

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (2)

In this department we will continue to consider the epistles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, with an emphasis on the need for and the nature, work, and reward of the overcomers. Among Christians today, there is a common and widespread yet inaccurate teaching concerning the overcomers. First John 5:4-5 says, "Everything that has been begotten of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory which has overcome the world—our faith. And who is he who overcomes the world except him who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" John's word here concerning overcoming the world is general, applicable to all the believers. Through faith in Christ, the believers are brought into an organic union with the Triune God and are begotten of Him (John 1:12-13). Now, having received the divine life, they have the capability of this life to overcome the satanic world system. This is the overcoming mentioned in 1 John 5. However, this is not the same overcoming that is found in Revelation 2 and 3. In these chapters the emphasis is not on overcoming the world in a general way but on overcoming the degradation of the church in particular:

These seven epistles are a call to those who are already believers to be the overcomers. We make a serious mistake if we simply define ourselves into being the overcomers described in Revelation 2 and 3...The overcomers we are talking about are a particular category of believers who respond to the speaking of the Spirit to overcome particular items of degradation in the churches. The very fact that these epistles to the seven churches issue a call to the overcomers indicates that not everyone in the churches is automatically an overcomer. God's children must face the fact that there is a general defeat, decline, and widespread degradation of the church. We may have our assessment of Christian work and of Christian gatherings, but we first need to care for the Lord's assessment. (Kangas, "Ephesus" 49-50)

He (or to him) who overcomes in chapters 2 and 3 is the participle form of νικάω, "to carry off the victory, come off victorious" (Thayer 425-426), "to...prevail over" (Wigram 592), to overthrow an enemy. It is a word that implies combat, warfare, and battle. It refers to an active struggle in which one party emerges victorious and another suffers loss.

As covered in the last issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, the church in Ephesus is called to overcome the losing of the first love for the Lord (Rev. 2:4). In the same principle, Jehovah says of His Old Testament people, "I remember concerning you the kindness of your youth, / The love of your bridal days, / When you followed after Me in the wilderness, / In a land that was not sown" (Jer. 2:2), but He adds, "My people have committed two evils: / They have forsaken Me, / The fountain of living waters, / To hew out for themselves cisterns, / Broken cisterns, / Which hold no water" (v. 13). Just as the failure of Israel was that they forsook God, the fountain of living waters, the degradation of the church is the losing of the first love for Him. The leaving, missing, and losing of the first love for the Lord and the substituting of anything else for Him, even good things, is the beginning of the decline of the church. It is the source of and main reason for the failure of the church throughout the ages.

The overcomers in Ephesus are called to come back to their first, best, and real love and to give the Lord the first place in all things (Col. 1:18). Those who overcome in this way enjoy Christ as the grace to live a church life that fulfills God's eternal purpose (Eph. 6:24), and they will be rewarded with the eating of the tree of life, Christ Himself, in the Paradise of God in the coming thousand-year kingdom (Rev. 2:7). Moreover, they preserve the shining of the divine light as the golden lampstand in their locality for the testimony of Jesus (v. 5). Thus love, life, light, and the lampstand are all apprehended by the normal believers, the overcomers, in Ephesus (Lee, *Overcomers* 35).

The Epistle to the Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8 through 11 continues to sound out the Lord's call for overcomers in a brief but significant epistle to the church in Smyrna. Verses 8 through 10 say,

To the messenger of the church in Smyrna write: These things says the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again: I know your tribulation and poverty (but you are rich) and the slander from those who call themselves Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear the things that you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that you may be tried, and you will have tribulation for ten days.

As we saw in the previous installment of this department, the epistles in Revelation are both historically literal and prophetic. C. I. Scofield notes that they are not only local to particular churches, admonitory to all churches, and exhortative to individuals but also prophetic of the “seven phases of the *spiritual* history of the church from, say, A.D. 96 to the end” (1331). Andrew Miller concurs:

They were intended by Him who knows the end from the beginning, to bear a prophetic meaning, as well as a historical application. [The seven churches] were selected from amongst many, and so arranged and described as to foreshadow what was to come. (3)

Thus, “the history of the seven churches constitutes the complete history of the church” (Nee 47: 10). In this principle, the church in Smyrna signifies the church under the persecution of the Roman Empire from the latter part of the first century to the early part of the fourth century.

Tribulation for “Ten Days”

The “ten days” in verse 10 prophetically signify ten periods of persecution that the church suffered under the Roman emperors during the span of over two and a half centuries.¹ Historians, such as Tacitus, the first-century senator and chronicler of the Roman Empire, tell us that by the middle of the first century there were great numbers of believers in Rome, who were already despised because of their atheism (rejection of the traditional Roman gods), their devotion to One higher than Caesar, their refusal to participate in idolatrous ceremonies and festivities, their neglect of pagan traditions, their close brotherly union, and their frequent meetings. Under the blinding of minds darkened by Satan, the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:18), the unbelieving Romans considered the church with odium as an abomination and baselessly attributed many wicked and strange crimes to the believers. A proverb spread: “If God does not send rain, lay it to the Christians” (Schaff 43).

The first official persecution was initiated by Nero (r. 54-68). After the great fire of Rome in June of A.D. 64, which rumor attributed to him, the emperor deflected the blame from himself by accusing the Christians, giving rise to a “monstrous exhibition of the power of evil” (Neander 130). Tacitus writes in Book 15 of *The Annals*,

To get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations,² called Christians by the populace...

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. (n. pag.)

Among the Roman emperors, Nero—the madman, tyrant, and antichrist—became “the first who stained with blood the rising faith” (Tertullian, “Scorpiace” 648). It was during his reign that both Paul and Peter were martyred.

During the reign of Vespasian and his son Titus, the number of Christians greatly increased, but Titus’s brother Domitian (r. 81-96) renewed the persecution. The church historian Eusebius tells us that

this emperor was the “successor of Nero in his hatred and enmity toward God” (147). Domitian deified himself, commanded that his statue be worshipped as a god, treated belief in Christ as a crime against the state, and carried out banishments and cruel executions of Christians. It was during his reign that John, as a fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and endurance in Jesus, was exiled to Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1:9). Domitian’s oneness with the spirit of antichrist, and thus with Satan, is testified by Revelation 17, in which he is figured as one of the seven heads of the scarlet beast—the sixth king, who “is,” that is, who was still living at the time of John’s prophecy (vv. 3, 9-10).

A brief respite under the emperor Nerva allowed John and others to return from exile. Concerning the advance of the gospel at this time, Pliny the Younger, a governor in Asia, reported, “The contagion of this superstition has seized not only cities, but also the villages and open country” (qtd. in Neander 133).

In little more than seventy years after the death of Christ, [Christianity] had made such rapid progress in some places as to threaten the downfall of paganism. The heathen temples were deserted, the worship of the gods was neglected, and victims for sacrifice were rarely purchased. This naturally raised a popular cry against

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Christianity...Those whose livelihood depended on the worship of the heathen deities, laid many and grievous complaints against the Christians before the governors. (Miller 127)

Accordingly, the persecutions continued anew under Trajan (r. 98-117) and Hadrian (r. 117-138), mostly at the hand of local governors and magistrates, who carried out the arrest, torture, and execution of Christians while admitting that they were guilty of nothing more than an “immoderate superstition” (Schaff 46), what the pagan historian Suetonius calls “a new and impious superstition” (16).³ It was during this period that the aged Ignatius was carried from Antioch to Rome to be martyred in the amphitheater.

The number and severity of the persecutions greatly increased under Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180). Although hailed as “the philosopher on the throne” and the author of the much-read *Meditations*, he was led by his Stoic ideal to despise the Christian faith as absurd and fanatical (Schaff 53), and he encouraged provincial authorities to crush the Christian opposition to the Roman gods. Active searches were made for believers in order to force them to worship at the altars of idols.

Christianity was now treated as a direct **crime against the State**...Christians were to be sought for as common criminals. They were torn from their homes by the violence of the people, and subjected to the severest tortures. If they obstinately refused to sacrifice to the gods, they were condemned. The wild beast, the cross, the stake, and the axe were the cruel forms of death that met the Lord’s faithful ones everywhere. (Miller 139)

During the reign of Aurelius, Justin Martyr was beheaded with some of his students, and around this time Polycarp, who served in the church in Smyrna, was also martyred. According to early writers, Polycarp had been a learner under the apostle John, and he is considered one of the chiefs of the early church fathers, whose witness to the teaching of the apostles was received as both authoritative and weighty. After serving a meal to his captors and spending two hours in prayer, he peaceably followed them to the place of execution. Upon being commanded, on pain of death, to reproach Christ, he replied, “Fourscore and six years have I been serving him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” (Eusebius 190). After this he was burned at the stake with some of his students. Great persecutions also took place at this time in Lyon and Vienne, France, including the remarkable ordeal of Blandina, whose martyrdom is recorded in an epistle by the churches there (212).

In the midst of those sufferings, they were absent from

the body; or rather, that the Lord stood by them and walked in the midst of them; and, staying themselves on the grace of Christ, they bid defiance to the torments of the world. (Neander 149)

After Aurelius, the rule of the empire shifted often and under perilous conditions, sovereignly allowing the churches a season of comparative peace, but shortly, Septimus Severus (r. 193-211) outlawed Christians, rekindling the persecution against them. During his reign the schools at Alexandria, where the scholar and theologian Origen labored, were nearly vacated by martyrdom. The noble Perpetua narrated the account of her own imprisonment and ordeal, after which she too was martyred with her newly baptized companions (Tertullian, “Passion” 699).⁴

Another period of relative peace followed until the reign of Maximinus Thrax (r. 235-238), who ordered the death of many leading ones in the churches. Following this, the cruelest and most terrible persecution to date was enacted by Decius (r. 249-251), who sought to exterminate the Christian faith in order to restore the ancient pagan religion, to which he was zealously devoted. Until this time, persecutions of believers were carried out mostly by provincial governors and were sporadic, often local, and even capricious. The acts and edicts of Decius, however, signaled the beginning of universal, government-sponsored persecution. Believers were brought before a magistrate and commanded to renounce their faith and offer incense at an idol’s altar for the well-being of the emperor. If anyone complied, he was given a *libellus*, a signed and witnessed certificate, such as the following:

To the Commissioners of Sacrifice...I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, and poured the drink offering, and tasted of the sacrifices, and I request you to certify the same. (Davis 289)

Those who did not comply were exposed to imprisonment, starvation, torture, and execution. Around this time Origen died, probably due to the injuries he sustained under torture during the reign of Decius. Valerian (r. 253-259) also commanded Christians to sacrifice to the Roman gods, on pain of banishment, slavery, or execution. It was at this time that Cyprian, a preeminent writer in the church, was martyred at Carthage.

Aurelian (r. 270-275) sought to unify the empire by establishing the worship of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*) as the supreme god of Rome, and although previous emperors had demanded to be worshipped as gods, he was the first to be called *dominus et deus* (master and god) in official documents. It was under Diocletian (r. 284-305), however, that the last and greatest

systematic persecution of the church took place. If previous persecutions had been a fired furnace, that of Diocletian was “seven times hotter” (Coxe 126).

The fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the unimpassioned dislike of Marcus [Aurelius], the sweeping purpose of Decius, the clever devices of Valerian, fell into obscurity when compared with the concentrated terrors of that final grapple. (Schaff 64-65)

Diocletian, who associated himself with Jupiter, first purged the army of all who would not sacrifice to the Roman gods. Following this, he issued a series of edicts, each more severe than its predecessor. He called first for the destruction of all Scriptures and meeting places of the believers. Those who refused to sacrifice to the gods were at first stripped of their offices, rank, property, and civil privileges, but eventually untold numbers were imprisoned and killed. Even the food and drink in the markets were sprinkled with sacrificial wine, forcing the believers into either apostasy or starvation. Burning at the stake became a common form of execution for Christians, and inhuman tortures and executions were numerous and widespread. Prisons became so filled with Christians that common criminals were released to make more space. Eusebius was an eyewitness to these things (Eusebius 328).

Lactantius describes the persecution of Diocletian, with his co-sovereigns Galerius and Maximian, as the raging of “three ravenous wild beasts” (306). He writes, “Had I a hundred mouths, a hundred tongues, / A voice of brass, and adamantine lungs, / Not half the dreadful scene could I disclose” (306).⁵ “The powers of darkness—the whole Roman empire—stood, *armed*, determined, pledged, to the defence of ancient polytheism, and to the **complete extermination of the Christian name**” (Miller 178).

Diocletian’s animosity toward the Christians was inflamed by Galerius, his subordinate emperor and an ardent pagan. Galerius, in turn, was incited to this hatred by pagan priests and by his mother, a former priestess and a bitter, implacable enemy of Christians. As emperor (r. 305-311), Galerius continued the evil of Diocletian until, being smitten with an agonizing and putrefying disease and being desirous for the prayers of the Christians, he issued an edict of toleration to temporarily end the persecution. However, Maximinus Daia (r. 308-313), the “impious, execrable, and God-hating tyrant” (Eusebius 368), later renewed the attacks until all the means

available for exterminating the believers and the faith were exhausted and found ineffective. Then he too issued an edict granting the right to assemble and build meeting places. Finally, after the defeat of Maximinus in the Civil Wars of the Tetrarchy, co-emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, which signaled the end of the official, systematic persecution of the believers and the churches by the Roman emperors. This was the conclusion of the prophetic “ten days” in Revelation 2:10.

The Gates of Hades, the Spiritual Forces of Evil

As viewed by historians, the reasons for the great persecution of the early church were several. Although Roman society boasted of religious toleration, the gospel that Christians preached was absolute, causing them to seem exclusive and aggressive. The believers opposed and denounced the worship of the traditional gods and of emperors, which was contrary to institutions of the state and considered seditious and atheistic. The believers were a separate and distinct people, avoiding the public sphere and rejecting public festivals, causing them to be viewed as secretive and arousing the suspicion and resentment of the pagans around them. The spread of the faith also threatened the material interests and ambitions of priests, fortunetellers, image makers, and others. Besides these, wild, false, and blind accusations of even sorcery, incest, and cannibalism were made against the believers. Tertullian writes,

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, “Away with the Christians to the lion!” (“Apology” 47)

We know, however, that the actual source of persecution was and always has been Satan, the evil enemy of God, who hates and fears the building up of the church as the testimony of Jesus. Jesus told the persecuting Jews,

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks the lie, he speaks it out of his own possessions; for he is a liar and the father of it. (John 8:44)

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Because the devil is the father of sinners, they are the children of the devil (1 John 3:10). The evil element of Satan works as sin through death and darkness in fallen man, causing man to do the will of his evil father in lies and murder (Lee, Recovery Version, John 8:44, notes 1, 3). Jesus foretold the persecution against His disciples as He sent them out, saying,

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves...Beware of men, for they will deliver you up to sanhedrins, and in their synagogues they will scourge you. And you will also be brought before governors and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles...And brother will deliver up brother to death, and father his child; and children will rise up against their parents and put them to death. And you will be hated by all because of My name...Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (Matt. 10:16-18, 21-22, 34)

Jesus proclaimed that the “gates of Hades” shall not prevail against the built-up church (16:18), revealing that it is Satan’s authority and power of darkness that powerfully, ruthlessly, and incessantly attack and war against the church. There is a spiritual warfare between Satan’s power, which is his kingdom, and the church, which is God’s kingdom (v. 19; Col. 1:13). Jesus taught His disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 6:10). Then He sent Paul to the Gentiles, appointing him “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18). The prayer of the kingdom and the preaching of the gospel bind Satan, the “strong man,” enter his house (the kingdom of Satan), and plunder his goods—the fallen people, who are under Satan as his vessels and instruments for his use (Matt. 12:28-29). The proper, built-up, praying, proclaiming, praising, and victorious church is the corporate warrior that is empowered in the Lord and in the might of His strength to wrestle against the rulers, the authorities, the world-rulers of this darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:10-12). Because of this, the church will always be resisted and attacked by Satan until he is cast out of heaven, then bound in the abyss, and ultimately cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 12:7-9; 20:2-3, 10).

Becoming Dead and Living Again

In Revelation 1:17-18 Jesus said, “I am the First and the Last and the living One; and I became dead, and behold, I am living forever and ever; and I have the keys of death and of Hades.” Then in chapter 2 He continued, “To the messenger of the church in Smyrna write: These things says the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again” (v. 8). Witness Lee writes,

In suffering, the church must know that the Lord is the First and the Last, the ever-existing, unchanging One. Whatever the persecuting environment may be, the Lord remains the same; nothing can precede Him, nor can anything exist after Him. All things are within the limits of His control. (Recovery Version, v. 8, note 2)

Jesus became dead and lived again. What power, victory, and hope are expressed in the words *lived again!* This refers to the Lord’s resurrection. The Lord suffered and entered into death, but death could not hold Him. Acts 2:24 speaks of Him in this way, “Whom God has raised up, having loosed the pangs of death, since it was not possible for Him to be held by it.” The Lord Himself is resurrection (John 11:25), and His life is the endless, eternal, divine, uncreated, and indestructible resurrection life (Heb. 7:16). John 19:36 tells us that no bone of Jesus was broken on the cross. In the Scriptures, the bone is a symbol, a figure, of resurrection life. That not one of the Lord’s bones was broken signifies that although the Lord’s physical life was terminated, His resurrection life could not be hurt or damaged (Lee, Recovery Version, John 19:36, note 2).

First Peter 3:18 says, “Christ also has suffered once for sins, the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, on the one hand being put to death in the flesh, but on the other, made alive in the Spirit.” Being constituted of the Holy Spirit in a human virgin, Christ was both the complete God and a perfect man, possessing both the human and divine essences. The Lord’s Spirit, as the essence of His divinity, did not die at the cross when His flesh died. Rather, His Spirit as His divinity was made alive, enlivened, with a new power of life, the resurrection life (Recovery Version, v. 18, note 3). In this way Christ passed through the test of death and Hades. He delivered Himself to death, but death had no way to detain Him. Rather, death was defeated by Him, and He rose up from it. It is this resurrection life that we the believers have obtained by believing into Christ (John 3:36) and with which the church is produced and built up.⁶ Thus Christ, as the One who holds the keys of death and of Hades, could comfort the suffering, grieving, persecuted, and slandered church. In His believers Christ is the One who can pass through the experience of becoming dead and living again.

The church is an entity absolutely in resurrection. Watchman Nee states, “God sees the church as a being that can endure death” (47: 21).

In John 11:25 [Jesus] tells us: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Surely this is the feature most characteristic of Him; and, as the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation show us, the Church is to know Him thus, as the risen and living One, so that she too may bear this

same character. Her task is to manifest the life and resurrection of Christ...

God has shown us right from the outset from what quarter the attack upon the Church will come. We are to expect it from "the gates of Hades"—that is, of death. This expression occurs only once in the New Testament, but there in Matthew 16:18 it is in its right place. Satan's greatest fear with regard to the Church is of her resistance...to his power of death. (40: 119-120)

Paul tells the Corinthians, "I delivered to you, first of all, that which also I received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Because Christ is the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, in Him all will be made alive. In this way, death, the last enemy, is being abolished (vv. 20, 22, 26). Paul concludes,

When this corruptible [body] will put on incorruption and this mortal will put on immortality, then the word which is written will come to pass, "Death has been swallowed up unto victory." Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 54-55, 57)

Christ's resurrection was His victory over Satan, God's enemy. The eventual swallowing up of death as the last enemy will result in the ultimate victory of the Lord's resurrection and be the consummation of the resurrection that we share in God's economy through the redemption and salvation in Christ. Such a resurrection is the hope and consolation of the church in persecution and trial.

A Grain of Wheat Bearing Much Fruit

In John 12:24 Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Through the Lord's death and resurrection, the divine glory that was hidden in His flesh through incarnation (1:14; 17:5) was released, producing "much fruit," many grains, the many believers—the church—as His increase and expression. This increase as the produce of death and resurrection was the experience of the early, persecuted church. During the long period of persecution and martyrdom, the church continued to increase, and the believers numbered in the millions. Tertullian says of the death of the martyrs,

This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil of life eternal...Therefore we conquer in dying; we go forth victorious at the very time we are subdued...The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed.* ("Apology" 54-55)

Justin Martyr tells us that it was the sight of the martyrs with their fearless bearing that converted him. He adds,

It is evident that no one can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world. For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us. For the vine planted by God and Christ the Saviour is His people. (254)

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As we saw in the previous installment of this series, the names of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are significant. The name *Smyrna* means "myrrh," a sweet-smelling but bitter-tasting spice obtained from incisions in the bark of a thorny tree (Vine 423). It is used as a perfume, an incense, a salve for easing the suffering of death, and a burial ointment. Thus, in the Bible it signifies the death of Christ (John 19:39), which is precious, aromatic, and effective. Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the sight of Jehovah / Is the death of His faithful ones." When the church participates in and experiences the death of Christ, it becomes a sweet savor to God. John Foxe records the martyrs at Lyon during the persecution of Aurelius:

The faithful, while they were dragged along, proceeded with cheerful steps; their countenances shone with much grace and glory; their bonds were as the most beautiful ornaments; and they themselves looked as brides adorned with their richest array, breathing the fragrance of Christ. They were put to death in various ways: or, in other words, they wove a chaplet of various odours and flowers, and presented it to the Father. (26)

Revelation 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Miller says of the saints under persecution:

The Lord was with His beloved suffering ones. He not

only sustained and comforted them, but He brought out, in the most blessed way, the power of His own presence in the feeblest forms of humanity. This was, we venture to say, a new thing on the earth. The superiority of the Christians to all the infliction of tortures, and to all the terrors of death, utterly astonished the multitude. (145)

Witness Lee concludes,

However severe were the persecutions instigated by the devil, Satan, through the Roman Caesars, who did their utmost to destroy and eliminate the church, they could not subdue and terminate the church. History demonstrates that the church of the living Christ, who became dead and lived again, withstood the persecutions victoriously and multiplied flourishingly by the indestructible resurrection life. (Recovery Version, 2:10, note 2)

In and by the power of Christ's resurrection life, the blood of the persecuted believers becomes a seed for the growth and flourishing of the church.

Living under the Shadow of the Cross

By the foregoing, it is evident that the basic components of the epistle to the church in Smyrna are death and life. The One who speaks to the church is He who "became dead and lived again" (v. 8). Verse 10 says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life," and verse 11 mentions the "second death." The experience of death and life is vital and intrinsic to every believer. Throughout His human life on the earth, Christ Himself lived a crucified life, the life of the cross. He began His earthly ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River, a sign of burial, calling this the "way of righteousness" (Matt. 3:13-15; 21:32). Because no man of the flesh can be justified before God, the fallen flesh is good for nothing but death and burial (Rom. 3:20; 7:18). Although there was no sin in the Lord Jesus, in incarnation He took upon Himself human flesh (2 Cor. 5:21; John 1:14). For this reason He submitted to baptism, declaring that in His flesh He was dead and buried in the death water in order to fulfill God's righteous requirement.

After His baptism Jesus continually lived under the shadow of the cross. He always denied Himself, not doing anything of Himself, not seeking His own will but the will of the One who sent Him, and not speaking His own words but the words of the Father (5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 14:10). Being meek and lowly in heart, He remained under the yoke of God, bearing the constant opposition and persecution of religion and politics (Matt. 11:28-29). Moreover, He was always obedient to God, until ultimately He was obedient even unto the death of a cross (Phil. 2:8).

"The first thought of the New Testament dispensation of

grace, the dispensation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is that all fallen men of the flesh are worthy of nothing except death and burial" (Lee, *God-man* 47). In the pattern of the Lord Jesus, the believers commence their life in the new creation by baptism, which is the burial of their old man. Romans 6:3 says, "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death." Following this, we are charged to learn Christ by living a crucified life, as He did (Eph. 4:20).

Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). In Luke 9:23 the word *daily* is added; Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." To take up the cross is to "die daily" (1 Cor. 15:31). Matthew 16:25 continues, "Whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it." *Soul-life* (ψυχή) in Matthew 16 refers to man's psychological life, the life of his person, as opposed to his spirit, or spiritual life (πνεῦμα), and physical life (βίος or σῶμα; 1 Thes. 5:23). The soul-life comprises man's natural mind, emotions, and will and is the seat of his disposition, intellect, thought, point of view, feelings, preferences, and intentions. *Soul-life* in Matthew 16:26 is replaced with *himself* in Luke 9:25, indicating that the soul-life is the self of man. To lose one's soul-life for the Lord's sake is to deny the self, that is, to deny one's own concept, pleasure, and intention. It is to cause the soul to lose its enjoyment in order to follow the Lord on the pathway of suffering for the carrying out of His plan, desire, and will. Thus, death is not merely an event but an active principle that operates by the cross of Christ in the believers' life and being. It is to the life of the cross that all believers are called and in which they must walk according to the path prepared for them by the wise and sovereign Lord and measured out to them by the God of measure (2 Cor. 10:13). The working of the cross terminates our self so that we may experience God in resurrection in order to build up the church in the resurrection life.

Filling Up That Which Is Lacking of the Afflictions of Christ

The apostle Paul lived this kind of crucified life for the carrying out of his ministry to impart the unsearchable riches of Christ to the believers for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ. Paul tells the Galatians, "I bear in my body the brands of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). *Brands* (στίγματα) denotes the marks branded on slaves to indicate ownership. The brands that Paul bore, as a slave of Christ, were the scars of the wounds on his body that he received in his faithful service to his Master, "the traces left there by the perils, hardships, imprisonments, scourgings, endured by him for the cause of Christ, and which

mark him as Christ's faithful and approved votary, servant, soldier" (Thayer 588). "Spiritually, they signify the characteristics of the life that he lived, a life like the one the Lord Jesus lived on this earth" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 17, note 1).

"The sufferings of the Christ" abounded in Paul as he was afflicted for the sake of the Corinthians, whom he expected would also be partakers of Christ's sufferings (2 Cor. 1:5-7). Paul says, "Indeed we ourselves had the response of death in ourselves" (v. 9). *Response* (ἀπόκριμα) denotes a judicial sentence and, by extension, an answer:

When the apostles were under the pressure of affliction, despairing even of life, they might have asked themselves what the issue of their suffering would be. The answer or response was "death." This led them to the vital decision not to base their confidence on themselves but on God, who raises the dead. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 9, note 2)

Paul goes on to say, "We who are alive are always being delivered unto death for Jesus' sake that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death operates in us, but life in you" (4:11-12). The apostles lived a life like the one that the Lord Jesus lived on earth, a life under the killing of the cross for the manifestation of the resurrection life, issuing in the impartation of life to the believers.

Later, while in the bonds of his imprisonment, Paul told the Philippians,

What things were gains to me, these I have counted as loss on account of Christ. But moreover I also count all things to be loss on account of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, on account of whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse that I may gain Christ...to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. (Phil. 1:13; 3:7-8, 10)

Paul also expected that the Philippians would follow in his pattern. He says, "To you it has been graciously granted on behalf of Christ not only to believe into Him but also to suffer on His behalf, having the same struggle which you saw in me and now hear to be in me" (1:29-30). To suffer on behalf of Christ is to have the fellowship of His sufferings so that we may experience and enjoy Him in His sufferings. This is to live Christ and magnify Him in a situation in which He is rejected and opposed (vv. 20-21).

Paul told the Colossians, "I now rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). To "fill up" (ἀντ-απληρώω) is to fill adequately, to bring to completion, by undertaking one's part. The afflictions of Christ are of two categories (Lee, *Colossians* 97). The first is the afflictions that He suffered for the accomplishing of redemption. First Peter 3:18 tells us, "Christ also has suffered once for sins, the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God." Christ alone is the Redeemer; He died once for all to accomplish a perfect, complete, and eternal redemption for man. Only He, the righteous One, is qualified to win redemption, for only His sufferings and death avail with God to this end. To say that we have a part in Christ's redemptive sufferings is to speak blasphemy.

To suffer on behalf of Christ is to have the fellowship of His sufferings so that we may experience and enjoy Him in His sufferings.

The second category of Christ's sufferings is for producing and building up the church as the Body of Christ. Paul undertook on his part a full share of "the sufferings which follow after the sufferings of Christ, and are experienced by the members of His Body, the church" (Vine 236). "That which is

lacking of the afflictions of Christ signifies that portion of Christ's ministerial sufferings which was not endured by Him in person, but is endured in the sufferings of Christians in all generations in carrying out Christ's work" (Vincent 477). Paul was a pattern for us in this matter. Immediately after his conversion, he began to share in the sufferings of Christ, to partake of the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His Body. Like Paul, if we are faithful to Christ, we also must share in His sufferings for the church. Because the sufferings for the sake of the church have not been completed by Christ Himself, by the apostles, by the martyrs, or by all the believers to date, there is still the need for the Lord's faithful ones to follow His footsteps to make up what remains. Those who desire to serve Christ must follow Him in the sufferings and death that build up the church.

Just as Jesus was "counted with the lawless" (Luke 22:37), Paul also was put into bonds as a criminal (2 Tim. 2:9). He says, "I endure all things for the sake of the chosen ones, that they themselves also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (v. 10). Paul told Timothy, "I am already being poured out, and the time of my departure is at hand" (4:6). *Poured out* refers to the drink offering, which was poured out on the basic offerings, signifying Christ's absolute living for God and His being poured out on the cross (Num. 15:1-10; Isa. 53:12).

Paul became a drink offering by enjoying Christ as the heavenly wine, so that he could be poured out as a sacrifice to God upon the offering of the Philippians' faith. *Already being poured out* in 2 Timothy 4:6 indicates that even before Paul's martyrdom, the process of his being poured out unto death had begun in him.

Having the Overcoming Spirit of a Martyr

In Revelation 1:9 John says that he was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. As such, he was a "fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and endurance in Jesus." To be a fellow partaker in the tribulation in Jesus is to suffer and be persecuted as we follow Jesus, the despised One of Nazareth. As we wait for the coming of the Lord, we must be willing to suffer attack, opposition, persecution, and evil speaking. This suffering is for the Body, the church. In chapter 6, at the opening of the fifth seal, John saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony which they had. The souls of the martyred saints being under the altar indicates that, in the eyes of God, they have been offered to Him as sacrifices and that their blood, their life, was shed there. These were told to rest yet a little while, "until also the number of their fellow slaves and their brothers who were about to be killed, even as they were, is completed" (vv. 9-11).

In chapter 15 John saw a "glassy sea mingled with fire and those who come away victorious from the beast and from his image and from the number of his name standing on the glassy sea, having harps of God" (v. 2). God executes His judgment over the rebellious earth, angels, and mankind first by means of water and then by fire (Gen. 1:2; 6:17; 19:24; Lev. 10:2; Num. 16:35; Rev. 14:10; 19:20). These two means of judgment—water and fire—are mingled together first as the glassy sea and finally as the lake of fire, in order to deal with all negative things in the universe (Lee, *Revelation* 564). Those who come away victorious from the beast are the later overcomers who, though martyred under the persecution of Antichrist in the great tribulation, overcome him and his worship. *Standing on the glassy sea* in 15:2 indicates that these martyrs have been resurrected from the dead and that they are now raptured to the heavens to stand above the judgments of God. In the millennium they will reign with Christ as co-kings (20:4). These overcomers sing the "song of Moses, the slave of God, and the song of the Lamb," saying,

Great and wonderful are Your works, Lord God the Almighty! Righteous and true are Your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; for all the nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous judgments have been manifested. (15:3-4)

The song of Moses praises God for His victory over the forces of Pharaoh by God's triumphant deliverance of the people of Israel through the judging waters of the Red Sea (Exo. 15:1-19); the song of the Lamb is a praise for Christ's redemption experienced by God's people in the presence of their enemy (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 15:3, notes 2 and 3). "In their praises to God, the late overcomers will declare to the whole universe that they are above God's judgment on His enemies and that they have participated in the redemption of Christ" (Lee, *Revelation* 565). Their praise is not only for God's triumph but also for His works and His ways. God's works here refer to His judgment upon Antichrist, and His ways are His governing principles. God's ways are righteous in His principles and true in His promises (566). In the midst of their suffering and martyrdom, the overcomers do not yet see God's works manifested in full, but they are not stumbled, because they know the governing principles by which God does things. Even before witnessing His great works, they are able to praise God for His ways and principles in dealing with people. To know God's ways—apart from seeing His works—is a great factor for overcoming in suffering and even in death. In Revelation 12 a triumphant shout announces the coming of the kingdom. Verses 10 and 11 say,

Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ, for the accuser of our brothers has been cast down, who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they loved not their soul-life even unto death.

The overcoming believers who constitute the man-child (v. 5) overcome God's enemy, the slanderer Satan, by the blood of Jesus, which answers before God all the accusations of the devil against them and gives them the victory over him. These overcomers testify by their word that the devil has been judged by the Lord (John 12:31). Moreover, they do not love their soul-life, their self, but rather hate it and deny it even to the point of martyrdom. We should not assume that every believer, even those with a certain attainment or degree of spirituality, is able to overcome the enemy even unto martyrdom. Only those who know God's ways and do not love their soul-life are willing to be martyred. Without the self-denying spirit of a martyr, we are unable to offer our life to the Lord to the greatest extent. Our degree of overcoming, both now and in the future, depends much upon our daily exercise and practice of losing our soul-life, denying our self, taking up our cross, and following Jesus on the pathway of His rejection and suffering (Matt. 16:24-25). Moreover, only by the daily "martyrdom" of the subjective experience of the death of Christ can we know the resurrection life and minister this life to others for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ.

Being Proved by Fire unto Praise, Glory, and Honor

About the time of the great fire of Rome and Nero's persecution, Peter wrote to the Jewish believers scattered throughout the provinces of Asia Minor. His first Epistle concerns the Christian life under the government of God and, as such, has much bearing on the matters that we are considering here. "God's government is universal and deals with all His creatures that He may have a clean and pure universe (2 Pet. 3:13) in order to express Himself" (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 1:2, note 1). The dispersed and sojourning believers addressed by Peter needed to see that in their sufferings and trials they were under God's governmental dealing for a positive purpose. Seeing this vision would perfect, establish, strengthen, and ground the suffering believers (Note 1).

In its nature and purpose 1 Peter is much like the epistle to the suffering church in Smyrna. Like the latter epistle, Peter's writing stands out as not containing any direct rebuke, correction, or warning to its recipients. There was no need for the aging shepherd to issue a word of correction, because the "rebuke" in their day was the discipline that they were already suffering under God's government in their environment. This Epistle simply confirms the Lord's work among them in order to encourage and strengthen them so that they may learn directly from the discipline of God and be refined in the fire of persecution. This Epistle is profound both in its insight into God's economy and in its ability to comfort, console, focus, and strengthen the suffering believers. In this spirit Peter tells the believers that they are

being guarded by the power of God through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time, in which time you exult, though for a little while at present, if it must be, you have been made sorrowful by various trials, so that the proving of your faith, much more precious than of gold which perishes though it is proved by fire, may be found unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:5-7)

Proving (δοκίμιον) refers to something found approved or genuine after testing (Vine 492). The word is used in the Septuagint for a refining pot for silver (Prov. 27:21), a furnace that refines and purifies seven times (Psa. 12:6). The sufferings of the believers are used by God as trials to test the precious quality of their faith, to see whether they will follow Christ in suffering for doing good. Such trials are pictured in the Scriptures as fire (1 Cor. 3:13).

When undergoing the fiery trials, the believers must be sober (1 Pet. 1:13), calm, and clear in mind that they may realize God's economy in His salvation without being disturbed by fear, anxiety, or any care (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 13, note 2). Such trials come upon the believers so that the proving of their faith will result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation, the coming, of the Lord. Peter continues,

For this is grace, if anyone, because of a consciousness of God, bears sorrows by suffering unjustly. For what glory is it if, while sinning and being buffeted, you endure? But if, while doing good and suffering, you endure, this is grace with God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving you a model so that you may follow in His steps. (2:19-21)

**Trials come upon the believers
so that the proving of their faith
will result in praise, glory,
and honor at the revelation,
the coming, of the Lord.**

The believers, living in a consciousness of God, an intimate fellowship with Him in a good and pure conscience, have been called to enjoy grace and express God in the midst of their suffering unjustly. *Model* here is ὑπογραμμός, a writing copy given to students to learn to draw letters by tracing their outline (Thayer 642). As the believers enjoy Christ

as grace, they become His reproduction according to the pattern of His suffering life, the life of the One "who being reviled did not revile in return; suffering, He did not threaten but kept committing all to Him who judges righteously" (v. 23; cf. 1:11; 2:4). Rather than fight against or even resist sufferings,

the Lord kept committing all His insults and injuries to Him who judges righteously in His government, the righteous God, to whom He submitted Himself. This indicates that the Lord recognized God's government while He was living a human life on earth. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 23, note 1)

Peter says,

Even if you suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not be afraid with fear from them, nor be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, being always ready for a defense to everyone who asks of you an account concerning the hope which is in you...For it is better, if the will of God should will it, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. (3:14-15, 17)

Peter's thought is that to be terrified and troubled by persecutors gives the appearance that we do not have the Lord in our hearts. Rather, in suffering persecution we should show others that we have Christ as Lord within

us. This is to sanctify Christ, to separate Him, from the lifeless and ineffectual gods (Lee, Recovery Version, 3:15, note 1). This was the testimony, expression, and demeanor of the persecuted saints who faced imprisonment and martyrdom. Concerning those under the persecution of the Roman emperors, Miller notes,

The superiority of the Christians to all the inflictions of tortures, and to all the terrors of death, utterly astonished the multitude...What could be done with a people who prayed for their persecutors, and manifested the composure and tranquility of Heaven in the midst of the fires and wild beasts of the amphitheatre? (145)

Suffering under the Government of God

Peter continues, “Since Christ therefore has suffered in the flesh, you also arm yourselves with the same mind (because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin)” (4:1). In their suffering of persecution, the believers must follow the footsteps of Christ and have the same mind that He had, a mind that understands and realizes the way Christ lived to fulfill God’s purpose. *Arm yourselves* comes from the root ὄπλον, denoting an instrument with which to make war (Strong 52). The Christian life is a battle waged not only against Satan and his fallen hosts but also against the flesh, the self, and the fallen soul-life of the believers, which are always touched, dealt with, and terminated in the midst of fiery trials, that they may live no longer in the lusts of men but in the will of God (v. 2). Peter says,

Beloved, do not think that the fiery ordeal among you, coming to you for a trial, is strange, as if it were a strange thing happening to you; but inasmuch as you share in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice exultingly. If you are reproached in the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (vv. 12-14)

Here again Peter uses the imagery of the fire of a smelting furnace for the purifying of gold and silver. The persecution that the believers were suffering was being used by God to purify their life. As they were being reproached in the name of Christ, they were one with His person, sharing in His sufferings. The Spirit of glory is the Spirit of God Himself, through whom Christ was glorified in His resurrection. Such a Spirit “rests upon the suffering believers in their persecution, for the glorifying of the resurrected and exalted Christ, who is now in glory” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 14, note 2).

Strange (ξένοϛ) in verse 12 means “alien,” “foreign,” “amazing,” or “unheard of.” The suffering believers should not think that their trials, however fiery they are, are something uncommon, alien, or astonishing. Simply speaking,

sufferings are the common lot of Christians, as sojourners on the earth. However, Peter’s thought is deeper than this, touching God’s economical way to deal with the believers in the judgment of His governmental administration. Verses 15 through 17 say,

Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler into others’ affairs; but if as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name. For it is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God.

Peter’s thought here is deep and insightful, forming the central argument of his first Epistle. Apparently, the persecution and reproach that believers suffer comes from evil men motivated by Satan, the primeval enemy and murderer, with the intent to damage, destroy, and eliminate the church of God from the earth. Such a motive is easily seen in persecutions, especially those under the Roman Empire. However, deep within the outward situation is the hidden operation of God, who uses all the trials and travails of His children for their purification, sanctification, and perfection, that through the sufferings they endure by the grace and glory of God, they may be conformed to the image of God’s Son, who is the pattern and prototype of a God-man made perfect through sufferings and glorified in resurrection (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:10; Luke 24:26). First Peter concerns the government of God, especially in relation to His dealings with His chosen people. Because of the fallen flesh, God’s dealing with His people of necessity involves discipline and purification through various and fiery trials. This dealing is His judgment, which is exercised not only once but continuously throughout the believers’ life until the time of their perfection. Such a judgment, as God’s governmental administration, begins from His own house, so that He may have the righteous ground to judge all those who are disobedient to His gospel and rebellious toward His government, for the establishing of His kingdom on the earth (4:17-18).

In chapter 5, verses 5 and 6 continue, “Gird yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Therefore be humbled under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time.” *Be humbled* means to be made low, to be leveled, to be assigned a lower rank (Thayer 614); it means to be made humble by God, mainly through sufferings in persecution. Again Peter views the sufferings of the believers as originating ultimately from the hand of God so that He may establish His governmental administration by judging first His own household.

To be willing to be humbled under God’s hand is the God-honoring way that gives Him the ground to exalt us in His time; it is the prerequisite to being made high by

God's exalting hand in glorification. As the believers are being made low, they must watch, be vigilant, against the anxiety brought in by the adversary of God, committing all their worry and care to God, who is loving and faithful concerning them, especially in their persecution.

Knowing God's Purpose in Suffering

Peter, who was a witness of the sufferings of Christ (v. 1), concludes this Epistle with a word of comfort and encouragement: "The God of all grace, He who has called you into His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself perfect, establish, strengthen, and ground you" (v. 10). As the sojourners of the dispersion, along with all the brotherhood, remained under the threatening of the adversary, the God of the bountiful and gracious supply of life would exceed all their need and would perfect, establish, strengthen, and ground them. To Him be the glory and the might forever and ever (v. 1)! Witness Lee writes concerning 1 Peter,

This book was written mainly to show the persecuted believers God's governmental purpose in their sufferings. That they may pass through those sufferings, God supplies them with all the multiplied, varied, and true grace (v. 10; 1:2; 4:10), which is sufficient to enable them to participate in the sufferings of and for Christ (2:21; 3:14-17; 4:12-16) and which will perfect, establish, strengthen, and ground them in the Triune God and bring them into His eternal glory. (Recovery Version, 5:12, note 2)

For this reason, they should not find it strange when sufferings, even persecutions, appear. When John the Baptist was put into prison, he must have expected that Christ, whom he had recommended, would exercise His power to deliver him, because he sent a disciple with a question for Christ in order to provoke Him to action (Matt. 4:12; 11:2-3). However, Christ did nothing to deliver him, although He did many things for others. His word for John was simply, "Blessed is he who is not stumbled because of Me" (v. 6). Shortly before his own martyrdom, Paul said, "Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). It is crucial that we know this so that in times of persecution, loss, deprivation, and disappointment we will not be offended, and our faith will not fail. Jesus told Peter, "Satan has asked to have you all to sift you as wheat. But I have made petition concerning you that your faith would not fail; and you, once you have turned again, establish your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). Ultimately, Peter realized this, and he

went on to fulfill the Lord's word by establishing many brothers when their time of suffering came to pass.

Peter's graceful, stabilizing, and faithful word to the believers suffering under persecution reveals that behind all the fiery trials is the hidden hand of God, who operates wisely in His economy to produce the new creation out of the ruins of the old creation.

God is not working to make His might known in external acts but is working to impart Himself...What is the significance of suffering? It is this, that the devastation it brings to the old creation provides an opportunity for the God of resurrection to impart Himself to His creatures, so that they emerge from the death process with a divine element in their constitution. The primary purpose of suffering in this universe, particularly as it relates to the children

of God, is that through it the very nature of God may be wrought into the nature of man. (Lee, *Resurrection* 9, 15-16)

Although Satan fights to hinder, damage, and even destroy the believers and the churches as the testimony of Jesus, the economical God in His administration does not

act quickly to deliver His suffering ones. God has judged Satan,

but God in His wisdom has reserved the executing of the judgment because there is an ugly and negative work that only Satan, the devil, can do. There is the need to do a kind of destructive work on the old creation so that out of it God can produce the new creation in resurrection. There is the need for someone to touch in a negative way even the saints of God, to break them, to strip them, to test them, that they may be open and desperate to seek the Lord so that, as a result, the Triune God will be wrought into them. (Kangas, "Smyrna" 95)

The Christian life is a life of God's economy mixed with the satanic chaos of the old creation. However, even what Satan does, under the limited permission of God, is used by God in His wisdom to further His economical move on the earth. In this sense, even persecution and death serve God's purpose. By the Lord's mercy and His abundant grace, the true martyrs come to recognize this and agree, consent, and cooperate to be humbled under the mighty hand of God. May we all know such mercy and grace and give the Lord our cooperation that He may do whatever He needs to do, in His way and in His time, to complete His work and bring His kingdom to the earth.

By the Lord's mercy and abundant grace, the true martyrs come to recognize this and agree, consent, and cooperate to be humbled under the mighty hand of God.

Being Given the Crown of Life

The lesson of the epistle to the church in Smyrna, which follows that to the church in Ephesus, is that as we love the Lord as our first love (Rev. 2:4), giving Him the pre-eminence in all things and bearing a living testimony of the resurrected and ascended Christ in life, we must be prepared for persecution, opposition, and various trials, arming ourselves with a mind to suffer (1 Pet. 4:1). Then if God does not exercise His power to deliver us, we must not be offended, and we must not cease to enjoy Him as grace. Instead of being shaken, stumbled, disappointed, and discouraged, we should, like the overcomers in Smyrna, be strengthened and enabled to stand for and live out God's economy in the midst of every situation of suffering.

When seen in the light of the testifying function of the church, a martyr is a witness, a living testimony of the Lord Jesus—"one who avers, or can aver, what he himself has seen or heard" (Thayer 392). By extension, he is one who faithfully holds to his testimony under extreme opposition, sealing it by his death (Acts 22:20; Rev. 2:13; 17:6). When seen from the aspect of following the Lord as His disciples, to suffer for His sake and for the gospel is to deny the self, lose the soul-life, and bear the cross daily (Matt. 16:24-26; Luke 9:23-25; 14:26). A true witness does not love his soul-life but continually exercises to reject his self and live by another life, the divine life that indwells him. This is to love the Lord above all, hating our self and our soul-life even unto death (Rev. 12:11). When seen from the side of God's government, the suffering of the believers is God's discipline through His dealings, which begins from the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17). To experience God's dealings in our daily life through His inward touching and outward environmental sufferings is to be judged, dealt with, and disciplined in the flesh by the loving Father, who disciplines His children for the highest purpose (Heb. 12:5-10).

When seen from the organic aspect of God's full salvation, sufferings are also the subjective work of death in the believers that releases the resurrection life. Paul continually bore about in his body the death of Jesus that the life of Jesus also would be manifested (2 Cor. 4:10-11); Paul says, "Death operates in us, but life in you" (v. 12). By the inner work of the death of the cross, our natural man, the old man, the fallen flesh, is consumed so that our inner man may have the opportunity to develop and be renewed (v. 16). The killing of the cross results in the manifestation of resurrection life, the release of the divine life in resurrection. When the believers are under the killing of the Lord's death, His resurrection life is imparted through them into others.

It is in the foregoing ways—particularly the latter, sub-

jective way—that we can understand the word of the Lord to the church in Smyrna. He says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). *Life* here denotes the divine life (ζωή), the eternal life, the life of God that is implanted in the believers through regeneration and grows within them unto maturity. In the context of the epistle to the church in Smyrna in particular, it is the resurrection life, the life that rises victoriously out of death. Thus, resurrection is not merely an event but the death-conquering, indestructible, divine life that is Christ Himself, the One who became dead and lived again (John 11:25; Rev. 1:18; 2:8). In order for us to know such a Christ, we must pass through some kind of martyrdom—physical, psychological, or spiritual—to touch the resurrection life, to grow in life, to mature in life, and to minister life.

To this end, the trials, troubles, and sufferings of the believers cause the divine life within us to grow. At present we are in the process of resurrection. As unbelievers alienated from the life of God, we were dead in our offenses and sins (Eph. 4:18; 2:1), but through regeneration our innermost part—our human spirit—was resurrected (John 3:6, 15; Rom. 8:10). Now by our cooperation with the operation of the Spirit of life, our mind—the leading part of our soul—becomes life (vv. 2, 6). Similarly, our emotions are brought into resurrection so that we may love what God loves and hate what He hates, and our will is resurrected subjectively to be strong against God's enemy but pliable to God. In this way we know God in resurrection, we are one with Him in resurrection, and we live and magnify Him in resurrection. For this purpose God allows the suffering of "all things" in our environment to work for our continual sanctification and transformation, that we may be conformed to the image of His Son (vv. 28-29). Paul says,

If children, heirs also; on the one hand, heirs of God; on the other, joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed upon us. (vv. 17-18)

This glory will be our transfiguration, the glorification of our body to be conformed to the body of Christ's glory (Phil. 3:21). This will be the crowning event of our life-long experience of the life of Christ in resurrection. To the regenerated, transformed, and glorified saints this will truly be a crown of life.

"A crown in New Testament usage always denotes a prize that is in addition to salvation" (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 2:10, note 3; cf. 3:11; James 1:12; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4; 1 Cor. 9:25;). In the context of the epistle to the church in Smyrna, to overcome is to overcome persecution by

being faithful unto death, and the crown of life, as a prize to the overcomers, denotes the overcoming strength that is the power of the resurrection life (Phil. 3:10). Those who overcome in the midst of trials, suffering, deprivation, slander, opposition, persecution, and even death—physical, psychological, or spiritual—will be rewarded in the coming millennial age, the age of the kingdom, with the fullest measure of the divine, eternal, and indestructible resurrection life, by which they overcame.

Attaining to the Best Resurrection

In Philippians 3:10-11 Paul says, “To know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if perhaps I may attain to the out-resurrection from the dead.” First Thessalonians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 tell us that the dead in Christ will be resurrected at the Lord’s second coming. This is an experience that will be common to all Christians as the fruit of their believing in the Lord Jesus and, as such, requires no further qualifications or attainments. In Philippians 3:11, however, Paul speaks of an out-resurrection (ἐξ-ανάστασις). This is a unique term, used only here in the New Testament. It denotes a thorough and complete experience of resurrection, a resurrection in its full impact. Paul uses this intensified term in the context of his fervent aspiration, adding to it the qualifiers *if perhaps* and *may attain*. To be sure, *if perhaps* and *may attain* are not appropriate for referring to the common resurrection of all the believers, especially when spoken by Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians 15. The out-resurrection, therefore, is something more. It is something to which Paul aspired and sought for fervently, considering that perhaps he may not attain it (cf. 9:24-27).

The out-resurrection is the outstanding resurrection, the extra-resurrection, a resurrection set apart, which will be a prize to the overcoming saints. It is the “better” resurrection (Heb. 11:35) and the resurrection of reward (Luke 14:14). In Revelation 20:5-6 it is called the “first” resurrection (or “best,” πρῶτος, cf. the “best” robe, Luke 15:22). Whereas all the believers will be resurrected at the Lord’s coming back, the overcoming believers will enjoy an extra, outstanding portion of that resurrection, the resurrection of kingship as a reward to them, enabling them to reign as co-kings with Christ in the millennial kingdom. Revelation 20:4 and 5 say concerning the martyred overcomers,

I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and of those who had not worshipped the beast nor his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.

These souls include both the dead who pray underneath the altar prior to the great tribulation (6:9-10) and those who stand on the glassy sea after overcoming the persecution of Antichrist (15:2). In principle, they are those in Smyrna who were faithful unto death. All these will attain to the out-resurrection, the first and best resurrection, the resurrection of reward in the coming kingdom. As Paul did, we all must aspire to this best resurrection.

Those who overcome in the midst of trials, suffering, deprivation, slander, opposition, persecution, and even death will be rewarded in the coming millennial age.

Not Hurt by the Second Death

The speaking Christ says to the church in Smyrna, “He who overcomes shall by no means be hurt of the second death” (2:11). Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is reserved for men to

die once, and after this comes judgment.” As a consequence of man’s fall, his spirit was deadened, his soul was poisoned by Satan, and his body became subject to death. Thus it is reserved, apportioned, for every man to die. Physical death, however, is not the final settlement of a man’s condition before God. At the time of death, the soul and spirit of the unbelievers are separated from their body and perish in the section of suffering in Hades (Luke 16:22-24). Then at the close of the millennium they will be resurrected to pass through the judgment of the great white throne (Rev. 20:5, 11-12). Jesus called this the “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). As a consequence of not having their names written in the book of life, they will be cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death as the final settlement (Rev. 20:14-15). Therefore, the second death is in principle a judgment from God suffered after a person’s physical death and resurrection.

In contrast to the unbelieving dead, those who die in Christ are comforted in Abraham’s bosom, the pleasant part of Hades, until they are raised at the Lord’s coming before the thousand-year kingdom. At this time they will stand in judgment by Christ. Second Corinthians 5:10 says, “We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad.” Those who practice an overcoming

life and service to the Lord will receive a reward in the kingdom age. However, those who do not overcome will be excluded from the bright glory of the kingdom. Moreover, they will suffer a discipline from the Lord during the kingdom age to prepare them for their eventual participation in the eternal New Jerusalem (Matt. 25:10, 20-23, 30; Rev. 19:7-9).

All negative matters and situations are related to death. Every form of weakness and suffering—physical, mental, and spiritual—is a manifestation of death. Moreover, all the troubles, trials, and hardships of human life also belong to the realm of death. This fact helps us to understand the principle of the second death. The first death is the death before resurrection, and the second death is the experience of death after resurrection. According to this principle, the disciplinary dealings received by the defeated Christians will be in the sphere and realm of death, after their physical death. That is, the dealings will be related to the second death in the same way that weakness, sickness, trouble, and hardships are related to death today. Simply stated, the second death is the suffering of judgment after a person's physical death and resurrection.

Revelation 20:6 says, "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no authority." Today God uses weakness, trials, and hardships to discipline the believers so that they may partake of His holiness and grow in His life (Heb. 12:9-11). In the same way, a certain suffering will be used by Him to deal with the defeated believers in the coming age. The unbelieving dead will be consumed by the second death, the lake of fire, eternally. The disciplined believers, however, will be touched, hurt, by the second death only in the kingdom dispensation. The second death will still have some authority over them.

The history of the martyrs—those prefigured by the church in Smyrna, the souls praying underneath the altar, and those standing on the glassy sea—provides us with more than a martyrology, an inspiring history of the faithful saints, and more even than a testimony and reminder of Christ's power over death. Behind this history is the truth of death and resurrection, not merely as events but even the more as a principle in God's dealing with the old creation to bring forth the church in the new creation. Years before his physical martyrdom Paul aspired to know Christ, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (Phil. 3:10-11). He told the Corinthians, "Death operates in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:12). The subjective operation of the death of Christ's cross in us is a prerequisite for our knowing His resurrection life in our being, living, testimony, and ministry.

The subjective operation of the death and resurrection of

Christ is also a requirement for our attaining to the out-resurrection and not being hurt by the second death. Watchman Nee notes, "Ashes are something of which you can never make a fire. If a house is once burned to ashes there is no way of repeating the performance, for if the first fire has done its work, there is nothing for the next to do" (40: 120). This principle holds well for the experience of death and resurrection. As those born in the old creation and reborn into the new, we must all experience some kind, manner, or course of martyrdom, whether spiritual, psychological, or even physical. In this way our outward, natural, and fleshly nature will be torn down, and our entire being will be gradually and continually resurrected out of our old being by and with the divine life. This is a process that we all must pass through. If we are faithful to follow the Lord on the way of death and resurrection, we will attain to, arrive at, the "out-resurrection," the outstanding resurrection, which will be a prize to the overcoming saints for their participation and reward in the coming kingdom age. Furthermore, as those who have submitted to the Lord to become "ashes," we will not be hurt by the second death; that is, we will have no further need of the Lord's disciplinary work. This is the principle of death and life that is the foundation and deeper meaning of the epistle to the suffering church in Smyrna.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Andrew Miller (174) lists the ten persecutions as those under the emperors Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimus Severus, Maximinus Thrax, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian. In this tally, Hadrian's persecution is considered an extension of Trajan's. Likewise, the acts of Galerius and Maximinus II are part of the Diocletianic persecution.

²Latin *flagitia*. Tacitus accuses the Christians of "outrages."

³Roman society demanded the virtue of *pietas*, the reverence for and adherence to old traditions, among which their polytheistic religion was prominent. *Superstitio*, which was applied to the teachings and practices of the Christians, denoted an alien religious practice that was destructive both to society and to individual humanity. Moreover, Suetonius's term for the Christians was *impious (maleficae)*, which insinuates witchcraft and enchantment. In this blasphemous inversion of the truth, the lies and blinding of Satan, the god of this age, are manifest (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4).

⁴The author of the final portion of this account, on the actual death of Perpetua, is unknown. Tertullian may have been the editor of the whole narrative ("Passion" 697).

⁵Of the four co-sovereigns of the empire, only Constantius,

the father of Constantine I, was opposed to the extermination of the Christians. For this reason many in the regions that he ruled were spared from the Diocletianic persecution.

⁶See Witness Lee's note 1 on Hebrews 7:16, note 2 on Acts 2:24, and note 2 on John 14:26 in the Recovery Version of the Bible.

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