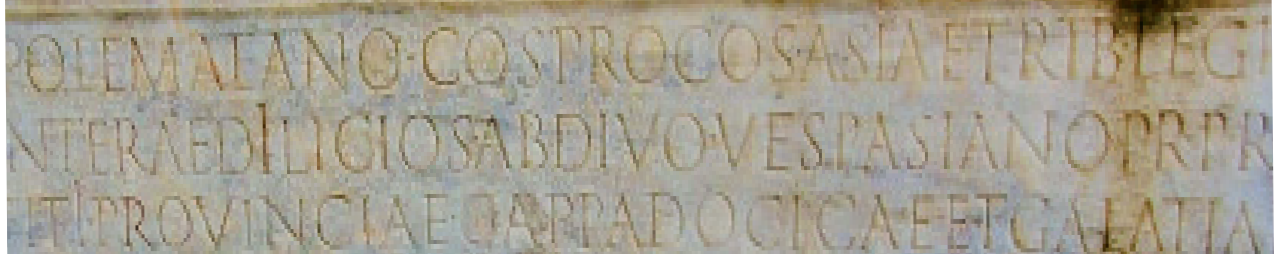




# FOUNDATIONS

Lessons in Discipleship  
from the New Testament Church



## Study Guide



CENTER FOR  
HOLY LANDS STUDIES

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## Smyrna The Church of Righteous Suffering

**Bible Text: Revelation 2:8-11**

In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul asks the questions to the church members of Corinth, “Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!”

In the letters of Paul, multiple comparisons are drawn between the Christian walk and different athletic competitions. Like in the modern era, there is familiarity surrounding the idea of winning a physical contest for a prize or an elevated status in the world. In Paul’s day, both the Olympic Games and the Gladiatorial Games brought wealth, notoriety, and remembrance. Remembrance was associated with a person and their family long after they had died, as historians still speak on many of the feats performed by these athletes today! Yet, when Paul spoke of winning and victory, the prize he referred to differs from that of the world, as 1 Corinthians 9:25 continues, “All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.”

To our ears, that probably sounds even better! But what does it take to win? What are the costs of being victorious?

Approximately thirty to forty years after Paul’s death, the church of Smyrna faced the same question. Like an athlete training for the highest tier of competition, the church of Smyrna contended for the highest tier of their spirituality and relationship with Christ. However, when Christ addressed them in a letter in the final days of the New Testament, He noted that there was still more that they could do to be the true victors.



### What does it mean to be a true victor in the eyes of Christ?

The example of the church of Smyrna is like many churches, not only in the biblical era but also throughout the ages. Even our modern era displays a harsh reality that cannot be escaped when studying the world of the Book of Revelation. To be a true victor, our lives must be lived in such a way that we can count our life as forfeit for the cause of Christ.

In Romans 10:9, we find the requirements for what we would consider “being saved:” **“If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** While this might sound easy, it is surprising how often the first portion of Paul’s command is overlooked. Many believers rely far more on the second part, hiding their salvation in their hearts rather than making public declarations.

Our culture has trained us to think that we will risk our place in society or among our friends and coworkers due to such public declarations. This can result in a stifling of the gospel, exactly the result that the enemy would desire. However, in most places of the world today, the vocal proclamation that Christ is Lord in our lives carries minimal actual consequences for us.

This was not so for the church of Smyrna. The world of the church of Smyrna is not our world. For a large population of our church today, simply professing the name of Jesus does not bring about a public execution, as it did for some in the church of Smyrna.

### What does being a genuine victor in Christ look like for us?

As pointed out in the video, Smyrna was a very loyal city to Rome. Part of the core beliefs that distinguished the Roman Empire from its republic predecessor was the faith that the people had in the emperor (Caesar) as a leader and god. The people of Rome believed that the emperor was a god and built grand temples in their honor. For a Christian in Smyrna, or anywhere in the Roman Empire, if you followed Paul’s words in Roman’s 10:9, openly declaring that Jesus is Lord, faced another truth. Paul reiterated in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:5, there is but one Lord, Christ Jesus. If that is the case, any who claims otherwise, even if he is the most powerful person in the empire, is a liar.

Imagine the implications of publicly calling the topmost official in the world a liar. How might that affect you personally or those around you?

You do not need examples from history to piece together what may happen. Many of the emperors reacted in hate and anger against those who carried “the good news of the gospel,” as did their followers throughout the large reaches of the Empire. Many of the emperors honestly did believe themselves to be gods. For example, Emperor Vespasian’s final words as he died are believed to be “I feel I’m becoming a god!”



Yet, due to their letter and their example, the church of Smyrna was prepared for what was to come as a result of their faith. They knew what needed to be done. They were prepared to have a true victory which came by following through on Christ’s command to “preach the Good News to everyone” (Mark 16:15) even if it meant forfeiting their very lives. By their example, we too must give similar effort even at the cost of a similar result.

How? What gave the church of Smyrna such strength that even when Christ boldly told them that members would face death, they still boldly pressed on? They held firm through the enlightening of the Holy Spirit. They believed in the promise that Christ revealed through John in Revelation “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared” (Revelation 21:1).

They believed that just as Jesus had said, the things of this world are temporal and fading. Someday they will pass away from memory. What remains is the kingdom of God. What remained for the believers in Smyrna and for believers today is a hope that will never fade and will be eternal. Even if we lose our lives, the vocal proclamation that Christ is Lord carries minor negative consequences for us. As Christ has shown us on the following Sunday after His crucifixion, death is not the end for “everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).



This truth allows us to diligently approach any danger that might befall us for the sake of the gospel. It is this truth that will also empower us to “press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:14)

We, too, want to claim, as Paul did and those of the church of Smyrna, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8)











