

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” Amen.

Revelation 2:8-11

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. <sup>9</sup>I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup>Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

<sup>11</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Here are a couple scenarios that I’d like you to think about for a moment, and let’s see if we can come with a few common denominators. The first one, a runner rounds the corner for the last home stretch. When he crosses the finish line all his hard work pays off as he finishes the race. That’s scenario one. Here’s the second: the Warrior King sees the gates of the defended city as his army pursues the enemy at the end of battle. The enemy flees back to their last hope, their city, before defeat. That’s the second one. So, a runner in a race and a King in battle, do you see any similarities between the two? In both scenarios the runner and the king are pursuing a goal, right? So there’s one similarity. Here’s another one: both the runner and the king have something to gain from their efforts. The runner wins a prize, right, or at least the satisfaction of knowing he finished the race. The King gains the victory, the land or country of the defeated king, perhaps some tribute or taxes. So, the runner and the king. But here is maybe another similarity, and maybe some of you even thought about this already. Both the runner and the king also have some major obstacles, or what-ifs, before they reach their goals, don’t they? Maybe to put it a little simpler, they both have something to lose. The runner might think, “What if someone cuts me off and I trip and fall, or what if I come in last or don’t even finish at all?” Then he’d lose his victory, his prize, his satisfaction, right? The king might think, “What if the defending army runs behind their walls and my army can’t get through, or what if I’m defeated by their defenses?” Then the king loses the battle, maybe even the war, and he’s the defeated king who must pay tribute to his new ruler.

So, the runner and the king, both are after a prize, both are near the end of their goal, but both have some questions or doubts about what is coming. Do you ever question your faith like this? What if my coworkers or friends, my teachers and classmates, or even just the clerk at the checkout line, find out I’m a Christian? Will people treat me differently? Will they shun me? Will they be argumentative and try to prove me wrong all the time? What about the person headed up to my door? I don’t want to be confrontational, or have to defend my faith to them. Those what-ifs sure can close in around us, can’t they? They can downright terrify us.

Our lesson this evening is the letter from Revelation to a city called Smyrna, and I’d imagine they were probably facing very similar questions about their faith, too. Our lesson says they were facing imprisonment and perhaps worse for their Christianity. Smyrna was a major port city, and prominent in the Roman Empire. In fact it’s the only one of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 that still

stands today. It's called Izmir, a city of 300,000 people, a pretty big city even by today's standards. It was one of the top 4 Greek cities of its day, which meant that it was heavily influenced by Roman rule. Rome was big on persecuting Christians at the time John was writing this letter. In addition, it had a heavy Jewish population which was attacking the Christians as well. They claimed to be "the true Jews," but Jesus calls them "the synagogue of Satan" that was slandering the Christian church. These Christians felt the pressure from both sides! It's no wonder why they would have been afraid. Jesus even hints that perhaps they were losing their earthly possessions through persecution as well: "I know your afflictions and your poverty." And more was to come: "I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days."

I hope and pray that none of us is faced with a similar situation of the loss of possessions, the loss of freedom, the loss of health, or even the loss of our lives, for our Christianity. And yet, rest assured that this is a matter of life or death. Jesus says, "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." Our *eternal* lives are at stake in this matter. Does that scare you? It terrifies me. If this race were left up to me, boy I'd be in trouble. This is a task far too big for any of us! I don't want that confrontation. I don't want that ridicule, the funny looks, the stares, the arguments, the shunning. I don't want any of that. At least, my sinful nature doesn't.

And yet, "you are rich!" Jesus says. How in the world can Jesus say, "I know...your poverty—yet you are rich!"? Does that make any sense, they are opposites. But look who is talking: "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." We see the miracle of Christmas in this opening phrase. "The one who is the First and the Last," that's the eternal One, God himself. "Who died and came to life again." He died, well that's Jesus, who became man so that he could die on a cross for our sins. On Christmas we see that marvelous miracle of God made flesh, the eternal and almighty God come down to earth as a little baby. That is who is talking. And he conquered death once and for all on that cross. And not just physical death, yes he rose from the dead and we too will rise. But he conquered the second death, hell, for us. We are so rich in love and grace through Christ it's hard to even wrap our minds around it. Jesus has won that prize for us through his death on the cross. The victory, the prize is already ours. It's there waiting for us at the finish line, in heaven.

Can you imagine running that race? All you need to do is finish, and you win first prize, the best! The crown is already yours. Or fighting in a war that you already know you won? Think of the confidence that would give you to finish the race. No one can rake the victory from you, because Jesus already won it for you. The crown is waiting.

**Jesus is coming to conquer death!** The victory, **the prize is won** for us already! Death no longer has power over us, neither the first death, which Jesus conquered at his resurrection, nor the second death, that some will face when Jesus comes again. They are both powerless against us. We are rich in God's love and grace. Therefore **fear nothing!** No one can rob that prize from you.

Did you catch the well-known comforting promise in these verses? "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Our conqueror encourages us as we finish the race, like the coach who encourages his team to victory, or like a general who inspires his troops, so Jesus encourages us. The crown, the prize they gave to the winners of the Olympic Games, is ours. But not just an earthly prize, but the crown of life! Now at Jesus' second coming he is coming to conquer the second death, to take his believers, us, to heaven. Oh how rich we are! And we need not fear because nothing can snatch

that crown out of our hands, neither persecution nor death, not even Satan himself can harm us. So as those times of imprisonment come up, have no fear! Christ has won the prize for you and encourages you like a general on the battle field or the coach on the athletic field, “Be faithful until death, the crown is already yours!”

Fear nothing! God is for us, who can be against us? What can man do to me? They can take away our house, or our money, or our possessions; they can take away our freedom or our health; they can even take away our earthly life. But they can never take away our faith. They can never take away our conquering hero, Jesus who has defeated death forever, the first one and the second one. It can never harm us.

And don't overlook the simple words that come up in every one of these seven letters to the churches, “I know...” Jesus, the First and the Last, the conqueror of death, he knows what we go through. He knows our afflictions, just as he said to the Christians in Smyrna. He knows when we face those persecutions that make us afraid. He knows what we go through when we do stand up for our faith, defend the truth, risk the confrontation. Nothing escapes his notice. But the comfort and encouragement remain the same, straight from our Savior: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.... He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” That victory is ours through Christ Jesus. That prize of heaven is in Jesus' hands, waiting for us. He has conquered death and is coming to give you your prize, your crown. This is where our wealth is, this is where our riches lie. They are stored up in heaven.

Like a runner finishing a race, so you are headed for the prize that is yours in Christ. Like the King closing in for his final victory, the defeat of his enemies, Jesus has won the victory on the battle field for us. His victory is our victory. Jesus is coming to conquer death. Our prize is won, so have no fear! Nothing can rob us of riches in Christ. Amen.

[Jesus] who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen.