

**The Letter to the Church at Smyrna, No Rebuke, only Encouragement (2:8–11)**  
September 8, 2019

**Introduction:**

**Psalm 23 is probably the most memorable and memorized:**

**Let's say it together:**

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,*

*I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.*

The reason I invited all of us to read it together is because those words must have been so important to the church in Smyrna.

**Today's Theme:**

In pulling back the veil Jesus encourages the church in Smyrna. Jesus tells them that they will have trouble but they will receive a crown of life.

Let's read Re. 2:8-11:

*"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. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 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 life as your victor's crown.*

*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.*

- I. Come! Take Your Crown. That is the main point.
- a. As we look at these verses, we see a Goal—A Crown of Life Won by Jesus Awaits Us.
- i. I believe that is to be encouraging. Who here does not want to receive a Crown?
  - ii. Don't you want to receive a crown from King Jesus?
  - iii. Do we want to hear Jesus say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant"? (Matthew 25:21 and 23)
  - iv. I once heard of a son who may not have said it but he wanted his father to be proud of him. No matter what, he wanted his father to be proud of him. His father, was always expressing his pride in his other son, but not the younger one.
  - v. Isn't it encouraging that we can receive a Crown from King Jesus. However, receiving this crown may not be easy. Actually, I dare say that it isn't easy.
  - vi. 2 Timothy 3:12: *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted...***
  - vii. Matthew 10:16-23: *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. **17** Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. **18** On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. **19** But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, **20** for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. **21** "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. **22** You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. **23** When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*
  - viii. The Christian life is not the easiest life. We will face hardships. Those are simply two of the passages regarding this.
  - ix. So, let's look at what Jesus says regarding this.
- a. Persecution: many frightening things stand between us and the Crown of Life.
- i. This is what Jesus says. There will be difficult times. However, we are to stand strong. We are to stay the course. We are to persevere.
  - ii. This instruction is first and foremost to the church at Smyrna, but I believe it is to us as well. I think these letters represent all of the churches as well as specific churches. Let's consider Smyrna.

*Smyrna was a beautiful and important seaport boasting a population of about 200,000, quite large for its time. It was a center for science and medicine, and the birthplace of the noted author Homer. It was*

also a regional center for emperor worship in the first century, whose citizens were expected to burn incense to Zeus once a year.<sup>1</sup>

- iii. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna was born in A.D. 69 and could have known the Apostle John whose writing he quotes. A defender of orthodoxy, Polycarp was martyred about A.D. 155 because he refused to deny his faith in Christ.
- iv. Marcion will later deny that the God who created the world is the Lord, Jesus Christ. He will claim that there is nothing to God but love, then an evil, false god was responsible for the suffering and death of Jesus. Valentinus will convince many that everything physical is evil, that the spiritual world alone is good, that heaven is made up of "aeons"--- angel-like, almost divine beings, one of which fell into sin and created the world. To Valentinus, even Christ is an aeon that adopted a human body.
- v. Many will consider this nonsense to be wisdom, but Polycarp will know better. He will defend the truth of the Trinity, the truth of the Divine and human natures of Christ, the truth of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection for sinners.
- vi. *The year was A.D. 155, and the persecution against Christians swept across the Roman Empire and came to the city of Smyrna. The proconsul of Smyrna, swept up in this persecution, put out an order that the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was to be found, arrested, and brought to the public arena for execution. They found Polycarp and brought him before thousands of spectators screaming for blood. But the proconsul had compassion on this man who was almost a hundred years old. He signaled the crowd to silence. To Polycarp he said, "Curse the Christ and live."*
- vii. *The crowd waited for the old man to answer. In an amazingly strong voice, he said, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How dare I blaspheme the name of my king and Lord!" With that Polycarp became a martyr.*<sup>2</sup>
- ii. So, Jesus calls these people a "Synagogue of Satan." That is pretty strong. What does that mean. Citizens of fallen Babylon worship the beast
- iii. A synagogue of Satan may mean that they are aligning themselves with the Roman culture.
- iv. Consider Paul's ministry. He would go to the Synagogue first and declare Jesus the Messiah. Sometimes he would be there one week or three weeks or months. He eventually gets kicked out and goes to the Gentiles and evangelizes Gentiles.
- v. In Roman world the Jews were a legal religion.

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<sup>1</sup> (2014-03-15). The Moody Bible Commentary (Kindle Locations 82566-82570). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Leith Anderson, "Can Jesus Trust Us?" Preaching Today, Tape No. 126.

- vi. In 48 B.C. Julius Caesar passed a law prohibiting all new religions except those of ancient standing. From 125 BC until that time Rome had been in civil war and the new religions were the hot beds of the war. So, he got rid of all new religions. Judaism predates the Roman Empire. Romans could trace their history to about 700 BC but Jews could trace themselves back to the second millennium. There were many court cases where Gentiles would drag Jews into court saying that they were illegal, but every time the Jews won as an ancient religion. They were allowed to govern themselves from their Torah. They could not be drafted into the army. They had to be able to have stalls to buy their own food at the market. There were limits: If the Jews are proselytizing or getting into the Roman government then Rome puts their foot down. In 17 A.D. The Jews are expelled from Rome: The Roman Historians and Josephus say this is because a high level Roman official becomes a proselytite. Later in Acts the Jews are expelled again from Rome by Claudius. Historians tell us this was because of a disturbance from Christus. In Acts when Paul and Silas are in Philippi they are arrested and accused of being Jews and disturbing the status quo. The worst thing to do in Rome was disturb the status quo.
- vii. Paul would go to the synagogue and then be kicked out.
- viii. He then proselytizes Gentiles. To the Romans this makes it look like the Jews are proselytizing. This puts the Jewish community in threat from Rome. So, in several places in Acts the Jews align themselves with the political leaders.
- ix. In Revelation: The Jewish community aligning themselves with Rome against the Christians makes them a Synagogue of Satan.
- x. This only appears in two places: Smyrna and Philadelphia: the two good churches.
- xi. The source of the persecution of these churches is the Jewish actions.
- xii. Smyrna is also where Polycarp was martyred and if you read the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp the Jews were instrumental in his martyr.
- xiii. Lastly, regarding this, Jesus say that they will be persecuted 10 days. In their time, 10 was a number of completion much like the number 7. This is from the Jewish pool of imagery. They will be persecuted until the time is complete.
- a. Means: Because Jesus died and lives again, our crown of life awaits us.
  - i. If we can persevere to the end, if we can stay strong, if we can overcome, then we will receive the crown. Now, if we notice this crown of life means that we will not receive the second death.
  - ii. Let's go a step further, what is the second death? I notice that John does not tell us what the second death is.
- b. John is wanting to leave us hanging. This was common in their culture. In literature they would introduce an idea and let it wait. In Rev. 20:14 we find that the second death is the Lake of Fire.
- c. Notice that in persevering that will receive a crown from Jesus.

## II. Some applications:

- a. I find it very encouraging to know that Jesus knows what I go through.
- b. In verse 9 Jesus tells them that He knows. He knows what they are facing.

- c. Jesus knows when we are facing troubles having to do with our faith.
- d. We are now in a post Christian society and when we have to stand up for our faith, Jesus knows. If you need to stand and have integrity at the work place and you face negative ramifications, have no fear, Jesus knows.
- e. If you lose friends because you don't care about drunkenness and sexual immorality, have no fear, Jesus knows.
- f. If you witness for Christ and you lose friends for that or face ridicule, have no fear, Jesus knows.
- g. If your business is in threat because of your Christian integrity have no fear.
- h. If you, your family, your morals, are in threat because you stand for life and marriage, have no fear, Jesus knows.
- i. This post-Christian culture has been a surprise to us, but not to King Jesus, He knows.
- j. It is going to be okay.
- k. When we overcome there will be a crown of life eternal.

**Closing:**

Psalm 23:4: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with me.

How can you fear the valley if your Savior has trod its path ahead of you and returns to carry you safely through it.

The American missionary Adoniram Judson arrived in Burma, or Myanmar, in 1812, and died there thirty-eight years later in 1850. During that time, he suffered much for the cause of the gospel. He was imprisoned, tortured, and kept in shackles. After the death of his first wife, Ann, to whom he was devoted, for several months he was so depressed that he sat daily beside her tomb. Three years later, he wrote: God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I cannot find him.

But Adoniram's faith sustained him, and he threw himself into the tasks to which he believed God had called him. He worked feverishly on his translation of the Bible. The New Testament had now been printed, and he finished the Old Testament in early 1834.

Statistics are unclear, but there were only somewhere between twelve and twenty-five professing Christians in the country when he died, and there were not churches to speak of.

At the 150th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into the Burmese language, Paul Borthwick was addressing a group that was celebrating Judson's work. Just before he got up to speak, he noticed in small print on the first page the words: "Translated by Rev. A. Judson." So Borthwick turned to his interpreter, a Burmese man named Matthew Hia Win, and asked him, "Matthew, what do you know of this man?" Matthew began to weep as he said,

We know him—we know how he loved the Burmese people, how he suffered for the gospel because of us, out of love for us. He died a pauper, but left the Bible for us. When he died, there were few believers, but today there are over 600,000 of us, and every single one of us traces our spiritual heritage to one man: the Rev. Adoniram Judson.

But Adoniram Judson never saw it!

And that will be the case for some of us. We may be called to invest our lives in ministries for which we do not see much immediate fruit, trusting that the God of all grace who oversees our work will ensure that our labor is not in vain.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Julia Cameron, editor, [Christ Our Reconciler](#) (InterVarsity Press, 2012), pp. 200-201