

Another day more mixed news about the economy. Another report says the number of jobless Americans or people on food stamps is up. News reporters saying the stock market just had the best September in years. Who should I believe? With some outlets telling me I'm suffering and others telling me I'm recovering who's right?

I suppose the only true reality is the one you and I live. If you have a job and things are steady you feel okay. If you're looking for work or have given up because there's no work then things are scarier. When you check your investments and they're up things are good. When you look at the markets going down you don't feel so good. Low interest rates for mortgages and refinancing is great, but I don't like making less than one half of one percent on savings. Life is a series of mixed reports.

It was mixed reports that the church in Smyrna was getting. They were a church in trouble; financially poor and personally experiencing persecution. It all weighed on them and threatened to lead them away from God and salvation. But Jesus had the apostle John write a special letter included in the book of Revelation, our second lesson today. While there's mixed news for the church only one message is important for them and for us.

Physically poor, spiritually wealthy
Grace makes you rich
Remain faithful to death receive life

There was money to be made in the Roman Empire. In the commercial center of Smyrna it was no different. They owed allegiance to Rome in the form of taxes, honor, even worship, but emperor worship came with privileges. Just enough was sent back to the city to keep the people feeling okay about their situation. The delicate balance could be upset though if anyone stepped out of line. Those that bucked the system, like Christians who refused to worship anyone but the true God, found this kind of environment no easy place to live. Christians were suppressed by force for biting the hand that fed them. Persecution may have led to the poverty or may have made it worse. Either way the Christians in Smyrna were poor and hurting.

None of it however escaped the watchful eyes of Jesus. He knew exactly what was going on in their church. **"I know your afflictions and your poverty...I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not."** Not only did he know current conditions but he also knew future problems. Things were about to get worse and they needed to be prepared. Jesus knew everything that was against them, and still Jesus called them rich.

Just scraping by gets old. Plus there's a lot of money out there, why shouldn't we get our hands on some? So we spend valuable time researching the newest money making strategies. It works for some, why not me? We talk to the rich to learn their pathway to success. We exhaust ourselves, our time, and our resources trying to get more. We fill dreams and our plans with things that require money. We let business plans, investment strategies, and balance sheets consume us, and even measure our success and happiness off them. When we don't like what we see we ask ourselves what we must change. We've done it at home and in our church. Our conclusion is that we're poor. Maybe not suffering tribulation like the Smyrna church, but we think we're poor like they were.

Take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows your situation. He knows exactly what your personal budget looks like. He knows exactly what the stock market will do tomorrow. He knows how much just the right amount of money is for you. And it's not that he knows and doesn't care. Rather Jesus cares more about your soul than your bottom line. **"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."** Jesus didn't leave the comforts of heaven to come to this earth so that we could be physically rich. Instead his death paid off the huge debt of sins we couldn't hope to pay off. Jesus paid with his life so we wouldn't pay with ours. Jesus made the payment and then Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection is our assurance the payment was complete. He's not paying. God's satisfied. Sin is gone.

With the payment satisfied we're spiritually wealthy. Grace overflows from God to our hearts and from our hearts to the people around us. Let grace burst out of you, flying in all directions. View yourself as spiritually wealthy and don't bother caring if you're physically poor or rich. Life is full of ups and downs, times of plenty and times of want. Concentrate on God's grace and you'll always know you're spiritually rich.

You may have heard Dave Ramsey before. He's the guy who millions have followed the plan in his books to live a debt free existence. The few times I've listened to his radio show he has said how he made a lot of money, lost it, and then made it all back again. Up and down, isn't that physical wealth? God's grace is constant however. It's the one thing you can count on to always be there just as much as you need and then some. And that grace remains constant till the moment of your death. That grace keeps you in faith, keeps you faithful till the point of death. Then God's promise is you'll receive the crown of eternal life.

Ask a soldier if ten days of war is pleasant or an unemployed person if ten days of no income is time for joy. You know the answer. For those not going through the difficulty it doesn't seem nearly as bad as those facing it directly. Nothing could be worse, no matter how long it lasts. The book of Revelation contains many word pictures. This ten day period is one of them. Don't think these Christians would suffer exactly ten days. Rather Jesus leads us say this tribulation will go for a time, but it won't be indefinite. Jesus knows exactly how long it will last and he won't let it go one minute longer than its set for. It's definite, fixed, and shortened. And Jesus knows.

Are you wondering when you'll ever be ahead? When won't there be a car payment to make, a sports team registration to pay, or a home repair that's not urgently needed? When will the finances ever get to a point where you can relax and let them go without constantly worrying about every penny? And problems at home only extend to church. When your finances are pinched the budget at church gets crunched. The temptation to sin is the same at home, what can we do to fix the crisis fast? More money from where, more members how?

Is it comforting to know that Jesus knows? **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** That's a gospel promise of God. God never asks us to remain faithful without a promise attached. We couldn't be faithful without the promise. God works faith in us to trust in him for our whole lives. God knows the troubles we will face and limits the influence of evil on us. We trust God to limit trial and tribulation for our good. We believe even amid troubles that Jesus triumphs over every evil and trial we face.

Participants in the athletic contests of that time in Rome won a crown of leaves twisted together. Kings wore crowns of jewels and precious metals. These crowns were symbols of importance and richness. Jesus has prepared a crown for you with love. It's waiting. It's yours and no one can take it from you, Jesus promises that. It's a crown worth living for. Prepare to receive that crown by concentrating on what the Bible tells you about Jesus and how he died for you. Serve Christ with the conviction that nothing will separate you from him. Live without fear knowing that though you may be physically poor now or wealthy every one of you is rich. Spiritually rich in Christ!