

# CROWN OF LIFE

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 2:8–11  
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Scott Grant  
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## *Revelation 2:8–11*

It's been said that you have to know what you don't know. Here's something we don't know: we don't know the future. No matter how much we know, no matter how much we study and plan and prepare, we don't know what's going to happen the next day, let alone the next minute.

How do you feel about that? Human incapacity to know the future has resulted in untold human anxiety. Jesus, on the other hand, knows the future. In Revelation 2:8-11, he tells members of the church in Smyrna what's going to happen to them and what they should do about it.

How can Jesus' knowledge of the future, even our future, help us?

The letter to the church in Smyrna is one of only two letters to churches in Revelation 2-3, along with the letter to the church in Philadelphia, that are entirely positive. In fact, on the whole, the letter to the church in Smyrna qualifies as the most positive letter.

## The first and the last

### Revelation 2:8:

**“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’**

The letter to the church in Smyrna, coming through the angel of the church, constitutes the “words” of Jesus. Jesus identifies himself for this particular church as “the first and the last,” as the God of Israel, the living God, the one true God, who created all things and will bring all things to fulfillment (Revelation 1:8, 18).

The coins of Smyrna proclaimed it to be “the first city of Asia in size and beauty.” Whatever the city thought of itself, Jesus is the “first”: his prominence exceeds that of any city, no matter what its citizens think of themselves.

Smyrna was destroyed about 600 B.C. and was rebuilt in 290 B.C. In a sense, it died and came to life. Jesus, though, proclaims that he “died and came to life,” once again eclipsing any glory that the city would claim for itself.

In light of what we know about Smyrna, we can speculate that Jesus identified himself in this way specifically for the church in this particular city. In any case, the upshot is that Jesus' words are unquestionably authoritative. As such, they need to be heeded.

## Jesus speaks authoritatively

The Silicon Valley has a boast similar to that of Smyrna: it's first in technology. One could even say it died and came to life—more than once in recent years, as a matter of fact, first in 1999 with the dot.com bust and second in 2008-09 with the Great Recession. In each case, the valley recovered. The Silicon Valley, it seems, is remarkably resilient.

But neither the valley nor any of its luminaries is Jesus. Jesus died and came to life, never to die again. He has the first word. He also has the last word. He speaks authoritatively, as the living God, both here, in the book of Revelation, and elsewhere in the New Testament, even if he doesn't get a whole lot of love around these parts.

What does he say—to the church in Smyrna and to us? Some remarkable things, really.

## Jesus knows the present

### Revelation 2:9:

**“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

Jesus, as the first and the last, who died and came to life, who therefore speaks authoritatively, first of all tells the church what he knows. He speaks with personal knowledge of the particular situation of the members of the church in Smyrna.

First, Jesus knows their “tribulation,” which, as the rest of the passage makes clear, involves persecution. It may help them to know that John, who is writing them, is their “brother and partner in the tribulation,” having been confined on the island of Patmos because of his involvement with the Gospel (Revelation 1:9). It may also help them to know that Jesus likewise suffered tribulation, and then some, having been persecuted unto death. John has already written that all his readers not only have “tribulation” in Jesus, they also have “the kingdom” of God and “the patient endurance” (Revelation 1:9).

Second, Jesus knows their “poverty.” Smyrna was known as a wealthy city, but these residents of Smyrna are poor, presumably as a result of the persecution they’re suffering. Smyrna was a center of pagan worship: it was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma, in 195 B.C., and it beat out ten competitors to build the temple to Tiberius, the Roman emperor. The best explanation for the believers’ poverty is their refusal to participate in pagan worship.

Although the believers in Smyrna may be poor, Jesus says they are “rich” in the things that matter most. James reminds us, “Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5). Especially in light of the new creation to come, poor believers—and rich believers, for that matter—possess “everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Third, Jesus knows “the slander” of certain Jews. If anyone deems this to be a screed against a particular ethnic group, it must be said that both Jesus, who speaks these words, and John, who records these words, were Jewish. Jesus here does not disclose the nature of the slander or the reason for it, at least in part because he doesn’t have to: the believers in Smyrna know what certain Jews are saying about them. Evidently, some Jews, who enjoyed certain protections in the Roman Empire that the followers of Jesus did not, contributed to the tribulation that the believers in Smyrna were suffering.

Jesus says these Jews aren’t even Jews and are, in fact, “a synagogue of Satan.” They are Jews by ethnicity but not by spirituality. In the New Testament, Israel is defined as constituting both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Romans 2:25-29, 11:11-24; Galatians 3:28, 6:16). The church is the continuation of Israel. Jesus says particular Jews in Smyrna are unwittingly serving the purposes of Satan. Jesus went so far as to tell certain

Jews who opposed him, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44).

## We’re rich

Jesus speaks authoritatively. He also speaks knowingly. He knows our church, and he knows each of us in it.

I submitted to one of those personality profiles recently. I answered one hundred and forty-four questions, and then I found out who I am. I read the description of my supposed type, and I thought it pegged me fairly well. Then I read the description of my type to my wife, and there were several points when she nodded in agreement and maybe two points where we both started laughing because certain descriptions pretty well pegged some of my, uh, idiosyncrasies. She’s lived with me for eighteen years. She knows me. When she speaks about me, she speaks knowingly—more knowingly than anyone else.

More knowingly than anyone else except Jesus, that is. When he speaks to us about us, we should listen. Specifically, with respect to this text, he knows our suffering. If life is hard for you, for whatever reason, he knows.

Jesus says, regarding the suffering we’re going through, “I know.” What do you feel when you hear Jesus say those words? Are you encouraged? Or are you wondering, if he speaks as God himself and knows your plight, why he doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it?

Jesus knows our suffering, and he doesn’t necessarily take it away. But he does give us a different perspective. He wants us to know that regardless of our suffering and regardless of our financial state, we’re rich. We’re rich in faith and we’re heirs of the kingdom, which means we will possess “everything,” the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:1).

Jesus does not describe suffering—tribulation, poverty, and slander—as tragedies or even as problems. In fact, suffering serves to accentuate that which matters most, which we tend not to value most: true and eternal riches.

Jesus knows our present suffering. We find out in verse 10 that that’s not all he knows.

## Jesus knows the future

### Revelation 2:10:

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

Jesus not only knows the current situation of the believers in Smyrna, he also knows their future situation. He knows that they are about to suffer, and he tells them so. Even so, Jesus tells them, “Do not fear . . .”

Jesus now calls Satan, who has taken up residence in certain Jews who are slandering the church, the devil. Satan means “adversary”; the devil means “accuser.” Satan will instigate the suffering that Jesus envisions, imprisoning some of them, evidently as a result of Jewish slander and Roman seizure. In the Gospels, Jesus cast out many demons, but now the devil is going to cast believers into prison.

The devil has his reasons, but Jesus has reasons above and beyond the devil’s reasons, and he uses what the devil does. The divine purpose for the imprisonment of the believers is to test their faith. Faith needs to be tested, not only to prove its genuineness but also to deepen its presence.

A team that practices together before the game starts doesn’t really know how good it is until it plays a game. It needs—even wants—to be tested in a real game. Then it finds out how good it is, and it also finds out what it needs to work on.

The imprisonment will last ten days. This does not mean that each of them will be in prison for precisely ten days; the number ten symbolizes both shortness and completeness. The tribulation will be severe, but it will also be limited.

However, it doesn’t look as if they will be released after a limited period of time; it looks as if they will be killed. Jesus, who has already declared that he “died and came to life,” urges the believers in Smyrna to be “faithful,” loyal to him, “unto death.” If they are, then they, like Jesus, will come to life after death. The book of Revelation promises life out of death.

In fact, Jesus tells them that he will personally give them “the crown of life,” a victor’s crown. In Revelation, the competition, so to speak, is a spiritual war, and those

who lose their lives in this war while remaining faithful to Jesus will win in the end, when they are resurrected and meet their Lord. In this case, the winners die.

The believers in Smyrna should not fear what they are about to suffer—imprisonment and death—because it will serve to test their faith, because their suffering will be limited and will accomplish Jesus’ purposes for them, and because Jesus will give them the crown of life.

## Don’t fear suffering

Jesus says, regarding the suffering that you’re going through, “I know.” Perhaps those words are encouraging to you. Perhaps not. Even if they’re encouraging to you, how would you feel about Jesus saying to you, as he said to believers in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer”?

What are you afraid of? If you are afraid, doesn’t it have something to do with the future? If you’re suffering, you’re afraid you’re going to continue to suffer or that your suffering will get worse, or you’re afraid that someone you love is going to suffer. If you’re doing well, you might be afraid that it won’t last. You just don’t know what’s coming next.

What does Jesus say? “Do not fear.” Even if suffering is in your future, he says this, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”

Why not? Because we all need to be tested, and we need to be tested by suffering of some sort. We need to be tested so that we will know the genuineness of our faith and that we might go deeper in faith. As James says, “the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:3). Without suffering, where would we be? Probably less appreciative of our need for Jesus and less appreciative of the true and eternal riches that he gives. Without suffering, we might just be a little too fat and a little too happy. Maybe we’re a little too fat and a little too happy, and maybe a little more suffering would do us good.

Remember, we’re in a war, and we have a fearsome but unseen enemy. As Paul says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

In Smyrna, the devil was going to throw believers into prison simply for being believers. There are places in the world today where the devil does that sort of

thing. The Silicon Valley isn't one of those places. The devil is far more devious here. He throws believers into an emotional prison. He locks people up emotionally so that they pull back from fully following Jesus.

The influence of the church has been on the decline in the West. The culture is changing and laws are changing, and not in ways that are favorable to the church. Who knows what's ahead? In any event, what's the word? "Do not fear."

## Light momentary affliction

I have a friend whose car was struck by a drunken driver. He writes this:

*During that brief moment right before the collision, when my mind escaped to the horror and inevitability and journeyed to a place where time slowed down and I could sense a greater force, I had enough time to ask God to save us. In that instant, right before impact, I knew—with absolute certainty—that God was present. I knew he was there with us not so much because I could hear Him or see Him, but because I could feel Him. He was there with us. And, right before impact, I could feel Him say, "This is going to be bad, but don't worry. I am with you."<sup>1</sup>*

That's consistent with Revelation 2:10, isn't it? "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." Gil's wife Kim was paralyzed in the accident. Gil says this about what has happened since the accident:

*Our faith has been both strengthened and tested. It is strengthened when we feel God's strength (usually when ours is not sufficient and when we can rest in God's comforting presence and the assurance it gives. We are tested whenever we get too busy and let the busyness drown out God's more subtle suggestion to lean on him and rest in him. It's what always happens when we try to do too much on our own that we can easily lose sight of him. We know, intellectually, that he is with us, but those testing times come easily when our gaze is diverted elsewhere.*

Remember: Whatever you suffer, no matter how severe, it's only for a little while. In light of eternity, a hundred years is nothing. And when you reach the end, Jesus himself will personally give you the crown of life—that is, the crown of victory: victory over Satan, victory over sin, victory over death. The crown of life: true and eternal riches. Spend less time fretting over your portfolio. Spend more time contemplating the crown of life.

Paul says the same thing, albeit without referring to the crown of life, in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). The word translated "affliction" in 2 Corinthians is the same word that is translated "tribulation" in Revelation. Moreover, the word translated "preparing" in 2 Corinthians would be better translated "producing."

Suffering for the believer in Christ is, in comparison to eternity, both "light" and "momentary." Moreover, it is producing something—what Paul calls "an eternal weight of glory." John would say suffering is fitting us for a crown. Don't fear suffering, because it's fitting you for a crown. Suffering is temporary; the crown is eternal.

C.S. Lewis, reflecting on Paul's words in 2 Corinthians, writes:

*It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the Divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.<sup>2</sup>*

Finally, Jesus again looks into the future.

## The one who conquers

### Revelation 2:11:

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.<sup>3</sup>**

For the second time, Jesus urges all John's readers—and, by extension, us—to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Jesus will say the same thing to all seven churches. It must be important.

The one who "conquers"—remains loyal to Jesus even unto death—participates in Jesus' victory over evil, especially Satan. They will not suffer what Jesus calls "the second death"—that is, eternal death—



which is the fate of unbelievers in the final judgment (Revelation 20:6, 14). As E.V. Hill, former pastor of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, said, “Those who are born once, die twice; those who are born twice die once.”

## Faithful unto death

So much of our lives, it seems, is oriented around avoiding suffering and death. It’s the wrong orientation. We must orient ourselves not around avoiding suffering and death; we must orient ourselves around following Jesus, even if it results in suffering or death. The goal is neither to avoid suffering nor death. The goal is to follow Jesus.

Let’s be clear, however, that neither this text nor any other commands us to be masochists. We do not seek suffering; we seek to follow Jesus, and we accept whatever suffering comes of that.

Your assignment is to keep following Jesus and to continue going deeper with him up to and including your final day, which may come today. Jesus, who died and came to life, brings life out of death. Death doesn’t win. Satan doesn’t win. Tribulation, poverty and slander don’t win, either. Jesus wins. And if you follow him, you win too.

If you suffer and still believe, that’s a powerful witness. If you suffer and believe unto death, that’s a more powerful witness still.

As we told you last week, our dear brother, Basil Fthenakis, a former elder of our church, has gone to be with the Lord, at the age of sixty-two. He had been in tremendous pain since he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in June. I visited Basil and Debbie a while back on the Central Coast, where they had moved to a few years ago. I asked him how he was doing with the Lord. He answered, “I don’t question that God is who he says he is.”

Now, let me be clear: we have biblical permission to doubt. But as Basil was suffering and dying, he did not doubt the goodness or power of God. I left the Central Coast inspired by my friend’s faith. Well done, Basil!

## Picture the scene

The book of Revelation is filled with images. Don’t miss the one in Revelation 2:10. Here it is again: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Remember again who’s speaking. These are the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. Imagine meeting him at some point in the future, which you surely will. Picture the scene:

You’re standing before him. He calls you forward. He examines you. You find approval. You please him. You are a real ingredient in his happiness, loved by him, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father his son. It seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory that your thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is. Finally, you bow before him, and he leans forward and places the crown of life on your head.

Now, do you think you can take a little more suffering? Do you think you can follow Jesus, even up to and including your final day?

## Endnotes

Gilbert Ahrens, *Shaken, Shattered, and Stirred* (Positano Press, 2009), 27.

C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 34.

Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 73