

The Lord Jesus Christ: The Man for All Seasons

By: Keith Keyser

Modern man faces a bewildering array of difficulties. Economic uncertainty, soaring crime rates, devastating wars, and conflicts within families all threaten to overwhelm people. Because Christians live on this fallen planet and are not yet morally perfect, they are not exempt from these problems. Thankfully in facing the crises of life, we have an ever-present Saviour, who is capable of dealing with any situation. In the truest sense of the phrase our Lord Jesus is the Man for all seasons.

The High Cost of Discipleship

The Lord's letter to the beleaguered saints in Smyrna showcases His multifaceted character. They were facing hard times. The name of the city itself hints at their afflictions. John Gill describes it in this manner: "Smyrna signifies 'myrrh', which being bitter of taste, is expressive of the bitter afflictions, and persecutions, and deaths, the people of God in this interval endured; and yet, as myrrh is of a sweet smell, so were those saints, in their sufferings for Christ, exceeding grateful and well pleasing to him."¹

The city was a pleasant place for most people to live, vying with Ephesus and Pergamum for the distinction of "first city of Asia." Its lovely situation is described thus: "...Smyrna was a center for science and medicine...and renowned for its fine wine, its beautiful buildings, and its wealth."² The ancient geographer Strabo affirmed that it was the finest city in that region during his time.³ It was also a literary mecca, having produced gifted writers – most famously, Homer the celebrated poet who created the epic *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. An ancient writer, Apollonius of Tyana, contrasted the beauty of Smyrna's buildings with human character, exhorting the citizenry to pay more attention to the latter: "... [Smyrna] is the most beautiful of all cities under the sun, and makes the sea its own, and holds the fountains of Zephyrus, yet it is a greater charm to wear a crown of men than a crown of porticoes and pictures and gold beyond the standard of mankind: for buildings are seen only in their own place, but men are seen everywhere and spoken about everywhere and make their city as vast as the range of countries which they can visit."⁴ Nevertheless, for the church this glorious city was a dangerous place of many hardships.

Christ assures them "I know thy...tribulation, and poverty..." (Rev. 2:9.) Tribulation indicates "a pressing or pressure."⁵ On top of the ordinary stresses of life, these believers

¹ John Gill's *Commentary on the Bible*, electronic edition, www.e-sword.net

² D. E. Aune, Vol. 52A: *Word Biblical Commentary : Revelation 1-5:14*. Word Biblical Commentary . Word, Incorporated: Dallas, 2002, CD-ROM edition.

³ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, (eds. Richard Stillwell, William L. MacDonald, Marian Holland McAllister); <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999%2e04%2e0006&query=id%3dsmyrna#id,smyrna>

⁴ Quoted in W.M. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, electronic edition, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ramsay/letters.xxi.html>

⁵ Joseph Thayer, *Greek Lexicon*, electronic edition, www.e-sword.net

encountered opposition for their identification with the Lord Jesus. Whatever problems they wrestled with they could console themselves with the thought that the Lord *knows*. As one Bible student notes: “Every trial is measured by the heart of infinite love in a hand of infinite care!”⁶

[As a quotation block in the text]

**Should Thy mercy send me Sorrow, toil, and woe;
Or should pain attend me On my path below;
Grant that I may never Fail Thy hand to see;
Grant that I may ever Cast my care on Thee**

-James Montgomery, “In the hour of trial”

Christ’s reference to their “poverty” indicates that material privation was their common lot. Perhaps they were like the Christians in the book of Hebrews: “...you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:32-34, ESV.) Persecution and penury are common bedfellows. As John Stott points out: “...It does not always pay to be a Christian. Nor is honesty by any means always the best policy, if material gain is your ambition. Poverty has often been part of the cost of Christian discipleship.”⁷

Rich man, poor man

In spite of their circumstances, Christ appraises the impoverished believers’ true spiritual net worth, saying “...you are rich” (verse 9.) Walter Scott relates their actual affluence: “Truly the Church is rich, whatever its poverty on earth may be. Endowed with the love and riches of Christ, which are enduring and placed beyond the possibility of loss or corruption, we may well triumph in Him who knows not only our tribulations and poverty, but knowing all, pronounces us ‘rich’.”⁸ Material wealth is often a hindrance to spirituality. Our Lord declares the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:24.) Paul cautions against seeking wealth, warning that “...those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:9-10, ESV.) Earthly things can distract from eternal riches and create a mistaken sense of security.

⁶ William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1935, p. 46.

⁷ John R.W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, p.39.

⁸ Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982 (reprint), p.67.

On the other hand James says: “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?” (Jms. 2:5-7.) Of course, poverty does not ensure spirituality; nor do riches automatically preclude faith. The father of faith missions, Anthony Norris Groves used his lucrative dental practice to help the indigent and support Christian work. His contemporary George Muller faithfully handled the equivalent of millions of dollars in assisting the nineteenth century orphans. Twentieth century Christian businessmen like R.G. LeTourneau used their wealth in the great tradition of successful believers like Lydia, who put her home and possessions at the disposal of the Lord (Acts 16:14-15.)⁹

Verbal assassination of character

The Lord also knows “the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, but are not” (verse 9.) “Blasphemy” literally means “speaking harm” and carries the thought of “to slander, [or] defame...”¹⁰ The professing Jews of Smyrna employed their tongues against the believers, accusing them of all sorts of evil. The Lord sees through their invective, and knows who His real followers are. As two Greek scholars remark: “From the NT point of view, the real blasphemers are those who deny the messianic claims of Jesus, and therefore revile and mock at him like those by the cross who said, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross’...He who impugns the dignity of the one sent commits an offence against God himself.”¹¹ Still today Christians are mocked and slandered in the world. They can rest in the certainty that Christ suffered the same treatment and will one day sort between the lies and the truth (Mat. 12:36.)

Many of the first century Jews rested on their natural descent from Abraham as their claim to Divine favour. John the Baptizer, the Lord Jesus, and the early apostles make it clear, however, that spiritual rebirth is the key to God’s mercy and blessing (Mat. 3:9; John 1:12-13; 8:33-59; Gal. 3-4, etc.) They became opponents of the early church, believing that Jesus was a false Messiah (1 Thes. 2:14-16.) In common with the prevailing orthodox attitude, Saul of Tarsus persecuted the Christians, thinking that they were a spiritual cancer on the body of first century Judaism. It took a personal appeal from the glorified Christ to dispel his antipathy toward “the Way.” In the second century A.D., Jewish antagonism towards believers in Smyrna continued, as is evidenced by their role in the martyrdom of Polycarp. This aged Christian was burned at the stake for his faith in Christ in A.D. 155 or 156. Even though his execution took place on the sabbath, some of the local Jews rushed into the pagan stadium in order to bring bundles of wood

⁹ For information on R.G. LeTourneau see
http://www.letu.edu/about_LU/museum/Museum_Online/index.html

¹⁰ H. Währisch & C. Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, CD-Rom edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.

¹¹ Ibid.

to kindle the murderous fire.¹² Through God's grace, many Jews throughout the Roman empire received Jesus as their Messiah and Lord during the early centuries after our Lord's crucifixion. Furthermore, one cannot read Acts 2-4 or Rom. 9-11 without acknowledging that God wants Israel to be saved. The New Testament offers no support for the frequent acts of anti-Semitism that have been and are committed throughout Christendom. This notwithstanding, it is clear that those who should have bowed the knee to the promised Deliverer, instead rejected Him and fought His people.

Infernal testing in the crucible

In John's day the church in Smyrna would be tested by the Devil himself. He would incarcerate some of them, subjecting them to torture; others would bear witness to their faith by giving up their lives. His character and tactics are revealed by his titles which are used in verses 9 and 10. Despite their profession of loyalty to God, the synagogue in Smyrna was actually Satan's – literally "the Adversary" – who opposes all that pertains to the Lord. The term "devil" refers to him as a deceiving slanderer who falsely accuses the people of God.¹³ In Zech. 3:1 he is standing at Joshua the high priest's right hand "to accuse him" (NAS, ESV, NIV, etc.); this is what he delights to do. Thankfully, the Lord responds by rebuking the Evil One, asserting that defiled Joshua is clothed in righteous garments before God through the redemptive work of the Branch (Zech. 3:2-8.) Similarly, a bystander in Smyrna might erroneously think that the conflict between the Jews and their pagan allies on one side and the struggling church on the other was a mere disagreement between religions. It was actually a spiritual battle being waged between the Risen Christ and the Devil – an epic fight between supreme good and pernicious evil. As R.C. Trench summarizes it: "...these great fights of affliction through which they were called to pass, were the immediate work of the Devil."¹⁴

Our Lord's response to their coming testing was to exhort them to "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer" (verse 10.) With all of the difficulties that they were facing, one might ask why they should not fear? The answer lies in our Lord's variegated ability to meet every circumstance. He addresses Himself to this assailed church as "the First and the Last" (verse 8.) Christ is the First, who always existed. Before the vaunted Roman empire, before the birth of their persecutors, before even Satan was created, the Lord Jesus was the great I am that I am (Jn. 1:1-2; 8:58.) He is also the Last. When time is no more, and the kingdoms of this world are a distant memory, the everlasting Christ will still be ruling over all. The persecuting Roman emperor Domitian was but a blip on the screen of time; the Lord Jesus is King forever.

Even though He is the eternal one, the Lord still condescended to become a man, "for the suffering of death." (Heb. 2:9; see also Phil. 2:6-9.) Thus, He knows what it is like to endure hardship and pain. He literally says that He "became dead." The Smyrnan Christians were facing physical death, but the Lord Jesus became "a man of sorrows, and

¹² See the 2nd century document *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13:1 at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompolyarp-lightfoot.html>

¹³ For definitions see Thayer.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Vincent's Word Studies*, electronic edition, www.e-sword.net

acquainted with grief” and experienced physical and spiritual death (Isa. 53:3.) His anguished cry from the Cross “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” reveals the intense sorrow of being “made sin for us” (Mat. 27:46; 2 Cor. 5:21.) Their suffering – painful though it was – would never approach His experience. In the truest sense of the word, the Lord Jesus could empathize with them and with all suffering believers. He not only endured unimaginable pain, but also entered into His glory (Lk. 24:26.) As He says in Rev. 2:8, He “came to life” (NKJV, RSV, ESV.) Though He died, yet He triumphed over death in the resurrection. In like manner, He promises deliverance to His people through the trial. Suffering will inevitably lead to glory.

With a mighty triumph o’er His foes!

Their distress only lasts for a limited time (“ten days”, verse 10), and whatever happens, they “will not be hurt at all by the second death” (verse 11, NIV; cf. Rev. 20:6, 14; 21:8.)¹⁵ What is more, the Lord promises the overcomer “the crown of life.” His resurrection life can overcome any adversity. He “rose again for their justification” and nothing would “separate [them] from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 4:25 ; 8:39.) For eternity, they would display the crown of life – not the laurel crowns offered in the Smyrnian games, nor even the majestic buildings that were described as a crown – but an eternal honour, displaying their incorruptible life.¹⁶ William Kelly eloquently writes of Christ’s ministry in suffering: “The Lord is like the tree of old which was cast into the waters of Marah. He went into the bitterest waters of death, which have thus been changed into sweetness and refreshing for us.”¹⁷ Suffering saints find temporal and eternal comfort from the suffering Saviour who never abandons them. With the hymn writer they can say:

I need Thee, precious Saviour!
 I need a friend like Thee:
 A friend to soothe and comfort,
 A friend to care for me;
 I need Thy heart, Lord Jesus,
 To feel each anxious care;
 To bear my ev'ry burden,
 And all my sorrow share.¹⁸

¹⁵ The phrase “not...at all” translates a double negative in the Greek, indicating “by no means” or “in no wise” (JND.)

¹⁶ On the “buildings as a crown” metaphor, see endnote 4.

¹⁷ William Kelly, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1984 (Reprint), p. 40.

¹⁸ Frederick Whitfield, “I need Thee, precious Jesus” - <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/n/inneedtpj.htm>