

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Smyrna's Crown

Joshua Riggins

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until 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 shall not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:8-11).

Smyrna was quite the place in its day. Known as the glory of Asia, it proved a magnificent city. It boasted ornate temples, claimed to be the birthplace of Homer, and possessed the largest public theater in all of Asia Minor. Perhaps more impressively, Rome trusted Smyrna and honored it as an "assize town" (aka "free city"). This afforded Smyrna some self-regulation and additional honor. For example, Rome sent governors to visit periodically and hear the empire's most important cases. We can appreciate the significance of this honor by imagining a system in which the Supreme Court would travel to cities of their choosing to try cases. All these characteristics of greatness made Smyrna a proud city. The historian Theodor Mommsen described Smyrna in his *The Provinces of the Roman Empire* as "a paradise of municipal vanity."

The congregation to which this letter was written did not share the same vanity or affluent lifestyle Smyrna enjoyed. The brethren found themselves troubled and poor. Jesus reminded them that though they were poor, in Him, they were rich. Paul echoed these words, referring to himself in the second half of **2 Corinthians 6:10**, "*as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*" Our brethren at Smyrna did not have much, but they possessed everything. Their faith in Jesus Christ jeopardized their physical and financial strength. One

of the more well-known brothers, Polycarp, lost his life at the hands of men determined to brand him disloyal to Rome. Even in these circumstances, Jesus reminded them of true riches. They lived in a city impacted by Satan's temple, but God kept them secure in His kingdom.

In **Hebrews 12:27-28**, we read,

Now this, "yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

Even if the world turns against Christ, our laws embrace evil and shun morality, or every fiscal foundation upon which so many place their faith fails with destructive force, there is a kingdom, and there is a crown of life.

Over the last several years, uncertainties ruled our day. We experienced physical uncertainties, not knowing the outcome of a disease that affected the globe. We experienced, and continue to experience, the consequences of economic decisions made in a crisis, one of which is the high likelihood of a recession of some fashion impacting future financial growth. There is an underbelly of political unrest and strife that strains the very fabric of our society. In all of this, we may be certain of two things: 1) The very core of our capitalistic society will rattle, if not now, then certainly at a day and time of God's choosing, (**1 John 2:17**; **Acts 17:26**) and 2) There will be only one kingdom remaining in the end. In whom, then should we put our trust?

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If we experience similar trials as our brethren in Smyrna, will God be able to say to us, "*but you are rich!*"? Our faith cannot hinge on the power of the Red, White, and Blue. As great a nation as we have been blessed to enjoy, its wealth and peace are no less transitory than Rome's. The city of Smyrna put its trust in Rome, but in the end, the empire fell. The brethren in Smyrna put their trust in God and found true wealth, everlasting stability, and life without end. "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (**Revelation 2:10**).

Be faithful regardless of the circumstances, whether our lives are lived in a world of peace and prosperity or toil and trouble. Submit to the Lord daily, without thought to the physical implications, "*for to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace*" (**Romans 8:6**). Abraham offered up his one and only son. Moses gave up the palace. Smyrna endured. Whatever future there may be for us, what service and grace will we offer our Lord? Even if the world turns against Christ, our laws embrace evil and shun morality, or every fiscal foundation upon which so many place their faith fails with destructive force, there is a kingdom, and there is a crown of life. Be faithful to the one who built the kingdom and offered the crown.

In his work, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, Colin Hemer shares an interesting note regarding a crown bestowed on a commoner in Smyrna annually. The crown was a wreath with the inscription "O Demos." It was awarded posthumously and placed on the body of the dead man. In contrast, God offers us a crown of life. In this life, we will finish our journey as dust (**Ecclesiastes 3:20**). Let us not get too attached to the vanities of our existence, lest we lose sight of true life and the crown of victory awaiting the faithful.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing (**2 Timothy 4:7-8**).

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And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (**1 John 2:17**).

Stumbling Blocks

Craig Hensley

Everybody likes to be encouraged. The feelings that come from being encouraged can often last a lifetime. It is not uncommon for people who have lived a good long life to happily remember back to an encourager that they knew when they were a child. Encouragement makes an impact. It is also looked on very positively in scripture. Encouragement is powerful; but so is discouragement. Discouragement may be as negative, or more negative, than encouragement is positive. It can be downright harmful.

In **Matthew 18**, Jesus responds to his disciples, asking, "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" (**verse 1**) Jesus called a child over to use as an example and explained that the expectation was to become like little children and if you don't "*you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (**verse 3**). Jesus then adds an explanation "*Whoever, then humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*" (**verse 4**). Then Jesus adds a warning that we must take seriously:

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a huge millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the open sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! It is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to the person through whom they come (**verses 6-7**).

Jesus makes it clear that his point is not about the age of the "little ones" but the spiritual maturity of a person. He was making his point to his adult followers. The point is also made that putting a stumbling block in the path of a less mature followers might even cause them to sin. This does not take away the personal responsibility of the weaker follower. It is teaching that temptation or discouragement of weaker and less experienced followers is a dangerous thing to do. How dangerous? Well, the result is compared to having a heavy millstone hung around your neck and being drowned in the sea. Our soul depends on it.

There are a variety of ways that a person might place a stumbling block that would cause someone to sin. A stumbling block would be placing a temptation in front of others that they are not prepared to overcome or being a poor

example to others. But another, too often overlooked, stumbling block is discouraging weaker Christians or those seeking Christ. We can be discouraging if we make the weaker feel that they are more flawed, more sinful, or not as valued as the experienced.

The danger of stumbling blocks is also addressed in other teaching. **Romans 14** provides some very clear words on this by instructing us to “*receive the one who is weak in the faith*” (**verse 1**) and further explains that “*we must not pass judgment on one another*” (**verse 13**). What we should do is made very clear in **verse 19**, “*let us pursue what makes for peace and for building up one another.*”

God desires that we meet to worship in a congregational setting. When done properly, this method of worship not only glorifies God but also benefits all of us as followers. In a group setting, we are always going to have part of the family that is weaker or struggling in some way. To behave properly, we must focus on edification and building each other up. We must be merciful as God has shown us mercy. We must not place stumbling blocks in the paths of our spiritual family by having an expectation of sinless perfection. We must be patient.

Sometimes, discouraging words and behavior from more experienced Christians can be damaging to weaker brothers and sisters struggling with living a faithful life. The correct response is not to condone sin or poor decisions but to have compassion. In **Romans 15:1-2**, the writer Paul tells us “*we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up.*”

When believers are struggling with their faith and with living an obedient life, they need our consistent love, compassion, and encouragement. We would never want a believer to fall away because they don't receive the encouragement that they need. We also never want to be in a position of placing the stumbling block of discouragement in their path. Which is the correct behavior? To point out people's faults to them and make them feel like they are in the spotlight of judgment? Or to be patient with them with a deep concern for their soul and to do all you can to help them succeed? God's mercy works this way as pointed out in **2 Peter 3:9**, “*The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being*

patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” Now those are words of encouragement.

The inspiring gospel preacher Winford Lee once said, “By the time people show external symptoms of backsliding, they're 75% gone. Encourage them before you really realize that they need encouragement. Everybody needs it.”

An encourager clears the path. A discourager lays the stumbling block.

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Glory to God!

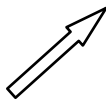
The **Rock Creek Church of Christ** in **Ottawa, KS** rejoiced when **Arrow** and **Piper Dennis** were baptized for the remission of their sins.

Blessed Are the Dead

Lorraine Marie Reichard, 75, of **Pomona, KS**, passed away May 6. Lorraine was a member of the **Rock Creek Church of Christ** and was active in the community through the 4-H **Pomona Pioneers**. She enjoyed reading and crocheting but especially loved being with family and grandchildren. She worked at multiple daycares in **Ottawa** throughout the late eighties and early nineties. She also worked at **West Franklin USD 287** as a para-professional for several years and was a substitute teacher working for several different area schools. Lorraine is survived by many loving family and friends.

Robert “Bob” Cummings, 80, passed from this world on May 30. He was born on July 26, 1942, in **Pennsylvania**, son of **Edwin** and **Elva Cummings (Steiner)**. Bob grew up on his family's farm in **Pennsylvania**. He then lived for a span of time in **Missouri** and **Iowa** where he married **Shirley Armstrong** and started his family. After his parents died from injuries sustained in a car accident, Bob moved his family to the farm in **Pennsylvania**. Bob and Shirley's children were **Michael**, **Mark** and **Sarah**. During his time in **Missouri**, Bob became a

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licensed barber, a skill he used for many years. He also served as an evangelist in the Church of Christ. Shirley died of Cystic Fibrosis in 1980. Bob valued hard work and spent his time raising cows, goats, chickens and other animals. He also logged trees on his 80 plus acres of land. He served as an elder at **Bolivar Church of Christ**. In 1989, Bob married his second wife, **Nancy Weaver**, and their family grew to include her children, **John, Anna and Joseph**. Later, **Katrina** was born from that union. Nancy died of ALS in 1997. In December of 1998 Bob married **Sharon Gilmer**, his third wife, with whom he lived the rest of his life here. After suffering a stroke in 2012, Bob and Sharon moved to Iowa where Bob remained a faithful member of the church in **Vandalia** until his death. Bob was known by his family for his love of singing. Bob loved working on puzzles and embroidering quilts to give as gifts; many have been blessed by his beautiful handiwork. Bob is survived by his third wife of almost 25 years, Sharon; three children; and five grandchildren.

feel free to print and post the flyer. Teachers, topics, schedules, and information about accomodations are included in the flyer.

2024 Summer Meeting

The **Church of Christ on Murray Road, Lee's Summit, MO** is pleased to announce their plans to host a **one-week study** in the **summer of 2024**. More details will be available in future months.

2023 Meetings

- July 3-7.....Midwest Bible Campout, Eminence, MO
- July 22.....Family VBS, Old Lamine, rural Blackwater, MO
- July 23-28....Summer Meeting, Smart Road, Greenwood, MO
- August 27.....White Oak, rural Ethel, MO
- September 2-3.....Labor Day Meeting, Pleasant Hill, IA
- October 6-8.....Fall Campout, Unionville, MO

Special Meetings

The Gospel Message

2023 Summer Meeting

The **Church of Christ on Smart Road, Greenwood, MO** plans a special one week meeting for July 23-28. To learn more information about the meeting including teachers, daily schedules, registration, etc., please go to the congregation's website using the QR code above.



<http://bit.ly/SRSummerStudy>

Northern Missouri Fall Campout

The churches in **Martinstown and Unionville, MO** plan their second annual **Fall Campout** for **October 6-8**. For a meeting flyer, please scan the QR code to the right with the camera on your phone or tablet. Congregations, please



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