



October 1st, 2025
Week 5

⁸ “Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: Thus says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life: ⁹ I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death.

Revelation 1:9-20

Of the seven messages, the one to the disciples in Smyrna best explains why it is so hard to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in our time, why it is so hard to stay “in love.”

From the middle of the lampstands Jesus dictates seven messages, seven “prophetic oracles.” Each message is different in context but similar in format. Each letter begins by Jesus identifying himself, using an image appropriate to each city. Jesus tells the church what he knows about them.

Jesus tells them what he “has against” them [except in the cases of the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia]. Then he tells them what to do to remedy the situation, warning them of what will happen if they do not do it.

He then makes a promise to those who do it, who “overcome.” And he calls those with ears to hear to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Notice how Jesus presents himself to the church in that city. **“The first and last, who was dead, and has come to life”** (2:8). That is a huge claim to make! “The first and the last.” Jesus is echoing the words of God as recorded by the prophet Isaiah:

“I, Yahweh, am the first, and with the last, I am he.” (Isa 41:4)

"Before me there was no God formed, and there will be none after me." (Isa 43:10)

"I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides me." (Isa 44:6)

"I am he, I am the first, and I am the last." (Isa 48:12)

In saying that he is "the first and the last," Jesus is telling the disciples in Smyrna, and you and me, that our lives are bracketed, or, boundaried, not by the decisions and actions of Caesar, not by the rise and fall of Rome, nor by the rise and fall of the United States. Our lives are boundaried by him, "the first and last."

Whatever else happens in our history and whatever else happens in my history, Jesus is there as the first word and Jesus will be there as the last word. And Jesus is here in the middle with the Word that gives us life.

Still I ask, why present himself in this particular way to the disciples in Smyrna: ***"The first and the last, who became dead, and has come to life"***? It is because those words immediately signal that Jesus knows what life in Smyrna is all about.

Smyrna rivaled Ephesus as "the first city of Asia." On their coins were stamped the words "First City of Asia in Size and Beauty."² First. The city loved the word "first." And Smyrna had gone through a number of once-dead-but-come-back-to-life experiences. It had been destroyed in 580 b.c. but rebuilt in 290 b.c. and the city of Smyrna was proud of its "resurrection."

"The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life."

And he says, "I know." It is what he says to each of the seven churches. It is what he says to us in this city. It's what he says to the people of Colombia or Iraq or India gathered in churches today.

"I know your tribulation" (2:9). Other versions of the Bible render it, ***"I know your affliction."***

The Greek word used here, _____, is a strong word. It's essential meaning is "pressure," more exactly, "crushing pressure."

The disciples in Smyrna were living out their faith under thlipsis, under crushing pressure.

Imagine how they felt when, as they gathered together to read the Book of Revelation, they heard the first line of the message addressed to them. "I know your pressure," says their Lord. Jesus knows what we are experiencing! Jesus knows it because he was personally under it to an even greater degree. And he knows it because he stands and moves among his churches. He is there in the midst of the believers in Smyrna—there with them under the crushing pressure!

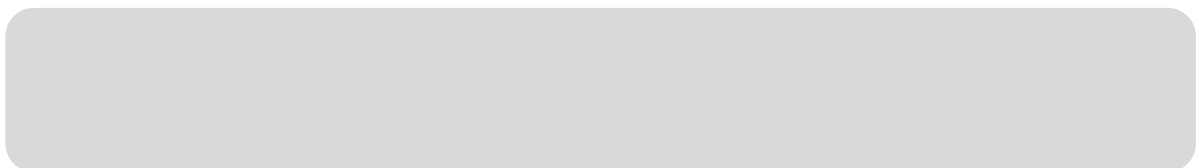
"I know your pressure ... Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful until death" (2:10). Jesus is saying that it is going to get worse before it gets better! "Do not be afraid as the pressure now begins to mount and some of you are imprisoned and some of you are killed. Hang on to me."

Why no promise to lift the pressure? Why no promise to insulate against more tribulation? Because in the nature of things that is not possible. Why?

Well, let us ask another question: What did the Christians of Smyrna do to bring on this crushing pressure? Had they displeased their Lord? Had they done something wrong? No. And that is precisely the point.

Notice that in this second of the seven messages there is no word of criticism or correction. In the other messages we hear Jesus saying, "I have this against you." But not in the letter to Smyrna (or Philadelphia).

1. Why is there no call to repentance? Why no call to take corrective action?



There is also no call to repentance; there is no call to take corrective action. Why? Because the disciples of Smyrna were doing everything right.

Look at it this way: when the light begins to shine in the darkness, the darkness has two options. One is to acknowledge what the light reveals and make the necessary changes. The other is to extinguish the light. The lampstand of the church at Smyrna was shining brightly. God's will for life was being made very clear. And the darkness of the city could not tolerate it. And the lampstand was feeling the pressure.

Sometimes we are under pressure because we are making careless, wrong or ungodly choices. But sometimes we are under pressure because we are making wise, right and godly choices. ***“All who desire to live godly lives will be persecuted,”*** Paul told Timothy (2 Tim 3:12). The disciples in Smyrna were experiencing tribulation because they were living godly lives. They were seeking first the kingdom and righteousness of God (Matt 6:33), and the city did not like it.

Thomas Torrance of Edinburgh, Scotland, says, “A church cannot be a true church without causing trouble.” Not that a church sets out to cause trouble. It’s just that in seeking to be a true church, a church true to Jesus Christ will make waves and will find itself in tribulation of one sort or another.

The word Jesus uses, the word *thlipsis*, is a technical word in the New Testament. It is _____ used of the *normal* frustrations of life, of the *normal* trouble we all experience in a broken world. It is _____ used in connection with the coming of the kingdom of God.

Thlipsis is the pressure experienced as the kingdom of God comes up against the kingdom of human beings in rebellion against God. Thlipsis is the pressure experienced along the line where kingdoms clash; along the line where the kingdom of light clashes with the kingdom of darkness; along the line where the reign of justice clashes with the reign of injustice; along the line where the rule of life clashes with the rule of death.

Thlipsis is the pressure experienced where idols are being unmasked. Thlipsis is the pressure experienced where human pride is confronted with the call to repentance.

This is why having said, “I know your thlipsis,” Jesus did not go on to say, “And it is wrong, so I am here to lift it.” To follow him into the world is to inevitably experience thlipsis.

Remember how the apostle John begins Revelation: ***“I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance that are in Jesus”*** (1:9).

2. What is in Jesus?



To be “in Jesus” means to partake of the kingdom of God, which means partaking of the tribulation which the in-breaking of the kingdom naturally causes and partaking of the perseverance being in the kingdom produces.

Don’t get me wrong. To be “in Jesus” partaking of the kingdom also means partaking of joy and grace and power and fullness and celebration. But as long as there is any resistance to the kingdom, to be in Jesus and partaking of the kingdom means to be in under pressure.

“I know your tribulation. Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”

The disciples in Smyrna were under pressure and being warned that it was about to increase.

We who seek to be faithful disciples in our cities are also under pressure. It seems to me that it is going to increase on many fronts. Can you feel the pressure mounting? Can you see the lines becoming clearer and clearer, the lines between the revealed will of God and the will of human beings in rebellion against God? Can you see the sliding into deeper and deeper immorality and paganism, and people becoming more and more intolerant of and hostile toward those who hold to transcendent, ethical and spiritual values? Thlipsis is the pressure felt at the clashing of values.

“I know your pressure,” says Jesus. ***“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”***

Some would be thrown in jail, as a way to coerce obedience to the emperor cult. Others would come under the greatest pressure of all: the pressure to denounce Jesus at the point of a sword or in the heat of flames. So there were visible components: threatened political leaders and hostile religious leaders. But there was also an invisible component to the crushing pressure.

I should say, there was primarily an invisible component. Jesus says, ***“The devil will throw some of you into prison”*** (2:10).

What is Jesus saying? ***“Things are not as they seem.”***

There is more to reality than meets the unaided eye. Jesus is helping the church in Smyrna wake up to the whole picture.

Behind the threatened political forces and hostile religious forces was the power of evil out to destroy Jesus Christ and all that he has made. ***“The devil will throw some of you***

into prison." Jesus is reminding them and us that, as in his own case, the real opposition is _____.

Talk of a personal source of evil is not intellectually fashionable and I know it disturbs many. I frankly wish we could scissor out of the Bible all references to Satan. But we cannot, for it is Jesus himself who most consistently brings the evil one into the picture. We cannot rightly understand Jesus' own ministry without reference to this dimension of the opposition against him. His whole ministry is one of coming up against *Satan and his works*.

3. What is the pressure on the Smyrna Church?

What needs to be strongly emphasized is that the disciples in Smyrna were not the ultimate target of Satan's pressure. The real target was _____.

But since he has defeated Satan at the cross and in the empty tomb, Satan can no longer hurt Jesus. So the enemy goes after that which is dearest to Jesus, namely _____.

"I know your crushing pressure." And instead of promising to immediately lift the pressure or insulate against more, Jesus prepares the church to persevere.

He gives two commands. **"Do not be afraid ... be faithful."**

So the question becomes, how? How do we keep faith under pressure? How do we nurture faith that overcomes fear?

Jesus gives us four helps.

The pressure only comes because we are getting closer to Jesus who is the real target. The Christians in Smyrna were in trouble precisely because they were faithful. So do not panic.

"The second help is the word 'test.'" **"The devil will throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested"** (2:10). The threatened political and hostile religious forces have a purpose for the pressure. The evil one has a purpose.

But so does Jesus. He allows it to come to test us. The word Jesus uses means “to prove” but it also means “to improve.” Jesus’ enemy was doing his best to tempt disciples to lose their faith. But Jesus takes that temptation and uses it to prove and improve their faith.

Which tells me that the Lord of the church thinks periodic pressure is good for the church. Thlipsis refines the church, stripping away excess baggage. Thlipsis brings us to bottom line essentials, to Jesus himself who is our only security and only hope.

Which leads us to the third help Jesus gives. He has final authority over the pressure. He says to the church in Smyrna, **“You will have tribulation for ten days”** (2:10).

“Ten days.” What is clear is this: Jesus Christ is in control. The political and religious forces have free will. The spiritual forces of darkness have free will. But they exist only by permission of God and their power is limited by God. Evil is on a leash. Its pressure has a limit.

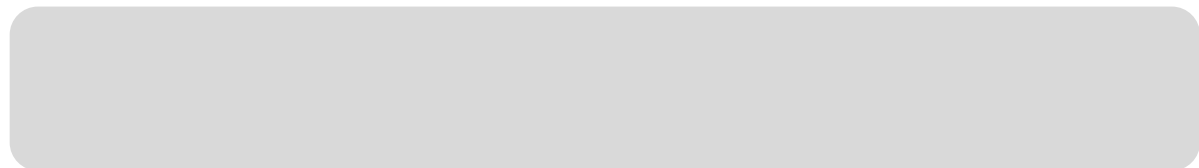
And there is a fourth help: Jesus make promises. *First*, he promises to those who endure that he will give them **“the crown of life”** (2:10). The word he uses refers to the victor’s crown.

Second, Jesus promises those who overcome that they **“shall not be hurt by the second death”** (2:11). John refers to the second death three other times in the book (20:6, 20:14, 21:8b). The first death we all die. The second death is the final death, eternal expulsion from the presence of God.

“I will give you the crown of life ... you will not be hurt by the second death.”

Those who are born again in Jesus—those who come to life in Jesus—do not die the second death. So E. V. Hill of Los Angeles used to proclaim, “Those who are born once, die twice; those who are born twice, die once.”

4. Did the disciples in Smyrna overcome fear and keep the faith?



Will the churches of our time stand when the pressure increases? Will you, will I, stand as the test gets tougher? The only clue we have is how we are doing in the lesser tests that come our way now.

"I know your pressure," says the Lord.

It seems only fair to conclude by telling you that there is a way out of the pressure. Just don't get serious about loving Jesus. Just go with the flow of the culture. Just settle for a comfortable, run-of-the-mill, watered-down kind of discipleship—"Christianity Lite." Just settle for a status-quo-blessing kind of discipleship. And there will be no pressure. And there will also be no passion.

"I know your pressure," says the One who loves us.

In the nature of things, he cannot lift it. Sustain us in it, yes. Use it for his glory, yes. But lift it, no.

For his presence is the reason the pressure comes!

When I remember that I can keep going. And even do so with a strange sort of joy.

*Written portions are taken from "Discipleship on the Edge" by Darrell W. Johnson.