

The Prince's Bride: What Revelation Meant to the Ones It Was Written To

The Crown of Life: Closing the Letter to Smyrna

SMYRNA'S SUFFERING, RECAPPED

Christ's Words to a Suffering Church

Jesus identifies himself as the one who has already conquered death, then acknowledges Smyrna's poverty and the slander turned against them by hostile synagogues, closing with a call to endure.

Revelation 2:8-10 (NRSVue)

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life: I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

THE CROWN OF LIFE

A Wreath, Not a Diadem

The crown Jesus promises is a stephanos, the athlete's wreath of victory, not a king's jeweled diadem, and Smyrna's own skyline made that image unmistakable.

1 John 5:4-5 (NRSVue)

For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

1 Corinthians 9:25 (NRSVue)

Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

CROWNS THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE

Different Crowns, One Reward

The New Testament describes several crowns of reward, righteousness, glory, and life, each tied to a different kind of faithful endurance.

2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NRSVue)

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

1 Peter 5:4 (NRSVue)

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

James 1:12 (NRSVue)

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

GRACE, NOT EARNING

Crowns Cast Before the Throne

Pursuing these crowns is not about earning salvation but about honoring Christ, who alone is worthy of the glory we one day return to him.

Revelation 3:11 (MSG)

I'm on my way; I'll be there soon. Keep a tight grip on what you have so no one distracts you and steals your crown.

Grace is not opposed to effort, just earning.

Dallas Willard

Revelation 4:10-11 (NRSVue)

The twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

THE CROWN OF THORNS

The King Who Wore Our Crown

Before any crown of victory was given, Jesus wore a crown of mockery and shame so that those who believe in him could receive the crown he alone deserved.

Matthew 27:27-31 (NRSVue)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Jesus is the only human being who ever ran the race who deserved the crown of life. But when he ran that race perfectly, and he got to the end of his life, what did he get? He got a wreath on his head too. It was the crown of thorns. But he took the crown of thorns you and I deserve for the way in which we've run. We were disqualified, but he took the crown of thorns so when we believe in him, we get the crown of life his running of the race earned.

Tim Keller

NO FEAR OF THE SECOND DEATH

Safe from the Second Death

The letter closes with the promise that conquerors will not be harmed by the second death, eternal separation from God. Polycarp, said to have been disciplined by the apostle John as a boy, likely heard this very letter read aloud and was later martyred in Smyrna rather than deny Christ.

Revelation 2:11 (NRSVue)

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Revelation 20:14 (ESV)

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

This is a terrifying prospect. But his point at the moment is this: do not be afraid to face the first death. Some of you will have to do that. To conquer, to face that martyrdom in faithful patience, will mean that you will have nothing to fear from the second death. Be content to go with Jesus through the first death. He was dead, and came to life; and so will you.

N.T. Wright

Romans 10:13 (NRSVue)

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

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