

COMFORTED BECAUSE HE KNOWS

Revelation 2:8–11

Dr. George O. Wood

Revelation 2:8–11 (NIV)

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

I. A little over a year ago, I had opportunity to be in ancient Smyrna.

It's now a city in Turkey on the western side called Ismer. Ismer has a population of over one million people. I have friends living there. There are only about five or six born again Christians in the whole town. The site of ancient Smyrna is a place on top of a hill in Ismer, which you can't even get into because it is archaeologically blocked off. It's town some 35 miles north of Ephesus. As we think of these letters coming to the churches in Asia, Jesus is writing them to kind of make a circle. The postman kind of makes a circle in the delivery of the letters. Smyrna is next.

Whenever the proconsul landed in his visit to Asia he'd land at Ephesus. Then from Ephesus he'd go to Smyrna. The letter is going the same direction. In Biblical days it was a rival city to Ephesus. Both cities claimed to be the first city of Asia. At about 200,000 people, Smyrna had a little bit smaller population than Ephesus. It was a city that had literally died for four centuries,

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between about 600 B.C. and 200 B.C. Then Alexander the Great planned to bring it back to life. After his death the city was rebuilt, and it was one of the few cities of the ancient world that was built like the city of Irvine—it was planned. The Lord’s description of Himself to this church as the one who died and came to life is remarkably adapted to the historical nature of this town which itself had had an experience of death and had come to life.

This town was known for its loyalty to Rome. Before Rome had established its position as a world power, Smyrna had sided with it against its enemies. In 195 B.C., long before people elsewhere in the ancient world were paying tribute to Rome, this city had built a temple in honor of the Roman goddess Roma. In 26 A.D., just a few years before the Christian message came to Smyrna, it had won the bidding against ten other cities of Asia to build a temple in honor of the Roman emperor Tiberius. It was known for its unvarying loyalty to Rome. In the letter, the Christians are commended for their unvarying, unyielding loyalty to Christ.

The city was famous for its beauty in ancient days. It enjoyed a picturesque setting. Before it was the Aegean Sea. It was backed by the hill Pagos, some 500 feet tall. This town had a famous stadium, a library, and the largest public theater in Asia. Someone has described it this way, “As if rising out of the sea, the beautiful buildings, streets and parks of the city rose up on the side of the Pagos hill and came to an apex with the public buildings at its crest.” An ancient writer likened it to a statue with a crown on its head and a gold necklace about its neck. As you looked at the town, you saw at its peak the public buildings, which were like crown. Below was a golden street, which ran around the circumference of the hill making it appear as though the hill wore a golden necklace. It is to this congregation at Smyrna that the Lord says, “I’ll give you a crown as well.”

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It's striking as you look at these letters to the seven churches that from each one of them you can draw forth historical and geographical detail and see how the Lord uniquely adapts the situation of that town and applies it to the position of the saints in that place.

The church at Smyrna was probably founded as the result of Paul's missionary efforts at Ephesus. Acts 19 tells us that the work at Ephesus spread the Gospel throughout Asia. The letter, which the Lord sent to the church at Smyrna, is the shortest of the seven letters to the churches, and it is one of two letters in which there is no condemnation for the church. At Ephesus the opposition had sought to enter the church, but at Smyrna it's very clear the opposition to the church is on the outside. Smyrna is a persecuted church.

II. As the Lord identifies Himself to this church, He first speaks of His character.

He is the first and the last. It is an especially appropriate greeting to these Christians who lived in a city that claimed to be first. There is a Lord who stands as first and preeminent above every claim of a city, or an empire, or person. And it is especially appropriate that his greeting of first and last comes to Christians who are courting martyrdom because they were being reminded by the Lord, "Do not fear death; it is not the last. I am the last."

We as human beings get tempted to think, because we are on the highest order of created beings and there are very few things we know of in the animal kingdom that live longer than us, that things that are beneath us do not live as long as we do. Bugs, insects, dogs, cats and horses: We were before them and after them so their life span according to ours seems so very short. What I think this Scripture is doing is reminding us to look up and say, "Men and women, you are not the highest order of being. Your lifespan is like a dot on an unmeasurable line. The unmeasurable line is eternity. "And I the Lord [Jesus is saying] fill that eternity. I am the first and I am the last. I give you the privilege, through my identification with you, of joining Me on that line. But you

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don't join Me from the beginning. You join Me from where you join Me and go to the end.

Because there is no end in Me. I am the first and the last," the Lord says. He tells the church not only is He the first and the last, but He became dead and lived.

Somehow I think these two phrases put together in the character of Christ bring real strength.

Because simply to say God is the first and the last teaches you that God is great. But to see Him as the Christ who became dead and lived is to see Him identified with us on a very personal basis. It really means that because of Christ, God has a face. God has identity. God has personality. He is the one who became dead and lived. That's appropriate to the town that died and lived.

When we describe a person practically the last thing that can be said about anyone is that they died. Lincoln for example, you don't say he died and lived. You say Lincoln lived and died.

That's the right order. But there's one unique person in all of history that absolutely flips that order—He became dead and lived. The last thing that is said about Jesus is not that He died. The last thing that is said about Him is that He lived. Of course He goes on living but Jesus wants to so identify the certainty of His resurrection that He puts His living in the past tense: He lived.

That means an act that has happened, the results of which are forever established. He lived.

What a beautiful appropriate description for the Christians there. If they are called upon to die for Christ, it's not the last word that will be said about them. They will join their Lord, the one who died and lived.

And thank God that not only applies to Smyrna it applies to us. The devil does not have the last word to say about us. He is not going to be able to say of you or of me as the last and final word you died. The last word is God's. He lived because He alone has the power to bring life. That's

the character of the Lord represented to this church. Christ brings a beautiful commendation to this church, a word of approval.

III. He knows that this church has maintained loyalty to Him in spite of some severe difficulties.

Three are identified. Jesus says I know your tribulation. How frequent this word is in revelation. How carelessly we brush over it at times because we're so many times in such a hurry to prove that Christians don't go through the Great Tribulation that we may miss the fact that Christians do go through tribulation.

A. Tribulation, the burden that crushes. Paul says in Colossians 1:24 this unusual thing about the Christian perspective on tribulation. He says "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's tribulations [or afflictions] for the sake of his body, that is the church."

How does an apostle, or how does a church like Smyrna complete what is lacking in Christ's tribulations? How do we complete what is lacking? What could be insufficient about the suffering or tribulation that Christ experienced? There are really three kinds of sufferings or tribulations that Christ went through. He went through tribulation as a man. Therefore he shares human nature with us. We don't ever quite experience what Christ Himself went through. It was on a deeper level. He was tested on deeper level than we will ever be tempted on. He experienced tribulation or suffering for men, for us because he became our substitute on the cross and bore our sins. And we never ourselves enter into bearing sin. That's not our responsibility. That's Christ's.

But there is an element of Christ's sufferings that we do share in. That is the tribulations He bears from man. That tribulation from others is sometimes in the form of outright persecution. At

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other times it is ridicule toward believers. That is the tribulation we share in. It is that tribulation of Christ, which is not yet completed. I think the Lord here in saying to the Smyrna church “I know your tribulation,” as he reflects upon the nature of what is being experienced in that town, He’s saying “Church, you’re filling up with what the world is dishing out to Me. The world is at enmity to Me. It will always be opposed to Me. It will always ridicule you. It will never quite accept you. In some cases the acceptance will be far less than at other places. I know what you’re going through.”

This fact that this church is going through tribulation leads us to a conclusion that one of the things that these letters are doing is getting rid of what might be called easy believism, or escapism, the idea that that when the going gets tough the Lord will vaporize you out of the situation or press the right button and help you to escape. Granted he does with the way of suffering provide a path of escape. But the escape may not always be the one we’d envisioned. Tribulation is what this church goes through. And tribulation or pressure is a part of Christian experience. We all go through it in one degree or another.

B. This church not only shares tribulation but this church shares poverty. In the Greek language two words can be used for poverty. One is a word, which can be used to describe a college student. That is a person who is poor but is not destitute. There is, however, another word in the Greek for poverty that is perhaps better translated by the word “destitute.” It describes the person who is literally without. And who, unless some aide comes through rather quickly, may perish. It is that word which is used of this church, not the poverty which is based on prevailing minimum wage scale, but the poverty which is based upon absolute destitution. The Lord says I know your poverty. Then He turns right around and gives four words that make all the difference. “But you

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are rich.” What a tremendous way to psychologically and spiritually reverse the adversity of the situation of being so poor that you live in a hovel, if you are lucky enough to have that.

This is a real contrast to the Laodicean church. There were different churches. At Laodicea I think they probably had a group within it that taught that if you believe the Lord you can be wealthy. This church evidently had a good deal of affluence. So the Lord says to it that it’s a rich church and knows its rich. We have need of nothing, it says. That’s not Smyrna. Smyrna has need of everything.

What a contrast between the two churches: Laodicea says I have need of nothing but needs everything. And Smyrna physically needs everything but the Lord says you’re rich. You can’t judge by outward appearances where a person is with God. You can’t use a monetary sign. You cannot judge by the externals of a person. You cannot say that outward adversity is a sign that God has withdrawn His favor. You cannot say that outward adversity is proof of spiritual weakness. Here is a church that outwardly doesn’t have it together. It can’t send missionaries to the four corners of the world. The members don’t have enough to feed themselves. They’re poor. But the Lord says, “You’re rich.”

The word for “rich” in the Greek is the word *pluto*. Smyrna was a rather wealthy town, and the plutocrats in Smyrna were the Christians as they are everywhere where the richness of the Spirit comes in the presence of Christ.

C. The third thing the Lord knows about this church that He commends them for is that they have endured slander by those who say they are Jews but are of a synagogue of Satan. We know from the Book of Acts one of the chief sources of opposition to the early Christians was the Jewish community. Calling a Jewish synagogue in our day a synagogue of Satan would sound very anti-Semitic. However, as we read the Old Testament we find prophets being far harder on

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their own people spiritually than were the New Testament writers. The first church was a persecuted church, not a persecuting church. It was a suffering church. The early Christians came to know that the true Jew was one inwardly. That opposition to Jesus would never come from the true children of Abraham, the children of faith. It would only come as Jesus says from those who are the sons of the devil. The synagogue at Smyrna liked to see itself as the assembly of the Lord, modeled after the experience of Israel in the wilderness. There's reference to this in the Book of Numbers. Jesus here simply notes their true identity is not the assembly of the Lord. It is the synagogue of Satan.

The Lord does not tell the church to do anything about it. He doesn't say burn down the synagogue. He doesn't say persecute people. He just simply notes that they have been slandered by people in the community. He doesn't tell them to slander back. The history of Jewish-Christian relationships has been marked with misunderstanding on both parts as to what the Old and New Testaments call for. A religion that has to slander people to make laws to protect its identity is not strong enough to stand on its own. Here is a group called the synagogue of Satan. I read this week of an experience of a person by the name of Levite who was with Jews for Jesus who was recently kidnapped by some of his family. He said they worked on him interrogating him, yelling that what he believed was wrong, that belief in Jesus as the Messiah was unfounded, that it contradicted Judaism. He said they called him anti-Semitic, a Nazi, and they showed him pictures of the holocaust, screaming that he had betrayed his own people.

That's a modern instance of how the Christians at Smyrna were being treated by people of their own ethnic background. That is why the strong word of the Lord comes to this kind of tactic.

Therefore a synagogue of Satan.

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To this church in the midst of its tribulation and poverty and slander, Jesus simply says, “I know.” And when the Lord says, “I know” it’s not simply an intellectual “I know this is going on because I’ve got the report on the paper.” It is an “I know” based upon the Lord’s own experience. He Himself has passed through tribulation and poverty. Corinthians says He became poor so that we might be rich. He knows what it is to be slandered. He knows what it is every day on this earth to have His name taken His vain. Every day on this earth the Lord’s name is slandered. So He knows what it is when His people are slandered for the sake of identification with Him. We shouldn’t be surprised when we see people who try to take a stand for Christ slandered by our society. Slander is a weapon the enemy still uses against the church to try to paint it ideologically so that Christ’s body becomes known as a funny group, a bunch of narrow-minded bigots. Slander. “I know,” Jesus says. “I know what it’s like to be slandered.” He commends the church simply in His knowing.

IV. He gives the church some counsel in verse 10: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”

There is no condemnation of this church and, therefore, no correction. Instead there’s counsel. Do not fear what you’re about to suffer. More suffering? Lord is that Your answer to our problems? We’ve gone through enough. We’ve got tribulation, poverty, and slander. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. It’s time to take the pressure off! No. Do not fear what you’re about to suffer.

Have you ever had that spiritual experience of going through a rather difficult time in your Christian life and just when you think you should see the break of day dawn and you’re going to finally get your finances in order, or your health is finally going to fall in line, or the bad string of reverses you’ve been going through is going to be ended, you’re slammed down in the

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basement into a deeper hole again? The Lord obviously has not taken some of the helpful seminars today that can tell us how to get out of adversity.

The Lord doesn't assure this church that its sufferings are at an end. We know from the Scripture that there are at least four purposes suffering serves. One is a disciplinary purpose. When we step out of line with God's will, there can be discipline. The Corinthians were warned of taking the Lord's supper in vain and told that there were some among them that were weak and sick because of it. Hebrews tells us that every child that the father loves He disciplines. There's that corrective measure that discipline can serve. The mistake that some people make is to say that all suffering is discipline.

There's more than one way though to explain suffering.

Sometimes it's preventative. Paul says that a thorn in the flesh was given him in order to keep him from being overly elevated about the number of revelations he was getting. Otherwise, he'd go around as a proud Christian. So he said the Lord used the preventative measure to keep him from boasting.

Sometimes suffering is simply educational. Hebrews 5:8 says the Lord learned obedience in the things which He suffered.

And sometimes suffering is simply associated with witness. It has to do with this matter where the early Christians were beaten for their faith and they were praising God that they were counted worthy to suffer in the name of Jesus. It's understandable when praise is coming from Christians for whom everything is going well. But, when the praise keeps coming from someone against whom everything is broken, it's kind of like a no surrender flag that's waving from the center of the heart. There are some things in this life I don't understand. I don't understand why when we pray for someone to be healed they're not healed. But I know that in the midst of their

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suffering there has been a complete non-surrender, a defiant “though he slay me yet I trust Him.” It’s as though they fling their faith at the devil and say, “No matter what you do to me you’ll never get me to quit praising the Lord.” You will not get in that central area of my life where I’m linked with God. You will not gain victory in that area. The witness in that situation is an incredible testimony to God and to others of the fact that, although everything is against me, yet will I trust. If we gauge our spiritual experience on the basis of a thermometer, high if everything is going well with us and low if everything is going against us and we pin our relationship to God on that thermometer, we’re going to be very up and down in our Christian experience. Somehow our relationship with God must be more rooted than that.

The source of the suffering for this church was that the devil was about to throw some of them in prison. The devil wasn’t going to come up out of hell and literally materialize and throw them into prison. There were other people who were going to throw them into prison. It was the Roman proconsul, the mob of people who were against the Christians in that town. But the Lord has perception and says it’s not human hands that are doing it. It’s the devil. He’s behind it all. That’s why we as Christians take the viewpoint that behind evil is the devil.

I have a difficult time praising God *for* everything because there are a lot of things that are from the devil. I don’t have a difficult time praising God *in* everything. The preposition makes a lot of difference. If you praise God for everything you can wind up praising God for the things Satan is doing. But if you praise God in everything you can say God is working that out for good. He’s not going to let the devil defeat us in that area. The devil is about to throw you into prison. The name Satan means accuser or adversary. The name devil means deceiver. Both phases of his personality are at work against this church. They’re going to be thrown into prison. In these

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times, prison was not a place of detention where one served a term. It was a place for awaiting trial. For Christians it might mean a place for preparing to die for one's faith.

From Satan's point of view he has come to tempt the Christians. From God's point of view the believers at Smyrna have come to be tested. There's a difference between temptation and testing. Temptation is designed to make you fall. Testing is to prove your strength.

Ten days is a short time. I don't think here as we're working with numbers we need an overliteralization to say ten literal 24-hour days. It's a term probably here meaning a short period of time. It is a term in Daniel 1:12 to signify a period of testing. Test your servants for ten days, Daniel tells them. So here are these believers at Smyrna faced with an impending persecution. The Lord has knowledge of it. So the Lord's counsel is don't fear more suffering. Do not fear. You've got it bad enough now. Don't add to that. Be assured I'm the first and the last. Then the Lord says to them, "be faithful unto death." The word is actually "become faithful unto death." The idea being that according to the level of your testing, the Lord will give you strength to go through the test. Christians might say, "but I don't think I'm ready to be martyred in the stadium. I don't think I have that much faith." This "become faithful" says when you get there you'll have it at the right time.

V. Isn't it striking the Lord offers no earthly solution to the problem of these saints at Smyrna?

He does not promise to take away their difficulties. He does not promise to somehow magically materialize an answer to their needs. His promise to this church, as it is many times to His believers who are going through similar situations, is simply a promise that reminds us of our eternal reward with Him. So the Lord says to this church "I'm not going to try to explain to you on earth all of your sufferings. I simply hold before you the fact that you have a crown of life.

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See the city with its crown? And every resident of Smyrna could think of its city located on the hill of Pagos with the public buildings at the top, the beautiful crown of the city. I'm going to give you a better crown than that. The crown of life."

It's possible in the New Testament to use two words for crown. One is "diadem" which is kind of like the crown Queen Elizabeth wears—it is royalty; it is sovereignty. The other is the word "stefanos" from which Stephen's name is taken. It's simply a laurel wreath, which was given to a person who had won a race. Or something somebody wore at a banquet or a wedding. It stood for festal joy. What the Lord is saying here to these believers is from here on the reward for you who conquer is a crown of life. Do not fear what they can do to you by death. Because I have life in My hand.

He gives this challenge to the church. He challenges the church to hear. This He says to every church. To him who has an ear, let him hear. The temptation for us to be in the midst of our grinding affliction and poverty and slander is to be so listening to other voices so that we can't hear what the Lord is saying. We keep on wanting an easy solution. Or maybe we talk so much to the Lord asking why that we don't pause long enough to hear what the Lord is saying. "Rest in Me. Trust in Me. Be faithful."

So the Lord is telling this church, telling us, "Hear what I'm saying to you." The other challenge is to conquer. Jesus says that if people don't cry out to praise Him, even the rocks will. Our part in conquering is to cheer. And to keep cheering even if people try to tell us it really didn't happen, or deny your faith, or cheer for somebody else. We say, "No. We're going to cheer for Jesus. Our whole life is a cheer and agreement as a witness that we have His life."

So that's the way we conquer. Not through some super human self-effort. We're not super men, wonder boys, wonder girls or the like. We are simply believers who have linked up with Christ.

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Jesus says, “He who conquers shall not be hurt.” A double negative is used which might literally be translated, “He who overcomes shall not, in no way be injured.” He promises on the fact that you won’t be harmed by the second death. The first death is the death that has to do with the body. But the second death has to do with the soul. The Lord is saying beyond the first death is the second death. But if you come into fellowship with me, you’ll never face the destruction of the soul. You will not be injured by the second death.

At the time of the writing of this letter of the Lord, probably in the year 95A.D. there was a young man in the church at Smyrna, a disciple of John whose name was Polycarp. We know that in the year 155 A.D., some 60 years after this letter was sent to the church that Polycarp, then an old man in his eighties, was put to death in the stadium at Smyrna for his faith in Christ. We have preserved in the historical record the encounter of Smyrna and the Roman proconsul as the persecutors came to get Polycarp. He has an incredible exchange with the Roman proconsul. He is the one who has heard this word from the Lord, “Become thou faithful unto death.” The Roman proconsul in the stadium says, “Have respect to thine age.” According to the customary form, the proconsul asked him to do certain things, “Swear by the genius of Caesar,” to take an oath to demonstrate loyalty to Caesar as God. “Repent! Say, Away with the atheists.” That’s what the Christians were called—atheists—because they didn’t believe in all of these gods. Polycarp did an incredible thing. Polycarp looked with severe countenance on the mob of lawless heathens in the stadium and he waved his hand at them and looking up to heaven he groaned and said, “Away with the atheists.” Meaning them. But the proconsul urged him: “Swear and I will release thee! Curse the Christ.” And Polycarp said, “Eighty and six years have I served Him and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me.” This is the proconsul, “I have wild beasts. If you repent not I will throw you to them.” And Polycarp said,

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“Send them, for repentance from better to worse is not a change permitted us but to change from cruelty to righteousness is a noble thing.” Then said the proconsul again, “If thou dost despise the wild beasts, I will make thee to be consumed by fire, if thou repent not.” And Polycarp answered, “Thou threatenest the fire that burns for an hour and is in a little while quenched. Thou knowest not of the fire of the judgment to come and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why delayest thou? Bring what thou wilt!” And when they went to tie Polycarp to the stake he said, “You do not need to bind me to the stake. I will stay there by myself.” So they bound him loosely.

An incredible personal fulfillment to a young man in the congregation at Smyrna at the time this letter was written. Here we're dealing with the hero age. We're dealing with martyrs. We're dealing with the phrase “Be thou faithful unto death.” Martyrdom I don't think is facing us next month or next year in America at least. I don't think whoever is elected the next president is going to campaign on the theme they're going to kill Christians. We're relatively safe from martyrdom here. Not so safe for Christians in other countries.

How does “Be thou faithful unto death” relate to us? We might say what are the things in our lives that could keep us from being faithful to Christ? Are we faithful unto death? Are we willing to be faithful though it costs?

Be thou faithful. It's kind of a two-edge word. It's a word, which causes us to look and say is there anything in our life, which is causing unfaithfulness to the Lord, which we are allowing to sap our faithfulness to Him and to His people, to His body. So it's a convicting word. But I think also, in addition to being a convicting word it is a comforting word for us.

Are you one who is fighting with inner turmoil and you're saying as you fight that inner turmoil “If I were called upon to die for Christ I could. But I'm struggling with what I'm going through

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right now.” You can make it. If you in your heart know you’d be faithful to Christ unto death Christ is not going to throw you out of the kingdom because you’re struggling with an error in your life. Struggle and be overcomers through Christ.

This beautiful letter, this strange letter comes to us. We who hear so many voices about success, prosperity, well-being in an air conditioned life but here is this word coming to us saying, “If all of that is taken from you, are you willing to serve Me even if I don’t give an explanation for it.” Will you be loyal and faithful? That’s what the Lord is asking. He doesn’t ask the same thing of every person. There are different words to different churches. But from each of His words we apply to our life what fits. What fits for you?

Closing Prayer

We think Lord, of those Christians being walked into stadiums in Smyrna on various occasions to give their lives to the lions or to the fire with a wild cheering mob surrounding them to see the display. A ten-year-old boy asking his father, “Will the lions hurt?” We think Lord of those who followed you in these profound ways. Your church is flecked and starred with these who have gone all the way to death for You. It makes us look today at our walk and our willingness to walk with You on the path, which You have called us. Lord we want today hearing Your voice gladly to take up our cross and the responsibilities You give us and follow You. We serve You not out of simply self-interest. But we serve You because You are Lord and God. Because there is none other. Because You are the first and the last. Because You have lived, we praise Your name today. Search our hearts Lord in areas where we are unwilling to be faithful that we might be faithful to Thee in all things through Jesus our Lord. Amen.