

Revelation 2:10

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Jesus encourages the Smyrna believers to be courageous in the face of their coming trial. They will be imprisoned, and it will test their faith, but the test will ultimately end. If they are faithful even to the point of dying, Jesus will reward them greatly in Heaven.

There is no real criticism here of the church in Smyrna. It seems that when severe persecution is transpiring, God just desires His faithful believers to keep the faith. This fits the biblical principle that God's expectation and definition of faithfulness depend on the capabilities and circumstances of His people (Luke 12:48).

Each of the seven churches can be seen as representing the dominant culture of an era of the western church. The period that may be represented by Smyrna spans from John's death in 100 AD to 330 AD, when Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople. This was a time of persecution of the church.

The period of persecution began in the first century and continued until 313, when Constantine, who had ascended to the throne just a year prior, issued the Edict of Milan which made Christianity legal and ended the period of persecution. This is also the period of time when, according to some scholars, the Roman empire went from being functionally zero percent Christian to over 50 percent Christian.

The exhortation in this letter isn't "I have something against you" but rather "keep hanging on."

Jesus tells the church in Smyrna that they are going to *suffer*, yet He instructs them not to *fear* any of it. Fear is a natural reaction to *suffering*, especially *suffering* that you know is going to occur. But God asks His people to trust that He is in control of it all, and to not lose hope. Jesus asks them to hold steady in the face of persecution, and trust that His reward for being a faithful witness will be more than worth the cost.

Smyrna was a Roman city within the Roman province of Asia, located on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. So the one doing the literal physical act of *casting some of you into prison* is likely to be a Roman soldier at the behest of a Roman governor. It seems here this persecution follows the pattern we see in the gospel accounts, where the Jews agitated and succeeded in the crucifixion of Jesus. However, the text says that *the devil is about to cast some of you into prison*.

This isn't making Roman soldiers out to be the *devil*, but rather reveals that Satan was actually the one directing the Roman government at that point in time, when the government is actually perpetrating evil. Constant throughout Revelation are correlations between events in heaven and events on earth. In the next letter to Pergamum, "Satan's throne" is said to be there (Revelation 2:13). Pergamum was the regional capital of the Roman province of Asia (in which resided the

seven churches of Revelation). So it appears that “Satan’s throne” is somehow analogous to the Roman seat of power.

It can be confusing how the *devil* is able to *cast* them into *prison* if he has already been defeated and displaced by Jesus as the ruler of the world (Matthew 28:18). One way to think of this is that Satan is like a lame duck president who has already lost his election, but the new president isn’t inaugurated yet, so he is still in office, taking actions in between his inevitable unseating.

Humans were designed to rule the earth in harmony with God, being chosen by God over the superior angels (see commentary on Psalm 8). However, since Adam fell, it appears Satan regained his power to rule the earth for a time (John 16:11). Jesus has broken that power, but Satan will not be dethroned until the latter days (Revelation 12:12).

We know from Romans 13 that God appoints authorities, so He is allowing this persecution to happen to the church in Smyrna. It might be unclear to the church in Smyrna why God would allow this *tribulation* in the first place. Regardless, it is clear that God will prevail in the end, and He will reward those who endure faithfully through the suffering.

The reason that the *devil is about to cast some of you into prison* is stated that *so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days*.

This could be a literal *ten days*, but it’s more likely that the meaning is more that the time has already been set, and it is a specific amount of time, since God knows the beginning and the end. The number ten sometimes represents completion. An example is when God says that Israel tested Him “ten times” while wandering in the wilderness, at which point God barred that generation from entering the Promised Land and possessing their possession (Numbers 14:22).

There are two other relevant examples of ten-day trials in the Bible:

The first is in Daniel 1:12 where Daniel challenged the leaders to let him eat vegetables and water for *ten days* to see if he would be just as strong as those eating the meat sacrificed to idols, meat he refused because he knew it would defile him. The other is in Jeremiah 42:7 where Jeremiah petitioned to God, and God waited *ten days* to answer him. In both places, the implication seems to be that *ten days* is considered a complete period for a trial.

This section of description of suffering for the church at Smyrna is finished with a promise, to *be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Revelation 2:10). In this instance, God offers a positive reward without reference to being an “overcomer.” Perhaps this is because that would be redundant, since to endure faithfully through persecution is the very definition of overcoming. At the end of this letter to the church at Smyrna, God will mention an additional reward gained by those who endure suffering faithfully, which is to avoid a negative consequence that stems from failing to endure.

James 1:2-4 provides helpful context for how to react to such *tribulation*, saying:

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

(James 1:2-4)

There is nothing naturally joyful about being *cast into prison*. There is nothing naturally joyful about being persecuted. Such circumstances do not bring joy. But here we are instructed to “consider it all joy” during these trials. This means that we have the power to decide, to choose a perspective that trials will be good for us. Just like James 1:12, this passage makes clear that one of the rationales for choosing a perspective of gladness is that God will greatly reward our endurance through such trials.

James 1 states that trials are good for us because they produce endurance when we continue in faith, which might be a reason that God allows this *tribulation* to happen to the church in Smyrna. But if they/we are faithful through the trials, developing endurance in them, they/we are promised the *crown of life*.

The Greek word used for *crown* is “stephanos,” which is the same word used for the *crown* of thorns that was placed on Jesus in Matthew 27:29, Mark 15:17, and John 19. The world gave a *crown* of thorns and mockery to Jesus who was willing to walk in obedience to God. If we endure the world’s crown of mocking, the world’s crown of thorns, God promises us the *crown of life*, which is a great reward that will make unjust suffering for Jesus while here on earth worthwhile.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul paints a picture of an Olympian running to receive “a perishable wreath,” but says that the prize we get is imperishable. In that passage, the Greek word translated “wreath” is also “stephanos,” the same word translated here in this passage as “crown.” This likely pictures both the crown of a victor (“nikao”) as well as a crown of authority (Revelation 3:21).

Biblical Text

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.