

## Smyrna's Crown

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*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:8-11).*

Smyrna was quite the place in its day. Known as the glory of Asia, it proved a magnificent city. It boasted ornate temples, claimed to be the birthplace of Homer, and possessed the largest public theater in all of Asia Minor. Perhaps more impressively, Rome trusted Smyrna and honored it as an "assize town" (aka "free city"). This afforded Smyrna some self-regulation and additional honor. For example, Rome sent governors to visit periodically and hear the empire's most important cases. We can appreciate the significance of this honor by imagining a system in which the Supreme Court would travel to cities of their choosing to try cases. All these characteristics of greatness made Smyrna a proud city. The historian Theodor Mommsen described Smyrna in his *The Provinces of the Roman Empire* as "a paradise of municipal vanity."

The congregation to which this letter was written did not share the same vanity or affluent lifestyle Smyrna enjoyed. The brethren found themselves troubled and poor. Jesus reminded them that though they were poor, in Him, they were rich. Paul echoed these words, referring to himself in the second half of **2 Corinthians 6:10**, "*as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*" Our brethren at Smyrna did not have much, but they possessed everything. Their faith in Jesus Christ jeopardized their physical and financial strength. One of the more well-known brothers, Polycarp, lost his life at the hands of men determined to brand him disloyal to Rome. Even in these circumstances, Jesus reminded them of true riches. They lived in a city impacted by Satan's temple, but God kept them secure in His kingdom.

In **Hebrews 12:27-28**, we read,

*Now this, "yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*

Over the last several years, uncertainties ruled our day. We experienced physical uncertainties, not knowing the outcome of a disease that affected the globe. We experienced, and continue to experience, the consequences of economic decisions made in a crisis, one of which is the high likelihood of a recession of some fashion impacting future financial growth. There is an underbelly of political unrest and strife that strains the very fabric of our society. In all of this, we may be certain of two things: 1) The very core of our capitalistic society will rattle, if not now, then certainly at a day and time of God's choosing, (**1 John 2:17**; **Acts 17:26**) and 2) There will be only one kingdom remaining in the end. In whom, then should we put our trust?

If we experience similar trials as our brethren in Smyrna, will God be able to say to us, "*but you are rich!*"? Our faith cannot hinge on the power of the Red, White, and Blue. As great a nation as we have been blessed to enjoy, its wealth and peace are no less transitory than Rome's. The city of Smyrna put its trust in Rome, but in the end, the empire fell. The brethren in Smyrna put their trust in God and found true

wealth, everlasting stability, and life without end. *“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”* (**Revelation 2:10**).

Be faithful regardless of the circumstances, whether our lives are lived in a world of peace and prosperity or toil and trouble. Submit to the Lord daily, without thought to the physical implications, *“for to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace”* (**Romans 8:6**). Abraham offered up his one and only son. Moses gave up the palace. Smyrna endured. Whatever future there may be for us, what service and grace will we offer our Lord? Even if the world turns against Christ, our laws embrace evil and shun morality, or every fiscal foundation upon which so many place their faith fails with destructive force, there is a kingdom, and there is a crown of life. Be faithful to the one who built the kingdom and offered the crown.

In his work, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, Colin Hemer shares an interesting note regarding a crown bestowed on a commoner in Smyrna annually. The crown was a wreath with the inscription “O Demos.” It was awarded posthumously and placed on the body of the dead man. In contrast, God offers us a crown of life. In this life, we will finish our journey as dust (**Ecclesiastes 3:20**). Let us not get too attached to the vanities of our existence, lest we lose sight of true life and the crown of victory awaiting the faithful.

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing* (**2 Timothy 4:7-8**).