

Riches and Life for the Poor and Dying

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[0 : 01] I'm going to start off with a little quiz. What do the following quotes have in common? Maybe you can tell me afterwards who said them or where they're from.

But what kind of statements are these four statements? I must be cruel to be kind. I can resist everything except temptation.

All animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others. It costs a lot of money to look this cheap. These can all be described as types of paradoxical statements, can't they?

Literature is full of these types of statements. For some reason, there's something about these contradictions that appeals to us and kind of captures our attention, doesn't it?

This short message from Jesus to the church in Smyrna, it contains a number of seeming paradoxes that Jesus gives.

[1 : 03] And I want us to use these paradoxes to help us to frame the key points in the passage tonight. So diving right in, what's our first paradox?

Our first paradox can be found there in verse 9, where we're introduced to the poor who are rich. Jesus here is speaking to the church in Smyrna.

Now, Smyrna was a port city on the Aegean coast of Anatolia, on a site that's now occupied by the city of Izmir. As well as being a port, it was located at the terminus of an important land route through Asia Minor, which led to several other prominent cities.

So being part of the Roman Empire, trade and commerce along this route resulted in Smyrna being a wealthy and prosperous city. So maybe we can imagine it a bit like the Aberdeen of ancient Anatolia, but with slightly better olives.

But interestingly, so it's a wealthy city, we can see from this bit of the history. But why is it that Jesus characterizes the believers there as being poor? However, how did their allegiance to Jesus lead to their material poverty?

[2 : 24] For one clue as to how this could happen, we can maybe look to later in the book of Revelation to chapter 18, where Rome is being described, the Roman Empire is being described, and it's being characterized as the city of Babylon.

And in that chapter, God is judging the city. And part of the judgment on Rome, of God's judgment on Rome, seems to be tied to the luxury and to the splendor that was brought about by its great commercial might.

Okay? But why was that a bad thing? Why was Rome being judged for its wealth and its luxury and its opulence? The machine of Roman society consisted of a network of business and social and civic relationships.

And the lubricant of that machine was religious observance. Venerating the Roman gods, venerating local gods, and even worshipping the emperor himself.

Now, this might manifest itself in families keeping shrines to the emperor in their houses, members of trade guilds, maybe observing sacred rites if you went to a dinner for the trade guild, or maybe at the public games.

[3 : 43] There might be some religious rituals that the crowds participated in. Okay? So, religious rituals permeated all of Roman culture. So, what did this mean for the Christians then in Smyrna?

Well, by rejecting these practices, the Christians in Smyrna would have made themselves social, civic, and economic pariahs, possibly losing out on advancement through marriage as well as business or job opportunities.

So, this is one possible kind of causal connection between being faithful to Jesus and the afflictions and the poverty that they experienced. Now, today, Christians in different parts of the world face struggles that maybe remind us a little bit of this.

Steve was praying for some of them there. We know about believers in Iran who maybe lose out on jobs or education because of their faith. In Saudi Arabia, you maybe have migrant Christian workers who face particular exploitation because of their faith.

Or in Yemen, as Steve was mentioning, Christians can be at the back of the queue to receive aid, or even worse, as Steve was mentioning in his prayer. Now, for us, in comparison, we can hardly call ourselves a poor church in comparison to some of these churches or believers we've been thinking about.

[5 : 00] But how can these questions of poverty impinge upon us? It's a different level of severity from the persecution that we've considered.

But in this country, you might have your chances of getting a job diminished because of your faith. It's possible. I mean, that's currently illegal, isn't it? But it could happen unofficially, and it may be more likely to occur in the future.

We don't know. Is it something that you think about? Are you prepared to make choices in your own life that might lead to affliction and poverty, either due to persecution or because you say no to certain opportunities, out of faithfulness to Jesus' commands or out of a desire to serve him and his church?

We've seen the possible ways that the believers in Smyrna were poor, but how is it then that Jesus could say that they were truly rich? Well, the Bible talks about the riches of believers in a number of ways.

We're told that we have all the spiritual riches of Jesus because he took our poverty on himself. We're told that we have the inward riches of the Spirit living within us, transforming us and helping us to show generosity to others.

[6 : 20] And Jesus tells his poor disciples that their reward will be great in heaven. We have eternal riches that moth and rust can't destroy and that thieves can't break in and steal.

When faced with your own poverty, do you draw comfort and strength to endure and even give generously to others from the riches that you have in Jesus?

Are we happy to endure material poverty for the sake of the riches that Jesus gives? Or, like the church in Laodicea, do we pursue material wealth at the cost of being poor in the eyes of Jesus? So, the Christians in Smyrna were rich in spite of their poverty. But adding to their general afflictions, they also had a specific problem that was caused by our next paradox, which is the Jews who are not.

As we read about in the book of Acts, the Jewish diaspora was present throughout the Greek and Roman world. We also get the impression that they were fairly well assimilated into the business and the civic and the cultural networks that we were talking about before.

[7 : 38] In Smyrna, there was a group of Jews that were slandering the believers. That is, making false accusations against them. We assume these accusations were being made to the civic authorities with the aim of landing the believers in even more trouble than they were already in.

And we don't know the exact nature of these false accusations. But we see from other parts of the New Testament that it was a popular line of attack to suggest that the Christians' loyalty to King Jesus made them disloyal to the emperor.

And we know even in the case of Jesus, Jesus here says, I know about the slander. Remember that Jesus himself knew what it was like to be falsely accused to the Roman authorities.

Now, here Jesus declares a really harsh judgment on these slanderers. He denies their status as truly God's people.

He calls them the Jews who are not. He calls to mind for me Jesus' admonition of his opponents when he said to them, if you were Abraham's children, then you would do what Abraham did.

[8 : 49] So what he's saying is that just like Abraham, they should trust in God's plan of salvation, which had now been revealed in Jesus. But not only here had they failed to side with Jesus as the Messiah, but they had chosen to join the synagogue of his adversary, Satan.

The name Satan means accuser. So by falsely accusing God's people, they had aligned themselves with Satan. As believers, then, we shouldn't be surprised when people make false accusations against us or maybe misrepresent our views.

I mean, we can experience a different version of this today, which are maybe not quite as acute as the slander that was being suffered by these Christians in Smyrna. One thing that I thought about was the misrepresentation of Christianity at a kind of cultural level, which you'll probably be familiar

with.

When was the last time that you saw the depiction of a Christian character in a book or film or a TV program and you thought to yourself, yeah, I really recognize that as a Christian that I know?

You know, it tends to be that Christians are normally portrayed as either kind of very judgmental and harsh or maybe kind of just really vague and wishy-washy and maybe sometimes both at the same time.

[10:15] And this can have a bit of an effect, can't it? An undermining effect where these representations can contribute to the people that we know having an unhelpful picture of Christians.

And we can feel that before we share the gospel with someone or speak to them about Jesus.

There's this kind of wall of misconceptions that we need to dismantle and that can lead to us kind of just keeping quiet, can't it?

So to repeat, we shouldn't be surprised when our views are misrepresented or worse. The church in Smyrna and Jesus himself knew exactly what this experience is like and where these attacks find their ultimate source.

So having considered the slander against the church, we'll now think about the result of that slander in our third paradox, which is that God's enemies are successful.

Put yourself in the position of the believers in Smyrna and you're hearing this message for the first time. Jesus has acknowledged your economic suffering.

[11:25] He's demonstrated that he knows about the false accusations of this group of Jews. What are you now hoping to hear from Jesus? You're hoping he's going to say, I'm going to come soon and deal with your enemies.

All your material needs will be met. Well, no, instead he says, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer, which is not a very promising start.

I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for 10 days. So you've been patiently enduring in the face of opposition and your opponents are now going to score a victory.

The slander of the Jews will achieve their aim and the civic authorities will throw some of you in prison. How might they have reacted to hearing this news?

How can God let his enemies win? We've already been faithful. Is this the reward we get? Who's going to be thrown in jail and who's going to be spared?

[12:31] We might ask the same kinds of questions when we're suffering for Jesus or maybe we see others suffering for Jesus. What is God doing in this situation?

Where is God's goodness in all this? Well, from this passage and from other related passages, I would suggest there's a number of ways that God can show his goodness to us in suffering.

Firstly, God can demonstrate his power to us by sovereignly relieving our suffering. This is seen in the message to the church in Philadelphia, which is just in the next chapter, in chapter three of Revelation.

The parallels there to Smyrna are quite interesting. In Philadelphia, they're being opposed by those who claim to be Jews, though they are not, sounds familiar, but are the synagogue of Satan.

So again, it's really very similar to the description in Smyrna. But in sharp contrast to what's happening in Smyrna, for the believers in Philadelphia, God is going to make their opponents come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

[13:43] So the Lord can sometimes spectacularly rescue his people from their enemies, which may have been some comfort to those in Smyrna, but it would still leave the question, well, why is God not doing that here?

The second way that God can show his goodness in suffering is by lifting the curtain on its true cause. Here he tells them that the devil is behind the events with the aim of testing the believers.

It's good to know when you're being tested, right? Isn't it? I'm sure you've probably all seen one of those prank videos where someone pretends to be a difficult customer in a restaurant, and they kind of provoke one of the members of staff with increasingly outrageous behavior.

So put yourself in the shoes of the staff member in that video, right? You're getting more and more confused and angry at your treatment and how this person's behaving.

Then imagine that you've already been warned and you know that your reactions are being filmed and that you're being tested. It would completely transform your response, wouldn't it?

[14:58] When we suffer for serving Jesus, we know that it's not random or meaningless. It's due to a particular cause and with a particular purpose. Thirdly then, God can graciously limit the time of suffering.

We see that here in the specific appointing of 10 days of persecution. The exact numbering of the days there might be literal or it might be figurative, but the key message is that it will be limited and that God knows the length.

So that gives us some comfort in knowing that God is in control. Fourthly, to help them endure suffering, God gives the Christians in Smyrna a clear command.

Notice the different providences that God has in store for the believers in Smyrna. Some will be jailed and some will not. So we see these two distinct providences.

Have a look with me at the end of verse 10 there. Do you see that there's one clear command? It says, be faithful. The pressure that was faced by those in prison is obvious.

[16:17] To renounce Jesus, maybe to agree to make offerings to the emperor. Jesus tells them to be faithful, to prove their faith. The persecution of those who are not imprisoned is maybe a bit different, but they too face a kind of test.

Will the suffering of those in jail cause those who love them to question the goodness of God or his power to defeat his enemies or even his very existence?

Will the fate of those in prison discourage those who are free from proclaiming Jesus to the city of Smyrna? Knowing this, Jesus has the same command for those who are not in prison.

Jesus says, be faithful. What about us? Maybe you're not currently going through particular suffering for following Jesus, but how do you react when you see other people experiencing it?

Either those you know well or maybe persecuted believers around the world. How do you react when people are not rescued from their circumstances? The Christian you've been praying for in Pakistan is sentenced to prison.

[17:29] Jesus says, be faithful. Someone you know is given a hard time by a colleague due to their opposition to the gospel and you're tempted to keep quiet the next time.

Jesus says, be faithful. So God helps is suffering people in these ways. But what if he doesn't relieve or limit their suffering?

Let's think about that with our last paradox here, death that brings life. We see that the persecuted Christians in Smyrna are called not just to be faithful, but to be faithful to the point of death.

We should stop and acknowledge what an incredibly serious and difficult command that is. It's not a small thing that is being demanded. And the believers in Smyrna would have known that dying for Jesus was a very real possibility.

The next message to the church in Pergamum talks about the martyrdom of Antipas. So that's being put to death for Jesus. And that would have been well known to the believers in Smyrna, so they would have known that it was a real possibility in the local area.

[18:46] And of course, we know that it's a terrible reality for Christians down through history and even up to the present day. And when we're faced with this command here, which is Jesus saying, be faithful even to the point of death, I start to ask questions of myself, trying to put myself in that position.

You know, would I be faithful even to the point of death? What if I failed? What if I've already failed to be faithful? And these questions are worth reflecting on.

Here, though, Jesus doesn't focus on failure. He doesn't give any threats for failure to be faithful. Instead, he wants to motivate believers to suffer faithfully for him by holding out the prospect of a great reward.

The faithful believer who appears to be defeated by death will be given a victor's crown of life. This picture evokes the garland that was given to victorious athletes at the games.

So it's not like a secret or a private kind of acknowledgement by Jesus. It's a very public declaration. One day, everyone will see this reward for the faithful believer.

[20:10] Even those people who have put them to death will see it. But here, Jesus doesn't just stop with talking about a triumph over physical death.

In verse 11 there, and then later in Revelation, Jesus talks about something that's worse than the first physical death. He talks about the second death.

Now, the second death is described as a fiery lake of burning sulfur where the enemies of Jesus are consigned to go. And that image is meant to terrify the listener.

And it's a terrifying image, isn't it? But isn't it so comforting here that Jesus says, the one who is victorious in Jesus will not be hurt at all, not even slightly singed by that second death. And we should notice here that the crown of life is not something that we claim for ourselves, is it? It's given to us by Jesus. But how is Jesus able to give life to the dead?

[21 : 18] How can he shield us from the second death? How can these suffering, fearful Christians in Smyrna be confident in the one who's making these promises to them?

For that, we look to the way that Jesus introduces himself at the start of this message in verse 8, where he says, these are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and who came to life again.

Now this is a kind of a callback to chapter 1, verses 17 and 18, where Jesus is speaking to John and he says to them, says to him these words, do not be afraid, I am the first and the last, I am the living one, I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever and I hold the keys of death and Hades.

So what would this have meant for the believers in Smyrna? Why was this picture so helpful to them? Well, the believers in Smyrna can be confident because the one who's speaking to them is the first and the last.

That means that he is the great God who is before all things, including their sufferings. He's the one who orders all things, including their sufferings.

[22 : 37] And he's the one who's going to be there after all things, including their sufferings. They can also be confident because he is the first and last who died.

Jesus was faithful even to the point of death. And as that great Alpha and Omega, he could take all our sins, all our failure, to be faithful upon himself on the cross.

They can be confident because he is the first and the last who died and came to life again. He's alive forever and ever, and he can give life to all who he holds in his right hand.

He also holds the keys to death and Hades and can lock them firmly so that they can never hurt the one who's victorious in Jesus. So in Jesus, death brings life.

This should comfort and strengthen all of us and especially those of us who are suffering in the name of Jesus. So as we close, remember that the poor in Jesus really are rich.

[23 : 52] Don't be surprised when you're falsely accused. Be faithful, even when God's enemies seem to be winning. And remember that by Jesus, the dead are given life.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that Jesus has words of encouragement for those who are suffering, Lord.

Lord, we thank you that though we are poor, that in Jesus we can be rich, Lord. We pray that you would give any of us here who are suffering that confidence to know the riches that we have in Jesus.

and we pray you would give all of us that sense of the great riches that we have in Jesus, that he became poor so that in him we might become rich, Lord.

We pray that we would live in light of that, we would live as those who are being given the riches of Jesus, Lord. Help us to know as well that we have those inward riches that come from being filled with the Spirit.

[25 : 04] and Lord, help us to give and to be bold for you, we pray. Lord, we pray for anyone we know or any situations we know where we don't understand your providence and the suffering that we see around us, Lord God.

We pray that you would help us to be, to remain faithful even as we struggle with these things, Lord. thank you that in Jesus that even though we die, yet we live, Lord.

And again, we pray you'd help us to live in light of that, Lord God. And Lord, we pray that you would fill us with that confidence that one day we will see our creator, Lord God.

We pray this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. We're going to