

SESSION 2

Steadfast in Difficulties



QUESTION 1:

What are some fears you've had to overcome?

THE POINT

We need not fear because we are rich in God's grace.

THE PASSAGE

Revelation 2:8-11

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Have you ever been scared? I mean scared to the point you feared for your life. Several years ago I was serving alongside others on a mission trip in London. We were prayer-walking one afternoon in an area that was full of mosques, and protestors were in the streets. As we walked and prayed for God to move in that area, we began hearing shouts from a group of men across the street: "Kill the Christians! Kill the Christians!" They were pointing at our little group while shouting those words.

Needless to say, that was a frightening moment for our group. I hurried our group along and we left the area immediately. As we later reflected on what had happened, we realized we didn't have to be afraid because we were told in the Bible that, for those who follow Jesus, they would face times of persecution but He would be with them.

In the message Jesus gave to the church at Smyrna, we will learn that we can stand strong in the face of fearful situations; we truly are rich in the grace of God.

Revelation 2:8-9

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

9 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.

KEY WORDS: Synagogue of Satan (v. 9)—The synagogue was a gathering of Jewish men to study Scripture and worship God. Because they were slandering the Christians in Smyrna, they were an assembly doing Satan's bidding.

Take notice of who is speaking to the church: it is Christ Himself. In a message given with great authority, Christ reminded them at the very beginning that He is “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.” In this statement of who He is, Jesus identified with them, showing that He too had suffered and been rejected but was victorious in the end.

The church in Smyrna was located in a unique city. Smyrna was a harbor city located about thirty-five miles northwest of Ephesus. At the time of this message, Smyrna was considered one of the grandest cities in the entire Roman Empire, containing beautiful architecture. It was a city with strong ties to Rome because it was the first city to build a temple to the goddess Roma. It also had other temples, including one dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius.

The word *Smyrna* is Greek for *myrrh*, an ointment or oil used specifically for the burial of the dead. Myrrh was one of the gifts that the Magi brought to Jesus (Matt. 2:11). Myrrh also was used to anoint Jesus' body when His body was placed in the tomb (John 19:39-40). Here was Christ's church in a city whose name was

associated with death, and the persecution the church experienced would even bring them “unto death” (Rev. 2:10).

In times of difficulty, it is good to know God has not forgotten you. Jesus said, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty.” Our government defines *poverty* in terms of falling below the minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs. The word Jesus used, however, is much harsher; it refers to being utterly destitute, impoverished without anything. The church at Smyrna was a poor church with few resources.

Even though the church was impoverished and lacking in material resources, they were rich because of their relationship to Jesus. When someone is in a relationship with Christ, nothing can bring greater satisfaction or joy than being in that relationship. We can have all the money and resources in the world, but they pale in comparison to the riches that can only be found in Christ.

Jesus was also well aware of the persecution and difficulties they faced. They were being slandered. The Jews in Smyrna hated the Christians and spoke blasphemy against God’s people. The Jews may have been Jewish by heritage, but they did not have a heart for God or the people of God. Their blasphemous actions had turned their Jewish gathering place into “the synagogue of Satan.”

Smyrna

COMMENDED FOR:

1. WITHSTANDING POVERTY
AND AFFLICTION
2. WITHSTANDING SLANDER
FROM THE SYNAGOGUE
OF SATAN
3. SUFFERING AND BEING
IMPRISONED FOR
THEIR FAITH

The church at Smyrna definitely faced harsh persecution, but they were rich in spiritual blessings because of their relationship and steadfastness in Christ. The same spiritual blessing and richness is ours today as we trust Christ and walk with Him. It's not enough just to be "religious"; we must have a relationship to lay claim to the riches of Christ.

QUESTION 2:

What riches have you experienced because of your relationship with Christ?

Revelation 2:10

10 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.

A few years ago I fell and broke the heel bone in my right foot. After being told I needed surgery to correct the bone, an immediate fear of the unknown began to settle in. I had never broken a bone before, much less needed surgery for anything. As we drew closer to the day of surgery, I grew more fearful. My heart and soul knew I didn't need to be afraid. My wife and several others told me I didn't need to worry, but still some fear was deeply embedded in my mind. Nevertheless, I let them take me into surgery, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in another room. Looking back, I can tell you that the fear and dread were totally unwarranted.

Jesus told the church at Smyrna not to fear what they were going to face. They had faced tremendous trials, tribulation, and persecution in the past—and more was still to come. We are told

repeatedly in Scripture (about 365 times!) not to be afraid, and Jesus reminded the believers in Smyrna of that truth.

They needed those words of encouragement because persecution did come. The Jews hated the Christians as much as the pagans did, and they sought to imprison them and even kill them. The most well-known case was Polycarp, who pastored the church at Smyrna several years after Jesus' message to the church. Polycarp refused to follow the demands by the Roman Proconsul to recant his faith in Christ and proclaim that Caesar was lord. They threatened to burn him at the stake, and yet he remained strong in his faith. His words to them were, "You threaten me with fire which burns for a little while and is soon extinguished. You do not know the coming fire of judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. What are you waiting for? Do what you wish."¹

Polycarp remained faithful unto death. Likewise, many believers at Smyrna remained faithful as well. Christ promised "a crown of life" to those who remained faithful to Him even if it cost them their lives. While the church at Smyrna may have wanted a message of deliverance, the word they received was a message of endurance. They received words of encouragement to keep on pressing on.

DIGGING DEEPER

THE CROWN OF LIFE

The famous golden street that wound up Mount Pagus was studded like a crown with various public edifices and temples of notable architectural achievement. For Smyrnans to speak of the city itself as "the crown" was not unusual. But the Lord's message to the saints of Smyrna is that a permanent crown of life, a crown enduring forever, would be given

to those who were faithful even unto death.

The crown promised here is the *stephanos*, the victor's crown, as opposed to the *diadem*. The *stephanos* was not worn by royalty, but rather was awarded to the athlete who had won an athletic event. The Smyrnans are invited to see themselves, whatever their sufferings, not as losers but as winners.

Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, vol. 39 in New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012) Wordsearch ed.

We need to hear that same word today. We need to endure whatever hardships come our way. We need to be faithful in our walk with Christ no matter the cost. While our churches in America may have little in common with the first-century church in Smyrna and the persecution they faced, we too must be faithful unto death if we expect to get a victor's crown.

QUESTION 3:

How do suffering and hardship work to strengthen our faith?

Revelation 2:11

11 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.

KEY WORDS: **The second death** (v. 11)—The eternal destiny of the wicked following physical death and the final judgment; a place of separation from the blessings of and fellowship with God.

Jesus's words to the church in Smyrna ended the same way His message to the church in Ephesus did: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." He wanted the churches to be sure and not just hear the words but take them to heart. Parents often ask something similar to their children: "Do you hear what I'm saying?" We ask that question because we want to make sure our audience heard our words correctly and could carry them out in the proper way. The real part of listening is acting on the words and the instructions we were given.

For the church in Smyrna, the instructions Jesus gave them were of the utmost importance. Certainly, anything Jesus says is important, but He underscored that and called them to pay careful

attention to His words for living if they wanted to receive the reward promised to them.

You may be familiar with the old story of a man who was applying for a job at the telegraph office. As he entered the office, he saw the sign on the wall telling him to fill out the application and take a seat until he was called in for an interview. The man filled out the application and sat down among several other applicants. In a few minutes, the man stood up and walked through the doors where the interviews were taking place. After a brief time, he came back along with the manager who announced the job had been filled.

Needless to say the other applicants became upset and complained that they were never given a chance to be interviewed. Besides, the man who got the job was the last man to fill out an application. The manager told them that, if they had been listening, they would have heard the telegraph ticking out a message: “If you understand this message, come into the office and the job is yours.” It pays to listen!

Jesus finished this letter by telling them they do not need to fear death. “He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.” Unless Jesus returns in our lifetime, we all face physical death. Jesus was not referring to this death, but a second one, a final, eternal death that comes after the judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). That judgment will be a time of separating those who had a relationship with Christ during their lives on earth from those who rejected him. None of us knows how we will die in this life, but those who know Christ and have a relationship with Him will not experience the second, eternal death (vv. 6,14). As we endure in Christ, we do not have to live in fear of death.

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways our church is like the church at Smyrna?

This message was given to the church in Smyrna, but it is a message that is relevant to us today. Hear what you have been told in this passage. Stay strong; stay faithful in your relationship with Christ no matter the cost, and the victory will be yours in the end.

QUESTION 5:

What are practical ways to reject fear and embrace God's promises for the future?

ENGAGE

Of the churches mentioned in the Revelation, Smyrna was one of two churches without any negative qualities; yet, it experienced persecution. Circle some of the reasons you've seen a church or a believer face fearful circumstances. Then answer the question.

Glorifying God

Sin

Evil society

Testing

Opposition by unbelievers

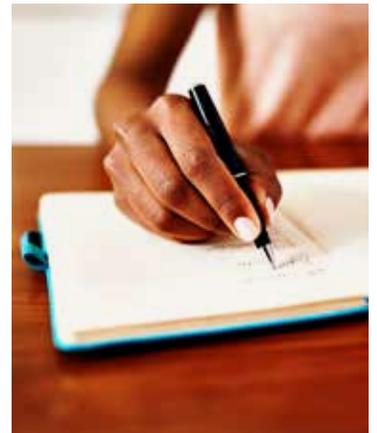
Natural disasters

When have you seen someone substitute faith for fear in one of these situations?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you listen to what the Spirit of God is telling you today?

- ▶ **Trust.** Christ tasted death for us so that we would not have to experience the second death. Turn from your sin and trust Christ to save you. Look on the inside front cover of this book for more information about committing your life to Christ
- ▶ **Thank.** Make a list of all the ways you are rich because of God's grace in your life. Spend time in prayer, thanking God for all the blessings He has given you.
- ▶ **Encourage.** If you know someone who is struggling in their walk with Christ, encourage them to endure and stand strong in Christ. Use your example of endurance in the face of difficulties to encourage their steadfastness.



END NOTES

1. Charles E. Moore & Timothy J. Keiderling, eds., *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship* (Walden: Plough Pub. House, 2016).



TAKING COURAGE IN LIFE'S HARDSHIPS

By Jennifer Rothschild

A few years ago, my sweet southern daddy and I walked down to the beach. On the outside, my almost 80-year-old father was a small man. He didn't stand too much taller than I do—and I'm only 5 foot 2. But, on the inside, he was a giant. He was my source of wisdom, my example, my cheerleader; in short, he was my hero.

And when my world became dark with blindness as a 15-year-old girl, I relied heavily on my dad's guiding touch to keep me physically oriented. He was the one I felt most secure with. His hand was always steady, his touch always gentle, and his pace always perfect for me.

Exile is anytime you feel removed from the familiar, disenfranchised from what made you feel secure, and banished from the stability you once felt.

But that day on the beach, I was the one who attempted to steady his wobbly frame as we headed to the shoreline. My dad had fought illness for a long time, and his body was tired and frail. I knew the sickness had been hard on him, and I said, “Dad, I just admire your strength.”

“Well, I’m learning,” he told me, “that you’ve got to be patient with yourself. You’ve got to be patient with others. And you’ve got to be patient with God.”

It wasn’t long after that my dad closed his eyes here on earth and opened them in heaven. When he did, my whole world changed. My brain knew what death was, but my heart was unaware that it was such a tearing and an emptying. Even after a few months, I felt like I was walking through a thick fog. It felt like life was in slow motion.

My season of grief felt like exile. The security and grounding that

came from my dad’s presence in my life were suddenly gone—and I felt insecure and lost without it.

You might feel like you’re in exile right now too. And, like me, you’re struggling to take courage within it.

WE ALL EXPERIENCE EXILE

We all experience seasons of exile, in one form or another. It may be relational, geographical, or physical. Exile is anytime you feel removed from the familiar, disenfranchised from what made you feel secure, and banished from the stability you once felt.

In the Bible, the Jewish people experienced exile. They were removed from their land, taken to a foreign land, and stuck there. The Book of Haggai begins at the end of the exile. It started in 586 B.C. when King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, destroyed the temple, and hauled them off to Babylon.

During their 70 years there, the Jewish people wept and longed for home.

And that's often how we feel when we find ourselves in exile, right?

For me, my dad's death brought relational exile. Maybe you're stuck here too. You find yourself alone because the one you loved died or has left you. The kids you raised are no longer home and rarely call. Perhaps you're in a marriage, and you feel overlooked and unseen. You're living in a foreign land of isolation.

Or you may be literally in geographical exile. You've moved to a new place, and you don't know anyone. You don't have the friends anymore that you once had, and you're lonely.

It's possible, like my dad's illness or even my blindness, that your exile is physical. You've been diagnosed with a disease or developed a chronic illness, and you feel isolated. Maybe you're battling anxiety or depression. As a result, you feel removed from the normal life you used to

live and secluded from the joy you once had.

Exiles vary, but what they have in common is they are hard, unwelcome, confusing, and often test your faith. But in your exile, you can take courage. Because even in hardship, God is with you, and He will accomplish His good purpose for you.

GOD IS WITH YOU

In Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah wrote a letter to those who were still in Babylonian exile. He reminds the exiles of God's promises, that He has good plans for them — “plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (v. 11).

The same is true for you, even if it doesn't feel like it right now.

You may not know the reason for your exile. We live in a fallen world, and life just happens. But while you may not understand the meaning behind it, there's something you can be sure of — God wastes nothing in your life.

Even in exile, God is giving you a hope and a future. He has plans for your welfare, even when it

*Learn to be patient with yourself, to be patient with others,
and most importantly, to be patient with God.*

doesn't feel well or fair. His plan isn't for your calamity. God's plans are to bless and prosper you, not to harm you.

When you hold on to this truth, you can take courage even when the landscape of your life seems dotted with the rubble of hopelessness.

You know that you're not alone. God is with you, and He will give you the strength to not only rebuild what's broken but also to construct new things during your exile.

You may be holding your breath right now, waiting for your exile to end. But instead of trying to hurry it up, participate with it, and invest in it. Use it as a time to grow and increase in your faith. That's what God told the Jews to do in Jeremiah 29:4-7.

Friend, sometimes it feels like exile has no expiration date, and it's hard to be patient. I know. I've been there too. But as my

dad so wisely told me that day on the beach, it's good to learn to be patient with yourself, to be patient with others, and most importantly, to be patient with God.

Your exile does have an ending. Until it is over, though, you can hold on to the promise of Jeremiah 29:11, trusting that God has a hope and a future for you, no matter what. Your exile won't last forever, but God's faithfulness will.

So take courage in your exile today. God is with you.

Jennifer Rothschild is a nationally known author, speaker, and Bible study teacher who has written 17 books, including the bestsellers *Lessons I Learned in the Dark* and *Me, Myself, & Lies*. Her newest video-based Bible study, *Take Courage: A Study of Haggai*, releases in July 2020.