

STRONGER

Anyone who has broken a bone has probably been told more than once how, when the bone heals, it's actually stronger than ever before. Our bodies adapt in incredible ways. We build muscle mass by creating micro-tears in our muscles. When these tears heal, we get bigger muscles. If we hurt the skin on our hands, we get blisters that turn to callouses. Those callouses then protect the skin.

We often think of hurt and pain as bad, but many times, they serve as preparation. In a world that says, "Do what feels best at any given moment," we must have the maturity to say, "I'm going to do the difficult thing now, to achieve a greater result later." From the weight room to what you look at on the internet (i.e. almost all of life), delaying gratification and doing the difficult thing makes you stronger and better.

Homework or video games, crunches or crunching Doritos—if you can embrace the hardship and put off what feels good (do what is necessary *first*) you will adapt. You will be stronger, you will win. And although this is true physically, it is true spiritually as well. As the legendary coach, Tom Landry, said, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be."

To hear a song that brings this idea home, scan the QR code to hear *Believer* by Imagine Dragons.



REVELATION 2:8–11

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

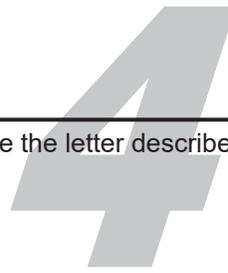
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Smyrna was named for the perfume (myrrh) of a small thorn bush. Although it may have been settled as early as 3,000 BC, the first Greek settlements began around 1,000 BC. The city was destroyed 400 years later and rebuilt around 290 BC with great beauty.

Smyrna was a "faithful friend of Rome" and worshiped the Caesars. Jews were tolerated by Rome and allowed to worship God. When it was clear that Christianity was not just a Jewish sect, they faced persecution because they did not pay homage to Caesar.

DISCUSSION

What is your favorite scent?



ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

1. How does the One who wrote the letter describe himself? (8b)
2. What did Christ already know about this church's circumstances (9a)?
3. What opposition did they face? (9b)
4. What rewards does Christ promise for obedience? (11)

5. Based on your own knowledge, how long will the "crown of life" or "second death" last? (10-11)

INTERPRETATION

6. Missionary and martyr, Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." What do you think this means and how does it look in your own life?

APPLICATION

Bad things happen to good people. This challenges the faith of many people. However, God doesn't waste suffering. If you have questions, talk to your coach today.

STUDY NOTES

IT WILL BE GREAT

Have you ever wondered what happens when two teams are competing in a sport, and both pray before the game? Do you think the team who exhibits the most faith wins? Sometimes we think, “If we follow God, everything will turn out great here and now.” However, it can be dangerous to believe that God has promised material blessing or a pain-free life if we simply have enough faith. You probably won’t win your next game just because you’re faithful to a daily quiet time. God *never* promises us that our faithfulness will be rewarded by winning, health, prosperity, or any material thing. In fact, God’s Word warns believers that trials and persecution will come.

Jesus said that if the world hated him, it would hate those who love him (John 15:18). As we see in today’s letter to Smyrna, their faithfulness led to persecution. This letter is only one of two containing no negative assessment. We know they weren’t perfect. They were human, just like us (see Romans 3:23). However, their dedication to Christ set them apart, gaining them attention from those who wanted to do them harm.

Your faith will *not* get you money, success, nor will it lead to a life of ease. However, it *will* give you hope. It will give you purpose. It *will* give you assurance of an eternity with God forever. It will be great, but in the here and now, your faithfulness may lead to hardship.

CHRIST’S GLORY IS REVEALED BY OUR SUFFERING

Smyrna was well-known for its beauty. Attacking armies destroyed the city in 600 BC, which was later rebuilt with great beauty. Its citizens were infatuated with Rome, even going so far as to build a temple dedicated to it. The Romans honored the loyalty of Smyrna after helping the Roman army by building and dedicating a temple to Emperor Tiberius.

Repeating Revelation 1:17, Christ is identified as the speaker, “**The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.**” Just as the beautiful Smyrna rose out of the ashes, so too Christ lives after dying. Even in the letter’s introduction, the persecuted believers are reminded that death is not the end for those who hope in the King who conquered death.

Christ continues with a reassuring statement, “**I know...**” I don’t know about you, but in times of overwhelming struggle, I wonder if Christ has forgotten me. He hasn’t! He said, “**I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are**

rich)” If you’re a sold-out believer in Christ, you may suffer because your faith, everything you have may be stripped away, but one day you will receive an eternal reward. Christ promises, “you are rich.”

As Christ continued, another thing he knew was **the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.** Here we discover that the Romans weren’t just out to get the Christians, the Jews of Smyrna spread lies. Christians were slandered as *cannibals* for eating “the body and blood of Christ.” Likewise, they were considered *immoral* for the “love feasts” they conducted, not realizing they were actually intended to feed the poor. Again, Christians were considered *atheists* since they didn’t accept the many gods of Greece and Rome.

Ultimately, however, it was an unwillingness to pay homage to Caesar that got many Christians into trouble. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was burned alive at the stake because he would not worship Caesar. Polycarp and many others lived and died Christ’s words, “**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**”

OUR SUFFERING WILL BE REWARDED

“**He who has an ear, let him hear** (i.e. “listen up”) **what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.**” We must not think that dying physically is the worst thing that might happen to us. What Christ called the **second death** is far worst—an eternal separation from God in Hell. Yet, **the one who conquers** has no reason to fear.

While believers shouldn’t go looking for a fight, neither should we shrink from the opposition that living out our faith may bring. Martyrdom happens every day all over the world, but not much in the U.S. However, that doesn’t mean Christians don’t face consequences in living for Jesus. Jobs, scholarships, relationships, etc. are lost every day because people stand for Christ.

The Bible clearly warns that following Jesus has a cost. However, it also promises that whatever cost we pay, it will be worth it (see Luke 14:25-33).

A relatively small percentage of Christians ever face death for their faith. The question isn’t if you’re prepared to die, it’s are you prepared to live for him *now*? Would anyone in your life be surprised to find out you are a Christian?

Preparing for suffering isn’t done in the moment. It’s done through dying to yourself daily and living boldly for the Lord. Whatever price you pay, it will be worth it.