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DEATH AT NEW LIFE CHURCH

It was the sound of a frightened teenage voice on the cell phone, "Someone's shooting at the church!! I've managed to get out of the building!" A few minutes later, a text message came from another teen, "I'm out of the building, but my brother is still trapped inside! Pray!!" These were our first bits of information about an incident that was to rock our community and shock the nation. Around midnight the previous night, an enraged gunman had killed two and left two more injured as he opened fire on the Youth With A Mission base near Denver. In the meantime, he had posted rantings on the internet threatening to come "armed to the teeth" to kill Christians. Now, armed with several guns--including an assault rifle--and more than a thousand rounds of ammunition, he had showed up at our church to make good on his threats. Within minutes, two young sisters, their father, and a couple others were dead, dying, or injured. As the assailant entered the building, he was confronted by an armed security who took him down in a barrage of gunfire.

We had attended the early service that morning and were not there at the time of the bloodbath; however, we--like all of Colorado Springs and most of the nation--spent the afternoon glued to the television eager for every bit of breaking news on the violence. During the coming week, we heard from many friends who wanted to make sure that we were safe and who wanted to know more about the incident. Some of our callers broached the theological questions about how such a horrible thing could happen to such good people as the Works family, who lost two beautiful Spirit-filled daughters at the hands of a crazed gunman. I tried to help the questioners to understand that bad things do happen to good people but that something good always comes out of it: Joseph saved the world from starvation after being sold into slavery, Job got twice as much after being decimated, Paul led an entire island to Christ after being shipwrecked and bitten by a snake, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church, Jesus saved the world by going to the cross. Even in recent events, we can see how the testimonies of young girl at Columbine who was shot after confessing that she believed in God, the missionary family in India who were burned to death in their car, and the students at the Amish school who were slaughtered have stirred many more to faith and boldness in their confessions. I assured each inquirer that something good would certainly be birthed out of the tragedy at New Life. Corrie Ten Boom said it this way, "Life is like a tapestry which God is weaving. We look at it from the bottom side where all the ends of the threads are dangling loose. God sees it from the top side where the pattern is developing." Someday, we'll also see that pattern.

Revelation 2:7-13, one of the passages that I quoted during the week turned out to be the foundation from which our pastor minister the following Sunday. His point was that what we had experienced was not the wrath or outrage of an party against specific individuals or a certain congregation, but part of a demonic onslaught against the church in general--what we could label as end-time persecution.

I can readily testify that this diabolic hatred toward the Body of Christ is not a simple isolated incident. In my travels around the world, I've seem the scars of this prophetic assault against the church in such places as India where I toured the campus of a Bible school that had to be shut down after militant Hindus vandalized the building and beat the students. I've had other first-hand experiences with women who have been horrible mutilated for their faith, such as the lady in Nepal whose face was doused with battery acid because she became a Christian.

Persecution of the church is, in deed, prophetically part of the end times. Jesus listed persecution right along with the earthquakes, wars, and famines we are accustomed to hearing talked about. Why have we seemed to always overlook these words?

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and

kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matthew 24:1-14)

Jesus reemphasized the prophecy of coming suffering for Christians as part of His last instructions to His disciples.

These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me. If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause. (John 15:1-3, 18-25)

As I read these words from our Master, I am convinced that Jesus is talking about a universal persecution which will engulf the church world-wide. The Church of God has always known persecution; remember the Christians versus the lions. I once saw a cartoon depicting a modern man watching a television program about the early Christians being fed to the lions in the Roman amphitheater. The caption read, "Christianity didn't used to be a spectator sport." A following line added, "It still isn't." The truth is that today the Christian faith is experiencing more widespread attacks than at any other time in history. More Christians were slaughtered in the Twentieth Century than the total causalities in WW I, WW II, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War combined! Yet, most of us have no concept that over 200 million of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world live under severe conditions of oppression and persecution. Most of us have no realization what it means that these believers live under a constant threat of imprisonment, torture, slavery, and even death. Most of us are totally foreign to the fact that blood is being spilled every day on behalf of the gospel which we so nonchalantly take as a given in our lives. Thousands of martyrs are being slaughtered in countries, which have Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu, or other anti-Christian controlled governments. Religious fanaticism is causing problems for Christians in many parts of the world. "Destroy all Christian churches today!" screamed typical headlines in prominent Hindu newspaper. Some papers have openly called for a campaign of genocide against non-Hindus who refuse to deny Jesus Christ and convert to Hinduism. Death threats are common both in print and on the field. The Buddhist controlled governments of some Asian countries have been working on exterminating entire tribes of hundreds of thousands of people just because they are predominately Christians. Modern helicopter gun ships and armies have been used in some areas to exterminate entire population regions of Christians. One Western observer witnessed a gun ship using a rapid fire 50-mm cannon stirring up a rage of dust behind a fleeing six-year-old boy. The deadly projectiles caught up with their target as a pastor ran to help the terrified boy. Both were decimated, as well as hundreds of others trying to flee the village from the Moslem armies. The women and young girls were then herded away to be sold as sex slaves to Moslem men.

Several years ago, a little insert encouraging us to pray for the persecuted church was enclosed in our church bulletin. One startling sentence was emblazoned into my heart as I took the few minutes necessary to read the flier: "By the time you finish reading this page, another brother or sister will have given his or her life for the faith." One believer is martyred every three and a half minutes. That means that while most churches are making their announcements, one of our brothers has been announced at the Pearly Gates as a new arrival through martyrdom; while we sing one worship song, one of our sisters has performed the ultimate act of worship; in the time it takes most churches to receive the offering, two of our brothers or sisters have made the most acceptable offering possible. When we realize the suffering that our brothers and sisters are enduring, the Holy Spirit will begin to motivate us to pray as He did Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, "Oh Lord, break my heart with the things that

break yours!" Jesus Himself interceded for Peter when He realized that the disciple was headed into a trying ordeal.
And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. (Luke 22:31-32)
When I was first began to study this topic, I resisted by telling the Lord that I was a "good news" preacher and did not want to bring bad news to the people I so dearly love. He reminded me that if I teach only from the Bible, I couldn't be preaching bad news because the word "gospel" itself literally means "good news"! I was reminded of a little story I recently heard that helps us understand that good and bad news are really in the way we perceive things.
A poor peasant family was visited by a relative who gave the teenage son a horse. That night at dinner, the father said, "We have had good news today because our son has a fine new horse." The next day, however, the lad was thrown from the horse and his leg was broken. So that night at dinner, the father announced at dinner, "Our good news has turned to bad news because the gift horse has broken our son's leg." The next morning, a military officer showed up at the little village to forcibly conscript all the teenage boys; however, the son in this peasant home was left alone because of his injury. That night, the father summarized, "Well, our bad news really is good news after all since our son is still at home with us."
The bad news is that the Bible predicts that the church will experience universal persecution in the these last days. The good news is that God has made a provision for us in this persecution!
Jesus gave us at least three great directives concerning how we are to respond to persecution. The first is found in Matthew 5:11-12.
Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.
There are two great principles to learn from this passage. The first one is that we must look at persecution positively. Jesus said that we are blessed when we are persecuted. We are all eager for God's blessings -- thinking of money, good health, nice homes, and happy families. How many of us have virtually memorized the first portion of Deuteronomy 28 as we have so frequently quoted the litany of blessings listed there? But being persecuted isn't exactly on that list! Jesus goes on to say that this persecution is actually reason to celebrate and rejoice! Perhaps a little look at the book of Hebrews might give us an insight into how we can actually rejoice when facing persecution. In the great "roll call of faith" in chapter eleven, those who had to endure suffering and loss were no less men of faith than those who were listed as ones who saw miraculous deliverances. In Hebrews 11:32-40 we learn something about the differences between them. Notice that some of them were delivered from their persecution:
And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword.
This was a deliverance of the body. Others were delivered in their persecution:
out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.
This deliverance was of the soul. Still others were delivered through their persecution:
and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.
These experienced deliverance in the spirit.
If we look at the whole section in Hebrews, we see that there are four areas of suffering which are addressed. The first is a trial of our faith. (Hebrews 11:36) This area is just a test to see how solid your faith is; it is nothing to be concerned about if you are secure in your faith. The second is persecution from the devil. (Hebrews 12:4) This suffering results from the devil's hatred for those who are doing damage to his kingdom; therefore, it is cause to rejoice because you know that you are doing something

right. The third area mentioned is the chastening of the Lord. (Hebrews 12:7) When this one comes, it means that we are doing something wrong, but it is still a time to rejoice because we know that God still loves us enough to correct us. The fourth area to be addressed is weariness in the race. (Hebrews 12:12) This suffering is actually more intense than the English translation conveys in that the term "race" in Greek is the root for our modern word "agony." I once talked with two different men who had recently run in twenty-six-mile marathons. One gentleman who was almost ready to drop out of the Chicago Marathon said that just when he was ready to "throw in the towel," he saw an amputee adjusting his artificial leg. The gentleman who ran in the New York Marathon described how he was able to cope with swollen knees, aching joints and feet, and the experience of "hitting the wall" by his sheer determination to raise money to feed hungry children through pledges he had raised in conjunction with the race. Sounds like agony to me! It is only the knowledge that you will come out better on the other side of the agony that can make it worth the suffering. Three great New Testament writers expound on this truth:
But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. (Hebrews 10:32-34)
My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. (James 1:2-5)
And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Romans 5:3-5)
It is said of Jesus that He was able to endure the cross because of the joy that was set before Him. When we know that God has a good plan for us (Jeremiah 29:11) -- even if we have to go through persecution to get there -- we can rejoice. You can't rejoice in the face of every pain -- an injury or a sickness -- but you can rejoice when you know that the persecution is a part of God's great redemptive plan. This is why Paul can say in II Corinthians 7:4 that he is joyful in all tribulation. The joy of the Lord is our strength and it is at a time of persecution that you need the most strength. Therefore, rejoicing is an absolute must when you face persecution.
The second thing we learn from this statement of Jesus in which He listed suffering persecution as one of the Beatitudes is reaffirmed in another of His teachings -- this one from His last conversation with the disciples prior to His arrest. "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also." (John 15:20). His message here is that we are not to take the persecution personally. We must remember that no one hates us as individuals; they hate the Christ inside us. They hated the prophets, they hated Christ, and they hate us because the light of God emanating from believers exposes the darkness of their sinfulness. They are not trying to hurt you; rather, they are trying to douse the light which shines through you! In the parable of the vineyard keepers, we learn that the messengers who came to the wicked vineyard keepers were abused and even killed, but it was not they themselves which were the object of the persecution -- it was the vineyard owner whom they represented. In fact, Jesus Himself went so far as to ask Saul why he was persecuting Him (Christ) even though all the injuries he had inflicted were actually against the church members.
A third quote from Jesus gives us a directive on how to respond to those who inflict persecution upon us. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) We all have a natural reflex of wanting to fight back at those who hurt us, but we have learned that two wrongs don't make a right so we try not to hurt those who hurt us. However, Christ takes us far beyond this level by telling us to do good to them. Before we react to such a statement, we must remember that Jesus did just that by crying out to the Father to forgive the very ones who were crucifying Him. Stephen, the first martyr, followed the example of the Lord by praying for the violent mob as they stoned him to death. Even more personally, we must include ourselves in the list of "bad guys" who received the love of Christ in that Romans 5:10 reminds us that Christ died for us while we were still His enemies. The Apostle Paul, who had the unusual experience of being both a persecutor of the faith and then one who received persecution for his faith, echoed the words of our Lord in Romans 12:14, "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not."

I see a couple important points concerning why we are directed to pray for our persecutors. The first is that it turns our focus away from ourselves. Without an external focus, we become self-centered in our prayers and develop pity. If you throw a pity-party, RSVP with a "regret." Elijah presents himself as an example of how God deals with those who turn inward and weep over their persecution. When he lamented that he was the only prophet yet alive and that he should just as soon be dead as well, God soundly rebuked him and revealed to him that there were yet seven thousand other faith ones who had not yielded to the oppressor's threats.

The second reason that we should pray for our oppressors is that it may actually result in their conversion and, therefore, our deliverance. Paul taught us to pray for those in governmental authority so that we may lead peaceable lives. Although this verse does not specifically mention that these rulers may be oppressive, we must remember that the Roman government at the time of the New Testament was beginning to persecute the Christian Church. In Paul himself we have a splendid example of a persecutor who was converted to the faith -- a conversion which very likely was at least partially the result of the prayers of those whom he persecuted.

When I was in graduate school, I suffered severely under a professor who seemed to almost go out of his way to give me a hard time. This went on for several semesters. All the time, I was constantly praying about the situation. One day in class, he mentioned something which triggered a revelation; I could see behind the professor into the human that he really was. I caught a glimpse into the window of his life to discover that he was a man hurting from family problems at home. From that moment, I stopped praying about him and began to pray for him. Miraculously, his attitude and actions toward me took a dramatic turn for the better, and our relationship experienced a total turn around. Without realizing it I had applied this biblical principle to my problem, and I experienced remarkable results.

Another point from Jesus' teachings can be applied to help us understand our relationship to persecution. In the parable of the four soils (also known as the parable of the sower), He tells of some seeds which fall into some shallow soil which does not allow for the roots to grow down too deeply. He says that the plants which grow from such seeds will wither in the hot sun, and He goes on to parallel these plants with Christians whose lives are not deeply rooted in Christ. "Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended." (Matthew 13:21)

We must develop a deep faith in Christ which does not waiver no matter what difficulties may come our way. We must be convinced as Paul was that no amount of persecution can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35) We must be convinced of the promise that Jesus Himself is with us just as He appeared as the fourth man in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) We must gain assurance that He personally will avenge us. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6)

With this kind of revelation concerning our condition, we can come to the unshakable position Paul described in Romans 12:12, "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing constant in prayer." In Acts 5:4, the early disciples actually rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ. They had apparently come to such a very mature relation with Christ and revelation of His plan that their being identified with Christ was more important than their temporal pleasure or security. This maturity is demonstrated in the prayer they prayed after being dragged before the council, "Lord, behold their threatenings and grant unto thy servants that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy Child Jesus." (Acts 4:29-30) Their prayer wasn't to stop the persecution but to extend the ministry. It is interesting to note that they called for more miracles (God's work, not theirs), apparently because they realized that the persecution was really against Him, not them. Since these signs were promised as confirmation to the validity of the message they were preaching, the prayer that they would continue was a commitment that the disciples were going to continue their ministry of preaching and evangelism! A few chapters later (Acts 8) we read that the persecution in Jerusalem became the impetus for mission work outside the city and region. Sometimes we mistakenly see this as part of God's plan to spread the church; in reality, God's plan of expansion as set forth in Acts 1:8 was that the message would reach the ends of the earth -- not because of persecution, but because of the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have often been told -- and I've said it myself -- that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the

church. It is true that every time the enemy has tried to destroy the church, God has raised up a new army of men and women to follow Him. But the overpowering truth is that the seed of the church is the blood of Christ. The fact of the matter is that the church grows when men and women yield themselves to the anointing of the Holy Spirit, regardless of the conditions around them. In fact, it grows best under peaceful conditions -- not persecution. The point I want to stress here is that the church grows in spite of, not because of, persecution.

One last point we must understand is that we must never confuse persecution and simple punishment for wrongdoing. Peter addresses the possibility of misunderstanding this point several times (I Peter 2:20, 3:14, 3:17, 4:15, 4:16, 4:19) implying that some Christians could mistake their directive to disobey the ungodly laws prohibiting their faith for a blanket permit to disobey all authority. Of course, we know that human authorities -- whether in the home, school, or civil arena -- are established by God to keep order in our lives. It is only when they blatantly violate the God-ordained commandments and prohibit the expression of our faith and begin to persecute us for holding to our faith that we are permitted -- no, commanded -- to challenge their authority and place ourselves in line for their persecution.

In all these things we have one overwhelming warning accompanied with an even more overwhelming promise:

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast earned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (I Timothy 3:12-17)

In other words: stay in the Word, and God will see you through!

We spend so much time in Ephesians six studying about putting on the armor that we seldom figure what to do with the military gear once we get it on. Notice that Paul concludes the discussion with the mandate to pray.

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:18-20)

Do you see it now? One of the main purposes of spiritual warfare is to undergird the persecuted Body of Christ! We must pray for our brothers and sisters in those secret corners of the earth who cry out and have no ear but God's to hear their pleas, who weep but have no eye but God's to see their tears, who suffer but have no heart but God's to feel their pain, who stumble but have no arm but God's to uphold them, who bleed but have no hand but God's to mend their wounds. These brave souls, like the apostles, rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer persecution for Christ (Acts 5:41); they, like Stephen, pray for their persecutors (Acts 7:60); they, like Paul, would scold us if we suggested that they take the easy way out to avoid their tragic fate (Acts 21:13) -- BUT they hurt nonetheless! And we must help bear their burdens (Galatians 6:2) to the point that it is as if we were suffering with them (Romans 12:15).

It was this kind of prayer that saved a medical missionary from death. He served a small field hospital in an African nation and frequently traveled through the jungle to obtain supplies from a nearby city. On one trip, the missionary stopped a fight between two young men and treated the wounds of one. He then made the two-day bicycle trip back to the hospital. Two weeks later he returned to the city and met the man he treated. "Some friends and I followed you into the jungle knowing you would camp overnight. We planned to kill you and take your money and drugs," the man told the missionary. The gang was frightened away by "guards" who appeared around the camp. The missionary explained that he always traveled alone. But the man protested that he and his friends counted twenty-six men protecting him, "It was because of those guards that we left you alone." When the missionary told the story months later to his home church in Michigan, a member of the congregation stood up and asked him the exact day that he was spared. When the missionary told him, the gentleman said that he recalled having a strong urge to pray for the missionary at the time of the incident. "In fact, the urging of the Lord was so strong, I called men in this church to meet with me here in this sanctuary to pray for you." It turned out that exactly twenty-six members of the missionary's home church were praying for him at the time of the attack.

In the passage in Revelation 2:8-11, the Risen Lord explained why bad things happen to good people.

He acknowledged the church's works and tribulations and recognized their fiscal poverty while affirming that they were actually rich in faith. In a chilling revelation, He spoke of the resistance the church has experienced from the synagogue of Satan. All His admonition to this church is prefaced by His identification of Himself as the first and last and the one who was dead but is now alive. This realization of His identity should bring comfort to the suffering saints in that it assures them that He has already faced and conquered whatever they may have to confront. Their victory was assured as was heralded in a popular Gospel song, "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow." Even though this church was destined for persecution and tribulation, they were readily assured that it was only temporary (symbolically described as ten days); even though they may have to endure all the way to death, they were promised an eternal crown of life. Truly death is only a momentary experience which ushers the believer into an eternal heavenly reward. Because of their faith, these believers were promised that they would not experience the second death which is eternal damnation. Because they had been born twice (physically and through the new birth), they would have to die only once. Had they been born only once, they would be destined to die twice (physically and spiritually). These believers, were so focused on the heaven that they were headed to that they barely noticed the hell that they were having to go through at the moment.

The risen Lord promised the overcomers at Smyrna that they would not be hurt by the second death. Like David who could write in the twenty-third Psalm of the peaceful guardianship of God even while death was breathing down his neck, Christians need not fear the process of dying, the experience of death, the judgment that follows death, or hell which finalizes the death of an unbeliever. Death to a Christian is not the end; it is actually a new beginning. In speaking of His own death, Jesus described it as a change of address. He said that He was going away and that He was to return to bring us to be with Him at this new address. (John 14:1) If we view death this way, there is no more to fear or dread about it than the simple act of moving from one home to another. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "I am in a strait between two -- to stay or to go. To die is to my gain, but to stay is to your benefit." As soon as he was certain that he had done all that he needed to do here on earth, he was ready to move on to his new home. In death, we experience simply a transition from one form of living to another. We can't deny that the process of dying can be cruel, but the death event itself is described in the Bible as a great homecoming with an angelic escort into the presence of God where we are to be rewarded with the crown of eternal life.

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