

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Smyrna: Fear Not

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. (Revelation 2:8–11, KJV 1900)

The more we focus our hearts and minds on the Lord in the heat of our trials the less we struggle with fear. I have often found amazing comfort during life's trials from the many "Fear not" passages in the Bible, though I confess that many times that comfort came after a moment of rebuke because I had fallen into fear-paralysis. The Lord's words to this church, "Fear not..." are not set in a Pollyanna attitude that blindly chooses to ignore the things that we do not like or wish to face. The Lord tells the church that she shall suffer, but that she should not fear those things that cause her suffering. Fear is a fascinating thing to study. Someone has written an interesting assessment of fear. When you fear God, you fear nothing else. When you do not fear God, you fear everything else. Notice the next points in the letter.

...behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days.... If you knew that you would shortly face prison or other intense "tribulation" because of your faith, how would you react? I suspect that most of us would immediately struggle with some element of fear. We tend to dislike anything that disrupts our soft, feathered nests; we fear their loss or disruption.

To be "tried" in Scripture often refers to a test. The Lord's "trying" of Abraham was neither a divine enticement nor a criminal proceeding. It was a test for Abraham's benefit, not God's. (James 1:13-17)

Commentaries on the Book of Revelation often spend significant time discussing the various numbers that appear in the book. No doubt many numbers in Revelation convey key information that we need to consider. For example, it would be impossible to consider the "...number of the beast..." in Revelation 13:18 as merely a meaningless number. Ray Summers, *Worthy is The Lamb*, suggests that the number ten in Scripture generally, and particularly in Revelation, conveys the idea of completeness from the human perspective. He lists as an example that God summarized His complete moral code for man in Ten Commandments. Perhaps; perhaps not. If the number ten in our present study conveys more than

ten literal tribulations that the Smyrna Church faced, the point is that they would face a full array of tribulations. Before the end of the season, they would face a "Full plate" of trials.

A more appropriate point for us in this passage serves to remind us that, regardless the number or texture of the tribulations that we shall face, our God is greater than any or all of them. Therefore, we should go into the faithful life, fully persuaded that our God shall be with us and shall enable us to endure if we stand closely to Him and keep our faith's eye on Him as we go through the trials.

...be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. Sometimes very sincere and well-meaning Christians tend to misconstrue every appearance of crowns in the Bible. If the Lord promises a crown to His faithful, obedient child, they conclude that the crown can only be bestowed in heaven. Quite often the same passage that reveals a promised crown also indicates the time and nature of the crown. In this case, the Lord's promise is for a "...crown of life..." not a "crown after life." This promise follows a consistent pattern that we find throughout Scripture. The Lord promises to bless, to "Crown" His obedient children with blessings in the here and now.

Being faithful unto death does not necessarily mean that we die for our faith. It rather means that we value God and our faith so highly that we are willing to die, should it become necessary, for our faith, rather than forsake our faith because we feared death. Jesus described this requirement of faithful and true discipleship. (Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24) What are we willing to do for our faith? How much of self are we really willing to deny, to give up, possibly to sacrifice, to hear the "Well done, faithful servant" from our Lord?

The promised crown in this setting is only given to those who choose to stand faithfully to their Lord in the heat of trial. Apply this principle to our present setting. We can quite easily speak boldly about our faith on a Sunday morning after we just heard a good sermon. How strong is our commitment, say on a Thursday afternoon, when an

intense trial invades your world unexpectedly and, in your assessment, unfairly?

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.... During this extended study on the New Testament church, we have examined with some regularity the question of ignorance. For individuals who turn from their faith and forsake the Lord's commandments, one of which is quite distinctly not forsaking our assembling with them in fellowship and worship (Hebrews 10:25), the rationalization that you hear is quite often one of two scenarios. 1) "I didn't know what I did was wrong. Pastor, why didn't you tell me it was wrong?" As our present passage tells us that the Spirit speaks to the churches, Scripture also teaches that He speaks to individuals. He need not send a thunderbolt or a mystical vision to speak. Perhaps most often He speaks through deep and abiding convictions in the hearts of those whom He directs to change their course. 2) The "Blame game." In this mind game, someone said or did something that they shouldn't have done, so the erring person chooses to simply find the exit door and abandon faith and godly obedience. The New Testament lays significant emphasis on the obvious fact that we live in a broken world and that we live in the midst of broken people, ourselves being just as broken as they. The New Testament instructs us with several strategies to deal with that brokenness, but never—not even one time—does the New Testament ever tell us to abandon our full service to the Lord because of what someone said or did. This action always contradicts and fails the Lord's "Be thou faithful unto death" commandment to us. The Lord speaks to us. Are we listening?

*I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, **after their own thoughts.*** (Isaiah 65:2 KJV; emphasis added)

How easily we coast through the routine issues of life and reasonably apply Biblical principles to our decisions, only to wholly abandon Biblical principles and follow our own thoughts and wishes when something really important for our life-course confronts us. Why do we think that the major life-changing decisions are exempt from God's direction in Scripture, open to whatever we choose to do? I suspect that a large majority of pastoral counseling to believers who seek help in times of trouble relates to just such bad choices. We face something that is so very important to us. We have strong desires for a particular outcome, an outcome that may not be the Lord's choosing for us. Our "...own thoughts..." our emotions take over and rationalize our choices. Later, when the desired outcome is nowhere to be found, and our life is in a shambles, we are bewildered and wonder why things turned out so badly. Clichés can be incredibly frustrating and superficial, but they can be quite true at times. To apply an apt cliché to this

situation, "The chickens always come home to roost." Scripture reminds us of a pattern that God faithfully observes in our lives and in our choices.

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. (Galatians 6:7 KJV)

We reap what we sow, not what we fantasize "...after our own thoughts." The more important and life changing the choices we face the more we need to faithfully abide in Biblical obedience—and listen to hear what He tells us. "He that hath an ear let him hear..." If we ignore the Lord's clear teachings when we make our choices, we can hardly later take the consequences of our bad choices to the Lord and ask Him to "Bless this mess."

He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. The Lord first emphasized the positive, the blessings that shall "Crown" the life of the faithful. Now he applies a negative to reinforce the point. This sentence is not in itself an admonition, but rather a statement of fact. The Lord did not tell us to overcome so that our own overcoming shall enable us to avoid the second death. He did not tell us that, if we are really His child, we shall in the end overcome and do the right thing. He states a truth in the simplest of terms.

Sadly often, the folks who make "Assurance of salvation" the primary theme of their preaching seem inclined to leave their hearers without any assurance! They focus on all the negatives, and they forget the positive, what their Lord has done.

We live our lives in the constant present, and we often use our present to assess our past choices, including the blessings and the chastening that we experienced from those actions. A correct view of our past will remind us of the Lord's incredible goodness. Every trial in life does not result in a positive outcome. When we make bad choices, bad results occur, and we strive to recover from them. When we put the Lord first and apply sound, Biblical principles of behavior and of choices to our lives, we realize the Lord's rich and faithful blessings. We overcome. In this closing point, John gives us a comforting truth. If we serve the Lord as He commands us in Scripture—if we, through faithful service experience this God-honoring, life-blessing victory, "overcoming,"—we live with the strong reminder of our future eternal joys with our Lord. In fact, living in faithfulness includes living life, even in the heat of the fiercest trial, with the joys of that "Blessed hope" of eternity with our Lord, free from the trials and disappointments of this life. The faithful life is ever accompanied with this comforting reminder that the second death, final, eternal separation, shall not take us. Rather than living in perpetual doubt and fear about our standing with the Lord, we live in joyful anticipation of the time when we shall be with Him and see Him as He is. (1 John 3:2)

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
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