (Be Courageous)

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

Before we talk about the first three words of that sentence, let’s thing about the last 5. **you are about to suffer**

Let those words sink down into your ears for a moment. **You are about to suffer.**

If I’m in Smyrna sitting in church Sunday morning, weak and lethargic for lack of food, my kids crying, my home ransacked... and Jesus says, “**You are about to suffer.**”? Excuse me, but I thought I already was!

Do you have a sense of the feel of this letter? Jesus is saying, “It’s OK – don’t be afraid of what is looming right around the corner.” Something scary is coming. Something beyond what you are dealing with now.

Remember this letter is to us too.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see the slide our government is making in the direction of hostility toward Christianity. So it’s not farfetched to think persecution from the state could come our way.

But it wouldn’t have to come from the state. A lot of countries guarantee religious freedom in the constitution, but local law enforcement looks the other way when it happens.

And persecution isn’t the only kind of suffering. I don’t know how many years there are between you right now and the grave, and neither do you. But I want you to think about those years for a moment – your future, the portion of your life you haven’t yet lived. There is pain in those years. You have not shed your last tear.

And Jesus reminds us of all that, and then says, **Don’t be afraid.**

That’s important. A courageous attitude toward future suffering is crucial for the Christian life.

Are you afraid of suffering? We live in a culture that is scared to death of pain or suffering of any kind.

We experience some discomfort and our whole Christian life gets put on hold while we panic and get medication and read books and see therapists and make an all-out effort to feel better.

And we keep saying, “Once I feel better then I’ll get on with the Christian life.” (And we don’t realize that pain and suffering is intended all along as an integral part of the Christian life.)

We can’t let suffering paralyze us, or Satan, who is capable of causing suffering, will have us in the palm of his hand.

We can’t have the avoidance of pain be our motivation in life.

It’s understandable that the world does that. The way they feel is all they have. It makes sense that they would be afraid of suffering and avoid it at all costs.

But to us Jesus says, **Don’t be afraid.**

Now obviously, when you are facing persecution and torture and death, the emotions of fear will be there. But you don’t have to let them give way to intimidation or despair or cowardice.

The point of this isn’t that it’s wrong to feel a certain way or to experience certain emotions.

The point is to have courage in the midst of those emotions, and to be willing to endure them, to live with them, and to be undistracted from your task by them.

In verse 10 He tells them what the suffering will be.

10 I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you

It’s interesting that he says **the devil will put you in prison.**
v.9 called the Jews there **a synagogue of Satan.**

Here we are first introduced to a concept we will see a lot of throughout the book – that all these efforts of persecution carried out by evil men are not just random run-ins with ornery people...

They are all part of an orchestrated, organized, battle plan masterminded and carried out by Satan against the people of God as part of a massive, cosmic war.

Satan is behind a lot of things, but his agency usually isn’t highlighted. Most of the time Scripture highlights man’s role or points back to God ultimate control over everything.

But in this letter – this letter in which Christ wants to warn His church about suffering, and to reassure them not to be afraid, the big emphasis is on *Satan’s* agency. Why do you suppose that is?

The reason is because we need to understand the big picture.

1. You need to be especially alert, because you are in the cross hairs of a very formidable enemy. The Lord wants us to take that seriously.
2. Jesus wants us not to be afraid. That also requires that we understand Satan’s role. If the trials that come my way are the product of all kinds of random forces and random people doing random things, that’s scary.

But if it's all part of a war between God and the devil, I can understand my role in that. And if I should become injured or killed in that effort, so be it.

Knowing all that enables us to have courage.

Remember this when persecution comes. If someday you find yourself behind bars for your faith, remember the issue is not the judge or the jury that sentenced you, or the witnesses who testified against you. It's Satan – a defeated foe.

The devil is powerful. As long as God permits, he has the power to pull the strings required to have you thrown in prison for the rest of your life.

But ultimately he will be unable to achieve his goal among the faithful.

to test you

This is not the word “test to prove.” This word can mean either “test” or “tempt,” and there is a theological reason why there was one word for both concepts – because every trial is both a test from God and a temptation from Satan.

God sends difficulties as a test of your faith, and Satan attempts to use them to entice you to do evil.

And both are clearly the case here. The language points more toward Satan as the direct agent, but we know God is ultimately sovereign over what Satan does.

It isn't at all unusual in Scripture to see God allow Satan to tempt someone as a test to prove something to Satan. Remember that's why Job had all his troubles. Satan was roaming around looking for someone to destroy, and God said, “Have you considered Job?” “Why is He offering suggestions?” Because He had something He wanted to prove. Satan said, “He only serves You because You give him so much.” So God allowed Satan to take away the blessings. And disaster after disaster struck Job, he lost his health, he lost his money, he lost his home, his children died... He was left with only his wife, who I'm sure he wished he could trade for one of his children. Then came the friends who bless Job with 22 chapters of terrible advice. They were the original Christian therapists and they didn't know anything. And through it all Job remained faithful, which proved Satan wrong and glorified God.

The same thing happened with Peter. In Lk.22:31 Jesus said to Peter "**Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.** You can imagine Peter: “You said ‘no’ right?” “I said ‘yes.’ But I have also prayed for you so your faith won't fail. And when you recover from your fall, strengthen your brothers.”

“The devil has asked permission to work you over, but don't worry – I'm praying that you won't be completely destroyed...” “So once you recover and get back on your feet, strengthen your brothers.”

When we go to God with our suffering, He doesn't always tell us what we want to hear. God puts Satan on a long leash and uses what Satan does to accomplish His perfect plan.

Jesus: “I know your suffering.” But He doesn't promise relief. He only promises it will get worse. “I know you have suffered in the past, I know you are suffering now, but let me tell you about your future. In the future...you're going to prison.

prison

At that time prison sentences were not given as the punishment for a crime. They had prisons for detaining people – primarily those awaiting trial. Sometimes for other reasons. But usually if you were in prison it was because you were awaiting execution.

These people were going to be in trouble with the government.

and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

What's the deal with the 10 days? What's going to happen after a week and a half that will end the persecution?

It seems to me the 10 days must be symbolic referring to a short period of time. In relationship to the church, it will be a relatively short period. But short doesn't mean easy.

#2. Be Faithful

Be faithful, even to the point of death,

They will be held for trial, and it will be a capital trial, and it sounds like they end up being declared guilty and sentenced to death as a result of faithfulness to Christ. So Jesus tells them to be faithful to the point of death.

Perhaps the opportunity is extended to them to go ahead and call Caesar "lord," and escape execution. That would be pretty tough. You can imagine thinking, "My children will be left without parents, the church needs my help, all I have to do is say these words..."

So Jesus urges them: "Remain faithful to death."

Richard Wurmbrand was at a conference in communist Romania, and one religious leader after another got up and spoke about how the church and the Communist party were compatible, and that Jesus wasn't really God, etc.

When she could stand the blasphemy no longer, his wife leaned over and said, "Aren't you going to stand up and say something?"

"If I do, you will no longer have a husband."

"I do not wish to have a coward for a husband."

So he got up and spoke, and confessed his faith in Christ as God. And he paid the price in ways that if I described it it would make you nauseous. That's the kind of thing Christ is demanding here.

Christ's message is not, "Here's how to get out of the circumstances you are in." It's this: "I understand you are suffering. I understand. Keep it up..."

The issue isn't to solve the problem of suffering. Death will do that soon enough. The issue is to suffer to the point of death. "Hang in there. Be faithful – not for a long time. Just until death."

How's this for a Gospel tract: "God loves you and has a plan for you to suffer and suffer and suffer and then die." Does that sound radical to you? That's normative Christianity. Christ accepts no one who is unwilling to surrender his entire life.

You would think with everything the Bible says about trials, we wouldn't have any problem accepting them. But we have a massive problem accepting them.

The time and energy and money we spend trying to alleviate our discomfort is staggering. And most of it is so unnecessary.

Do we need to go through all that Scripture says about the purposes of trials? You all know trials produce perseverance and character (Jas.2, Ro.5).

“But how much perseverance do I need? I can’t stand to learn any more perseverance!” Those are the words of someone who needs to learn perseverance.

Very often a close game is won in the final minutes of the game by the team who has the most endurance. The same goes for battles and wars.

This whole life is a spiritual warfare, and we have a very formidable opponent who will not give up after you stand strong a time or two. He will attack, and attack, and attack.

And he isn’t discouraged that very few Christians fall in those initial encounters. You don’t expect to win a war with the first shot.

He knows from experience that it’s after a long battle at the point of tremendous fatigue that Christians can often become easy pickings.

At least that would be the case if it weren’t for God constantly building perseverance in us by means of trials. People say, “I can’t stand this suffering any more. I’ll do without perseverance. Just get me out of this pain.” They say that because they don’t understand the value of perseverance.

It’s not just some lovely little virtue that will make you a little more well rounded person – toward the end of the battle it’s life or death!

I confess sometimes I see some devastating trial come to some of you and I think, “God, she can’t take that now. She’s so worn out and tired. It’s going to crush her. Can’t it wait?”

But you don’t gain endurance from doing one more rep...when you are fresh. You don’t gain endurance from running one more lap when you haven’t run any laps today.

You can only gain endurance by *pushing* yourself to the limit of fatigue and *then* pushing farther.

You want to know why God is pushing you so hard? Go rent Rocky. (It doesn’t matter which one – they’re all the same. He spends the whole movie training – pushing himself past the brink to gain the razor edge margin that he wins the fight by).

Just watch that and remind yourself that you are training not for a boxing match, but for a war – a battle to the death.

And what’s at stake is not money or a title or fame or popularity or personal fulfillment... What’s at stake is nothing less than the *glory of God* through your life and death.

And you don’t think you need perseverance? Maybe you’d rather be a casualty in the war than the victor, if being the victor is going to cost so much?

If you think that way remind yourself that the reason you need to be victorious is not just so you won’t be a casualty. It’s so God’s name is honored and glorified.

I heard a man the other day talking about all the incredible trials and struggles he is going through. And then he said, “My reaction to that is I say, ‘Devil if you’re going to try to take me out you better just take me out, because as long as I am on this planet, I’m going to bring glory to God.’”

That should be our attitude: “I may be hobbling on one leg, I may lose an eye or a hand, I may be bruised, hemorrhaging, bones broken...”

“I may feel like I’m almost dead, but as long as I’m not dead, as long as I can draw a breath I will use that breath to glorify God.”

Isn’t that exactly what Paul said in 2 Cor.1:8-10

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Paul suffered from full-blown clinical depression, despairing even of life, and in the very next verse says “That’s OK, because even that depression is something that came from God for a purpose – to teach us humility.”

That’s the Christian attitude. Every time suffering comes we say, “Oh, I guess God has decided I need this. Yes Lord. I’ll willingly endure this, because You know what You are doing.”

So suffering is crucial for gaining perseverance. But there is far more to it than that.

In Ro.3 we are in desperate straits, because we fall short of the glory of God. But by ch.5 we are rejoicing over the real, certain hope we have of *obtaining* the glory of God.

Ro.5:2-5 we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

We get excited about the glory of God, and so we get excited about suffering and pain, because that’s our ticket to the hope of the glory of God. That’s the path.

If you are beside yourself with anticipation to go to Wonderfulville, and the map says, “take the narrow, winding, rocky, difficult, steep road,” then you get real excited when you find that narrow, rocky road...

- not because you like rocks and difficulty, but because you know where that road goes.

Heb.5:7-9 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

Jesus is the eternal, omniscient God. He knows everything, including everything there is to know about suffering and obedience.

But prior to the incarnation He had not experienced suffering in the midst of trials. And in order to bring Him to the point of perfect completion as the source of eternal salvation, He had to personally experience the process of what it’s like to learn obedience through suffering.

In 1 Peter 4:12 God says **Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.**

That’s not any shock. Don’t panic. If you are suffering, don’t think your life is out of whack – you are right in sync.

God didn’t call you just to obey. He called you to *learn* obedience through suffering.

This is something you signed up for. If you aren't willing to suffer, find another religion, because following Christ is a call to suffer.

John 15:20 **No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.**

Acts 9:16 **I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."**

Most of the things people come to counseling for result from an unwillingness to endure suffering.

The circumstances in your marriage or your job or your family or your loneliness are painful, and so to escape that pain you do foolish or sinful things.

Your highest priority is feeling better, so you escape into worldliness, TV, recreation, drinking, drugs, adultery, achievement, education – whatever it takes to escape the pain.

But you find that you just trade one kind of pain for another, and when you can't stand it any longer you come for counseling.

And that's why most therapists are so little help, because all they are doing is trying to figure out how to alleviate your pain – which just feeds the whole problem.

Then you come to me, and I talk to you about how to simply accept pain, and how to develop a willingness to suffer, and right away you understand why the therapists have so many more clients than I do.

Suffering can take some very subtle forms. There are a lot of ways to suffer. One form of suffering is guilt – the anxiety you feel over not being as good a person as you ought to be.

Some people aren't willing to deal with that pain, and they justify it by saying, "I just hate my sin." When in reality they love their sin.

What they hate is that crummy feeling they have inside – that emotional pain that comes from realizing you are not as good as you should be. And they are not willing to endure that suffering.

The anxiety that comes from your sinfulness should be handled the same way you handle any other anxiety.

So Christ doesn't offer relief in this life. He just calls them to hang in there until death.

and I will give you the crown of life.

The crown of life is not some hat you put on your head that says "life" across the front that you wear all over heaven. It's the crown (or reward) which is life. It's not a crown that represents life. It is eternal life itself.

Don't think of a king when you see this word "crown." A better image would be a gold medal in the Olympics. When someone had a great victory in the games or in battle, they would be given a wreath on their head. It was a symbol of victory, and, above all, joy! – a joy that makes all the pain of getting there worth it.

This is the crux of the issue. Remember how Jesus identified Himself? He is the one who determines whether you have life and what kind of life.

Our pursuit of relief is really a quest for life. We don't just want a heartbeat. We want life that's really life.

So He reminds us that if we are on a quest for full, rich life, that is found not in masking our pain or relieving our struggle...but in receiving favor from the One who is the Master of life, the Author of life and the Giver of life.

When you have the flu, you seek to get rid of the flu, because the flu steals some of the living out of life. The same is true for a sprained ankle or a toothache...or depression or anxiety or fear or oppressive guilt.

We want full, rich, abundant, life – real living, the way life ought to be, life that is really life. And when the pieces and parts and components of death come and rain on the parade of life, our instinct is to resist that.

But Jesus says, “If what you want is the deepest, richest, truest life, you will find that not through fighting against suffering and trying to find the fullness of life in this world...

You will find it only by following Me, the Author of life, the Master and Provider of real life. And if you do that. If you follow me, Jesus says, I will lead you right down through the valley of death, through pain, sorrow, depression, suffering, persecution – right through to fullness of life – eternal life...

Life that is not only infinitely long, but infinitely rich.

Right now you are out in a violent, freezing, dangerous storm. And you are huddled under the branches of a little shrub, trying to survive. And Jesus is calling you out from under that little shrub into the warmth and comfort of His father's house in heaven.

But in between is the yard, which is unsheltered. And Jesus is calling to you, “Make a run for it!” And we come out from under the bush, and we feel the wind and rain, and we retreat back under the bush. Jesus calls, “Don't be afraid of that suffering. It's a small yard to cross. It won't take long. Come on!” And we try again, and get beamed in the bean with a big piece of hail, and we retreat back to our little refuge.

So many times we fail to make progress not because we don't have a Bible, not because we fail to pray, not because we aren't committed to the fellowship, but just because we refuse to endure suffering.

Are you having a rough time? Do you need relief and comfort? Then give up your efforts to comfort yourself, and start running toward the comfort Giver.

And there is only one road that goes to the comfort Giver, and it's Discomfort Blvd. Pain Alley.

What you are longing for is fullness of life. And that comes only from the Author of life. And the only way to get to Him is faithfulness to the point of death.

Stop resisting death and all the little components of death that cause pain. Realize that hell on earth is the path to heaven, and follow Him.

He brings this up again in v.11 (in the motivation).

MOTIVATION

11 He who overcomes will certainly not be hurt by the second death.

the second death isn't any mystery. We read about it at the end of Revelation.

In Rev.20 and 21, death and Hades and the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-all the people whose name was not written in the Book of Life, their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

There are only two options. You can spend this life trying to attain a good life by doing what you want...only to end up in the Lake of Fire in eternal death,

...or give up your life to Christ, embrace suffering even to death, and receive eternal life.

It was a phrase the Jews used to describe the final punishment of the wicked (Expositor's).

Listen!

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Think this through Creekside. Don't sit there and say, "That's wonderful" and then leave it all sitting there on the pew when you leave.

Pursue this truth, and you will become one who has ears to hear it. Notice this is **what the Spirit says to the churches** (even though they are red letters).

"But isn't it Jesus who is speaking here?" Yes, but the only way a person can have ears to hear what Jesus says (understand and accept it) is through enlightenment by the Holy Spirit.

And as we found last week, that comes only to those who have enough interest to vigorously and relentlessly pursue the meaning.

What happened to Smyrna?

One of the people in that church who had ears to hear this was a man by the name of Polycarp.

Picture this: you are visiting the church in Smyrna on a particular Sunday morning, and in between sentences you could hear a pin drop in that place – even though it's packed, while the church sits *riveted* listening to a pastor read this scroll that just arrived from the Apostle John – a personal letter from the Lord Himself addressed specifically to this local church!

Next to you sits a man in his mid twenties by the name of Polycarp, and we know these words took root in his soul, because of how he died.

It happened on a Sabbath day - Saturday, February 23rd, A.D. 155.

Polycarp is an old man now and has become the pastor of the church.

It was the time of the public-games; the city was crowded; and the crowds were excited.

In the midst of that someone began getting people to shout: "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for." (they called Christians atheists because they rejected the idols).

To find out where he was, they tortured a slave girl who eventually collapsed from the torture. Polycarp was found and arrested.

Not even the police captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief journey to the city, he pled with the old man: "What harm is it to say, 'Caesar is Lord' and to offer sacrifice and be saved?"

But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord. His final request was to be granted one final hour of prayer.

When he entered the arena the proconsul gave him the choice: "You can curse the name of Christ and make sacrifice to Caesar, or you can die."

"Eighty six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

So the crowds came flocking with sticks, and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were leaders in bringing wood for the fire.

They started to tie him to the stake. Polycarp said, "Don't bother."

As the flames rose up and began to consume his flesh, Polycarp prayed out loud:

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of you, God of angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before you, I bless you that you have granted to me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before you, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you, the God without falsehood and of truth, have prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise you for all things. I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Child, through whom be glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come. Amen. (Barclay)

He became known as the "twelfth martyr in Smyrna" (IDB, 4:393). And Polycarp was in no way an isolated incident. There were many mass executions of Christians in Smyrna.

I know what some of you are thinking: "I can't relate to that. I'm not tortured or starved or threatened with death..."

Please don't miss the entire point of this letter. The *degree* of suffering couldn't be farther from the point. The issue is your *attitude* toward suffering.

Are you willing to suffer anything for Christ? To give up what you know full well you need to give up?

To stop living with the goal of feeling better and start persevering in pursuit of the Giver of life?

What's the solution to your suffering? 2 things:

1. Be courageous. Don't be afraid of pain.
2. Be faithful to the point of death.

And you will receive real life.

Under Polycarp's ministry the church became deeply divided over the docetic heresy, which suggests Christ didn't have a physical body. (Caird).

Benediction: 1 Pe.5:10,11 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.