

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## God's Message to Seven Churches: Smyrna: Comfort in Tribulation

*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)*

In our American culture, we have no sense of what persecution for our faith might mean. However, life in a broken world constantly exposes us to one form of brokenness or another. Life "under the sun" is not what it should be for the faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we do not face the same intense persecution as the people in the Smyrna Church, we may identify with them in a small way as we endure the various—and at times intense—difficulties of life. About ten years ago, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The time lapse from diagnosis to surgery was just over three weeks. Those three short weeks seemed like a torturous eternity for me as I waited and tried to endure it. Many of you can identify because of various difficulties that you have faced.

When people face any kind of major trial, they need the reminder that they serve One who is eternal. For Him, the brief moment of their trial is a nanosecond. He endures beyond the trial, so He can deliver and protect them through it. At some point during a particularly difficult time in my life, someone gave me a simple, but amazingly comforting quip. Sometimes the Lord delivers us **from** the trials of life. We never face the ordeals that might have invaded our world, and we can't even know about them. At other times, the Lord delivers us **through** the trials. He does not intervene to prevent the trial, but He stands faithfully and firmly beside us to comfort us and to give us sufficient grace to endure. At the time of John's writing, Smyrna was going "through" the trial, so she needed John's assuring words from "...the God of all comfort...." (2 Corinthians 1:3)

*These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive....* These words serve to remind us of the Lord's words in Revelation 1:8.

*I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1:8, KJV 1900)*

The Lord's message to this suffering church reminds her that her God is eternal. No event in

time can either define or confine Him. He transcends anything that they may experience or suffer in time. When her persecutors are gone, He shall be there for them. And, if her persecutors martyr some of them, He shall welcome them home into His eternal comforts. I recently read a small commentary on the Book of Revelation, **Worthy is the Lamb**, by Ray Summers. This is one of the most insightful and simple—believe it or not—commentaries on Revelation that I have ever read. Summers' primary premise is this. Any interpretation we make of Revelation must be meaningful and comforting to the book's first century recipients, or we have the wrong view of the book. This simple, and I believe correct, foundation eliminates the majority of popular mystical, allegorical, and speculative views. For a suffering church, such as Smyrna, the same premise holds true. These suffering saints needed comfort at that moment in their trials. The Lord gave John the message that would provide them with that comfort. Although their Lord faced far greater trials than anything they might endure, even to the point of dying, He was now alive. Death itself could not overcome Him, and He would stand by them through their trials, even their martyrdom. Even death at the hands of their persecutors could not destroy or defeat them.

*I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).* As "I know..." might have seemed a bit disconcerting to Ephesus in her smugness, that same phrase, "I know..." must have been a powerful comfort to the suffering saints in Smyrna. When faithful believers suffer, they can easily drift into a doubting "Does Jesus know...?" state of mind. Consider John's struggle in prison. No one could have been bolder in his preaching and in his confrontation of the self-righteous religious elite of his day than John, when he challenged them as a "...generation of vipers." However, in the isolated confinement of prison, he began to wonder. Jesus didn't send a scathing rebuke back to John with his messengers. Jesus didn't play the self-righteous, "John, if you are really born again, you won't have such doubts." He sent

a loving, compassionate reminder, "...shew John again..." (Matthew 11:4) Suffering believers need a comforting reminder that their Lord is well aware of their trials, and that He shall watch over and deliver them in the end, even if that deliverance involves deliverance "through" the trial.

*...but thou art rich...* Our materialistic world measures wealth only by one's balance sheet of financial values. You are considered "rich" only if your accumulated wealth or your annual earnings exceed a certain amount. We do not know why the Smyrna people were poor, but the message tells us that they were. Given the appearance of this adjective in the list of works, tribulation, and poverty, we might consider that their persecutors in some way deprived them of their possessions. In many cultures in the world today, a Christian is not allowed to advance in business or career because of his/her faith. The same principle seems to have been even more prevalent in the first century. The major point of the passage, however, is not what the Smyrna Christians lacked, but **what they did have**; "...but thou art rich."

*But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*  
(Philippians 4:19 KJV)

In our materialistic culture, any conscious distinction between a "want" and a "need" becomes quite tentative. This point should nudge us to remember that our Lord knows the difference between needs and wants clearly. He has promised faithfully to supply our needs; He has not promised to grant our self-indulgent wants. For a Smyrna believer, such a promise would have been precious indeed. What kind of needs did those suffering people face at the time they received this letter? Remember what you have, what God has given. Don't obsess about what you do not have.

*I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.* Paul defines the distinction between a Jew by family ancestry and a Jew **by grace**.

*For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.* (Romans 2:28–29, KJV 1900)

John's point suggests that the Smyrna church had encountered some who claimed the special privilege of being Jews based on their ancestry, but their attitude toward God and their conduct contradicted their claim. In the eighth chapter of John's gospel, we read of an extended conversation between Jesus and some Jews whose sinful disposition was similar to the people mentioned here. Consider the sharp distinction that appears in this passage. These folks viewed

themselves as God's elite, blessed people. Though at the time they worshipped in local synagogues, they retained an attitude of exclusivity. While they viewed the synagogue as their place of special devotion to God, the Holy Spirit uncovered the reality of their moral decay. Rather than worshipping in the synagogue of God, they had corrupted that place and what they did in it so wholly that it became the "synagogue of Satan." From the perspective of civil government, one class of people should never coerce another class to follow one particular religious viewpoint. However, God transcends civil human government, and God quite specifically defines true worship in Scripture, as well as false worship. Consider Paul's rebuking letter to the Galatians. By departing from the truth that Paul had preached to them—and they had believed at one time—they soon listened to and believed false teachers. Paul rebuked them because they had "...so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel." (Galatians 1:6) Not only had the Galatians forsaken the gospel, but they had also forsaken the God of the gospel, "...**him** that called you..." The Smyrna Church stood faithfully to her Lord and to His gospel.

As we read most of the New Testament epistles, the letters that begin with Romans and continue through the remainder of the New Testament, we should note that almost all of these letters were written to various churches and individuals because of a problem. They had failed their Lord and their faith-walk in some way, and the Holy Spirit directed the inspired writers of these letters to confront them and to correct the problem. When Paul defined the permanent function of the gospel, he did so in terms of just such correction. "...for the perfecting of the saints." (Ephesians 4:12a) We do not find a single New Testament letter written to already "Perfect" saints. Every time we hear preaching or study our Bibles, we should do so with a prayer, "Lord, show me my clay feet. Show me my own failures and give me grace to repent and serve You as You command in Scripture."

As we ponder the way of faithful service to God, we must face the convicting Biblical principle that God doesn't give each of us a blank sheet of paper and tell us to write our own worship plan and to create our own form of worship. He reveals in the New Testament a "...faith (a body of specific truths and a specific way of thinking and living our lives) which was once delivered to the saints." (Jude 1:3) Our Lord further commands us to "...earnestly contend..." for that specific faith.

At times in our world, no less than in the first century, we must confront and reject error in the lives of those around us. We must apply caution that we do so in harmony with the teachings of Scripture, and not by our personal preferences. He commands us to serve Him in His way, not ours. Are we prepared for such a life-consuming service?

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor