

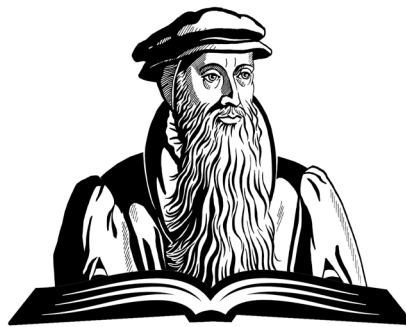
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

by Rev. William Macleod

Lecture #3

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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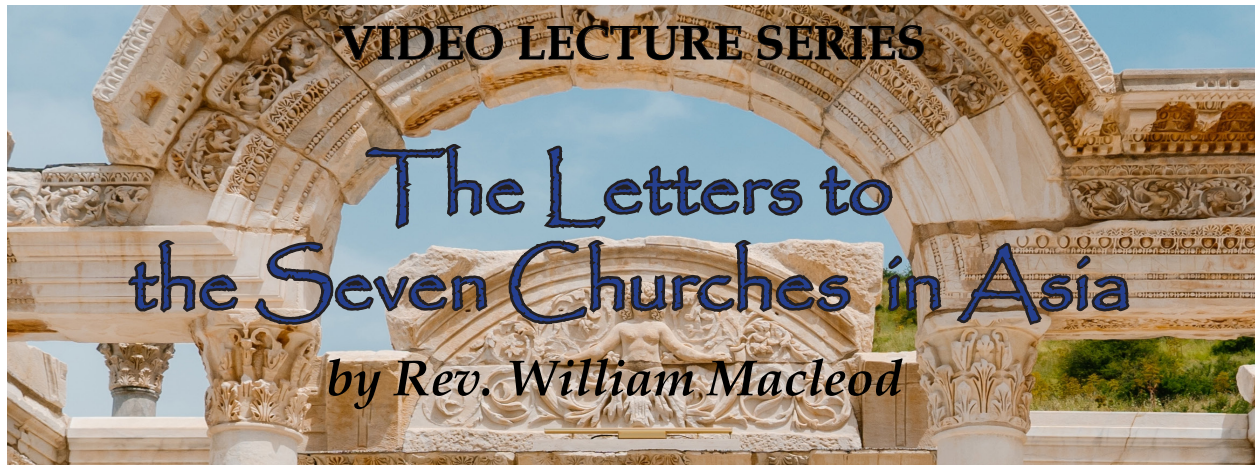
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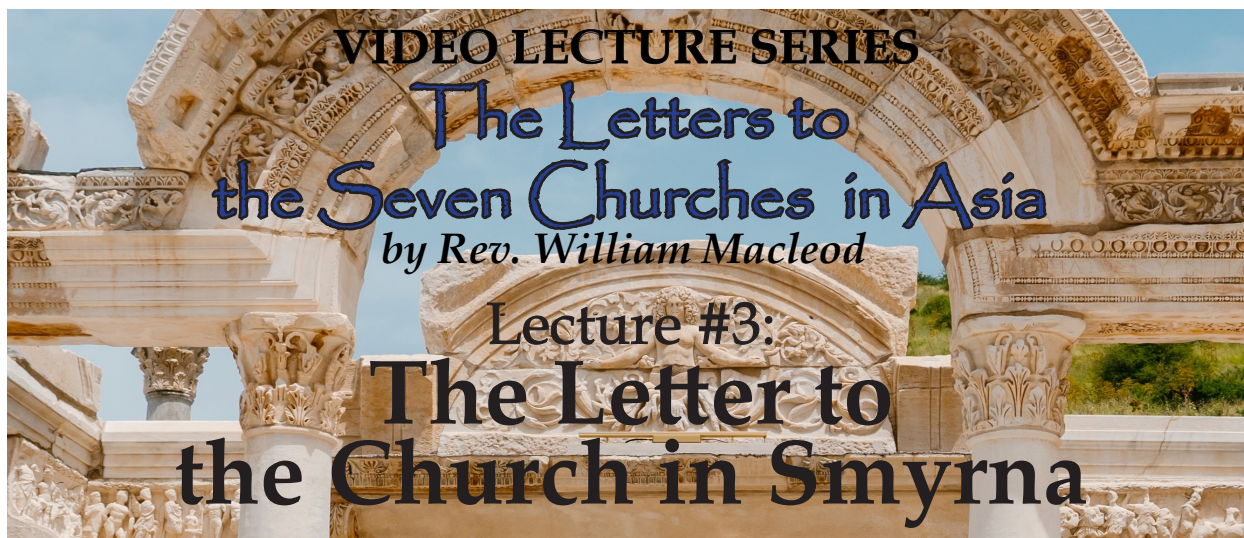
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Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal of the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. He is married and has three adult children and six grandchildren.

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Introduction

Our next lecture is on *The Letter to the Church in Smyrna*. We have that recorded for us in Revelation chapter 2, and verses 8 to 11. Smyrna was about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was a port city. The church there appears to have been small. Today, this place is called Izmir, this city, and it is the third largest city in Turkey today, and it has a good Protestant church—the Izmir Protestant Church.

Every church is different. The church in Ephesus was large, and busy, and prosperous; outwardly, it was very successful. In contrast, the church in Smyrna was poor, and small, and struggling. Yes, it was facing much opposition. These were difficult days. In a sense, it's like many churches in the West today. But interestingly, Christ has no criticism for this church in Smyrna. Only two of the seven churches are not criticized—the church in Smyrna and the church in Philadelphia. So this letter is one full of encouragement. We sometimes need that. Maybe your church particularly needs that today, and you, as a Christian. And so, we have this letter to encourage us.

1. Christ Introduces Himself

First of all, again, *Christ Introduces Himself* at the beginning of the letter, so we have that in verse 8: “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.” An important personal introduction is given at the beginning of each letter, and each introduction is different, and is particularly relevant to that church.

Here, he introduces himself as “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive” again. It's

like the words, “I am the alpha and the omega” in chapter 1. The church is struggling, but look up; remember, there’s a God—a God who is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, who is the eternal, who is over everything. Trials and persecutions come, but remember, God is, and God is “the rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). He is Jehovah—“I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14). “I am the sovereign God; I am the covenant-keeping God. I am what I was in the past, and I will not change, and I will be your God forever.” God reigns—let the earth be glad. Remember those Psalms that speak of God reigning—Psalm 97 and Psalm 99. God reigneth; let the earth be glad. And that’s, in a sense, the only reason why we should be glad, because God is in control. God reigns—how we should rejoice! So here, the one who is writing to the church in Smyrna, is the Eternal—the eternal God is speaking.

2. Remember Eternity

Remember Eternity, and in the midst of the trials and troubles; in the midst of the persecutions, remember there’s a future. This little life will soon be over, and then, there’s eternity—eternity spent where?—in the bliss and blessedness, and joy and happiness of heaven; or eternity in the misery, the lostness, the darkness, the pain of hell. Paul said, “Our light affliction”—Paul, who had so many troubles, physical troubles, persecutions, stonings, beatings, and so on—“Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17). It just lasts for a moment, and then, there’s the weight of glory. What are troubles in the light of eternity? What is pain, what is suffering, when you remember that it’s just for a day, and then comes eternity? What shall it profit, in contrast? Jesus says, “What shall it profit a man, [though] he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36–37). Even although you’re very prosperous, you have a healthy life, you have everything you want, you’re exceedingly rich, one day you’ll die, suddenly. It will all be over, and you’ll have to leave every penny behind.

Jesus told us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man, he had a great life. Fared sumptuously every day, clothed in scarlet, he lived in a palace. He had everything he wanted. And then there was the poor man, the beggar, Lazarus, he was carried and laid at his gate. He couldn’t walk. Covered with sores, the filthy dogs came and licked his sores. There he was, he seemed so miserable. But his name “Lazarus” is important. It means “his help was in God”—he trusted in God. The rich man died and was buried, had a great funeral. But in hell, he lifted up his eyes in a torment. Lazarus died, perhaps in some shack somewhere, but the angels were around his bed. When he breathed his last, the angels took up his soul and carried it to heaven, to the very center of heaven, and placed it in Abraham’s bosom. And the rich man looked from hell up to heaven, and he saw Lazarus there, and he pleaded with Abraham, “Send Lazarus with a drop of water to cool my tongue, because I’m tormented in this flame.” He would give everything he had for one drop of comfort, but there was none. The misery of his eternity, and the blessedness of Lazarus. So, it certainly emphasizes for us the importance of preparing for eternity.

“I am he that was dead and is alive again.” He that died for our sins, the Prince of Life, who laid down his life for us. He took our nature. He took our sins upon himself. He suffered as a sacrifice for our sins, as a substitute in our room and place. He endured our hell. And having paid the price for our sins, God raised him from the dead—died for our offences, rose again for our justification (Romans 4:25). God raise him, justifying him, declaring that the price was paid and accepted, that we were forgiven through him. He loved me and he gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20). And then he rose again, because “It’s finished,” he said. It’s completed (John 19:30). “I’ve

done it; salvation is accomplished.” And now, he is the risen Lord. “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:” and he that “liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (John 11:25–26)—“never die” the death of hell; “never die” the curse of death. Death will be simply falling asleep in Jesus.

There’s one very famous resident of Smyrna, of whom we hear in our history books—the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp.¹ He was martyred in AD 155. The Roman proconsul tried to get him to say, “Caesar is lord; Caesar is *the* lord, who is above everyone else and everything else.” But he replied, “Eighty and six years have I served the Lord Jesus Christ, and he did me no harm. Shall I sin against him now?” The proconsul said, “We will throw you into the fire!” He replied, “Your fire will burn but for an hour. Better to endure that fire than the fire of God’s wrath which will endure to all eternity.” Polycarp, he died as a Christian martyr, standing on the Lord’s side. Today, he’s enjoying the bliss of heaven.

3. I Know thy Works, Tribulation, and Poverty

Verse 9: “*I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).*” So these are words of encouragement. “I know thy works”—*works* do not save us, but works are so important. Works do not earn salvation; they do not merit it; they do not contribute to it. We are justified by faith alone. It’s the work of Christ, the merit of Christ alone that saves us. It’s not a bit of Christ and a bit of us—it’s Christ alone. And there’s great stress laid upon that in Scripture: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but [by] his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5). We have no righteousness of our own. We have no work that is of any merit in the sight of God.

But then, having been saved, having been justified, our sins being forgiven, being converted, now, we show our love. We show our appreciation to the Lord by our works. Once saved, our works are very important. They show that we’re saved. They show a transformation in our lives. We manifest our justification by our good works. James says we are not justified by our faith alone, but also by works (James 2:24). What’s he referring to? Is he criticizing the Apostle Paul’s doctrine? No, Paul is talking about actual justification—at the very beginning we are justified by faith alone. James is talking about our life from then on, and that life manifests, declares, reveals that we’re justified by our works. If we have no works, then there’s been no salvation—we’ve not been converted; we’re not new men and new women in Christ Jesus.

So, Jesus says here, “I know thy works.” What works are referred to?—all good works, even giving a cup of cold water to somebody in the name of Christ, for Christ’s sake (Mark 9:41). Even a little thing like a cup of water is recorded in heaven. It’s noted—all kind deeds, all charity shown, all helping of the poor, clothing of the naked, feeding the hungry, helping those who are disabled, visiting the sick, visiting those who are in prison for the faith and caring for them, all love that we show, all witnessing for the Lord, speaking a word for him, all teaching done for him—whatever we do for the Lord. Sadly, we spend too much time serving ourselves and serving our own pleasures. Let us be like the church at Smyrna—“I know they works.” They were doing good works.

And then, *Tribulation*: “I know thy...tribulation.” Jesus says, in this life, you shall have tribulation: “but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Christ knew far more tribulation than we will ever know, and he overcame the world. He stood firm; he

¹ Polycarp (AD 69–155), was a Christian bishop of Smyrna, a disciple of the Apostle John. He died as a martyr for Jesus Christ, burned at the stake, then stabbed when the first failed to consume his body, because he refused to burn incense to the Roman Emperor.

persevered unto the end. Some of you suffer from physical illnesses. Maybe you have to endure a lot of pain. You go through times, maybe, of great discomfort, great sickness. Some know what it is to be disabled, and to struggle along with disabilities. Others are troubled with mental illnesses; problems in the family; problems at work; problems amongst your neighbors; persecution. How do we respond? Do we give up? Do we despair? Do we get angry? Or are we patient, steadfast, unmoveable, continuing to abound in the work of the Lord, for as much as we know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58)? Remember Job, all that he suffered?—he lost his wealth in one day, and lost his whole family, his seven sons and three daughters killed by a tornado. Remember him saying, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). And even in the midst of illness and suffering, he continued and didn’t lose his faith. Paul says to us, Rejoice in tribulation, because tribulation works patience; and patience experience; and experience, hope; and hope does not make ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom we have given unto us (Romans 5:3–5).

All these things happen to us, but let us remember it’s for our good. All things work together for good, “to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). God set his purpose on us from eternity, called us with an effectual calling. We love him, and now, everything that happens in our life, it’s all for our benefit. Not one thing can happen to you or me but it’s for our good. Remember that. It’s a great help to our patience and perseverance.

“I know thy...tribulation, and *poverty*.” Poverty can be very difficult to endure; it’s hard when you’re struggling to pay the bills, struggling to buy food, and you’re perhaps hungry and your children hungry; struggling to buy clothes and a roof over your head. You work hard, but you’re not able to make ends meet. You’re in poverty. There’s the prosperity gospel going around today, which tells people, “Trust in the Lord, give money to the church, and God will make you rich, and God will make you prosperous. You’ll have health, and you’ll have wealth,” but it’s not the teaching of Scripture. The Bible doesn’t tell you, when you become a Christian, you’ll become healthy and wealthy. It tells us, when you become a Christian, you will have your trials and tribulations, just like those around you, and perhaps sometimes even more than those around you, because the Lord is putting us through trials to purify our faith and to prepare us for heaven. The prosperity gospel is a lie.

But one thing we do know is, “My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). He supplies your need, but not what you want. You might want to have a big flashy car, and live in a beautiful house, but there’s no promise of that in Scripture. But God will give you what you need, or what is appropriate for you. Trust in the Lord; he will provide. Not many rich, not many noble are called, Paul said (1 Corinthians 1:26). Not many rich people will get to heaven. Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). The disciples then said, “Who then can be saved?”—What is impossible with men, Christ said, is possible with God (verses 25–26). Yes, there are a few wealthy people, but generally speaking, wealth tends to immunize people against the gospel, because those who are wealthy love their wealth too much, and trust in their wealth rather than looking to the Lord.

“I know thy...poverty, (but thou art rich).” You’re poor in terms of money, but you’re actually really rich. You’re spiritually rich, blessed with graces, blessed with gifts, blessed with Christ’s own presence. blessed with his loving care for you. Remember, “Take...no thought

for the morrow...what you shall eat, what you shall drink...what you shall put on,” Christ said (Matthew 6:34, 25). Consider “the fowls of the air”—the birds—“they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them” (verse 26). Will he not feed you, “O ye of little faith?” (verse 30). “Consider the lilies.” Solomon in all his glory was not as beautiful as a lily. All his beautiful clothes. God who clothes the lilies, will he not clothe you, O ye of little faith? (verses 28–30). Trust in the Lord to provide for you. There’s an interesting verse in Psalm 37, and verse 25. There, the psalmist says, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” God looks after the righteous. He cares for them. Our God is a caring, loving Father. You are poor, and yet you are rich. You are rich because you have got a wonderful Savior; you’ve got a wonderful Father in heaven; and you’ve got a wonderful Comforter living in your heart.

4. The Judaizers

The church there was troubled by *Judaizers*, verse 9: “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” From time to time, heretics arise in the churches. In the early church, there were the Judaizers. They were saying, “It’s not enough to trust in Christ, you must also be circumcised, and you must keep the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. Faith in Christ is not enough on its own. It’s faith in Christ plus something else. You need something else. You need circumcision, and you need to eat certain foods, and not to eat other foods—kosher food and so on. It’s not justification by faith alone, but by faith and works.” Remember how Paul spoke to the Galatian church: “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). “[You] began in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?” (verse 4). I’m amazed at you, he says, how quickly you’ve turned away. You seemed to be converted; you seemed to be doing so well, and then you followed the teaching of these Judaizers, this works kind of religion.

“I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not.” It’s a blasphemy to say that Christ is not enough. Christ is everything. If we have Christ, we have everything. “He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (1 John 5:12). If we have Christ, we have everything. But these people that had come to Smyrna, they were claiming to be Jews, but they weren’t real Jews. Yes, they were Jews in the sense that they were the children physically of Abraham, but they weren’t the spiritual children of Abraham. In fact, they the synagogue of Satan, the church of Satan. Jesus said to them, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the [works] of your father ye will do” (John 8:44). Very harsh words, “the synagogue of Satan,” but they were tormenting the church; they were causing trouble. These Jews had claimed that it’s not enough to trust in Christ; you need to keep the Old Testament ceremonial law. There’s harsh words here, but we must be bold to speak against those who are undermining the gospel. It’s a serious thing to undermine, to add to, or to subtract from the gospel. Those who add to God’s Word, God will add to them the plagues that are written in his Word, and those who take away from God’s Word, God will take away their part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city. We’re told that at the very end of this Book of Revelation (Revelation 22:18–19). Troubled then by the Judaizers, they have resisted this heresy; they stood against it, and rightly so.

5. Persecution Coming

And then, verse 10 speaks of *Persecution Coming*: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye

shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.” This was preparation for them. Days of suffering were coming. There’s a warning, difficult times lay ahead. Trust God, stand fast with the Lord. His grace is sufficient for you. His strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Faith conquers fear. The victory that overcomes the world is our faith.

“The devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried.” It’s not easy when Christians are thrown into prison. And there are different parts in the world where this is happening today. Christians are imprisoned for their faith. There are prisoners for the Lord Jesus. But stand fast. “Ye shall have tribulation ten days”—tribulation is coming: beatings, torture, deprivation of food, of liberty, mockery, ridicule. The early church knew it all. The Reformers, many of them were persecuted. We think, in Scotland here, of the martyrs who were burnt at the stake, people like Patrick Hamilton,² and George Wishart,³ godly men who preached the gospel; Covenanters, who died at the Grass Market in Edinburgh, executed because they stood for the crown rights of Christ. Christ is the King and the sole King and Head of the church. There have been hostile governments in the past, and there are hostile governments today.

But it will be only for ten days, tribulation for ten days. “Ten” means a limited period of time, a fixed period and not a long period. God will allow you to suffer, but it will be measured, because he’s on the throne, he’s in control, he will bring it to an end. He allows governments to go so far in persecution, and then he removes them. And he gives grace to help: “My grace is sufficient for thee...my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Remember what one of the Puritans said, “Better to suffer than to sin.” Paul said to Timothy: “Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3). Stand firm. Remember you’re a soldier. Keep going, endure it, and you will get your reward. When you are tried, you shall come forth as gold (Job 23:10).

And then, verse 10: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” This is a great challenge. It’s hard to endure persecution. But be faithful, stand firm, even unto death. Some would die, as Polycarp did. He stood firm, and he was rewarded. And others have stood firm too. By grace, we can stand. His promise is that he will never, never, never leave us nor forsake us, and he will give to us a crown of life—eternal life. Think of Stephen, that first Christian martyr. We’re told about him in Acts chapters 6 and 7, how he was stoned to death for the sake of Christ. He prayed, “Lay not this sin to their charge...Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:60, 59). He could see Jesus standing, heaven opened and Jesus standing, standing to receive him. What a wonderful end—his face shining like an angel. He died, and the Lord Jesus took him to heaven, and he’s been there ever since, rejoicing in the Lord, crowned with glory. “Well done, good and faithful servant enter into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:23). Pray today for the grace you will need when these trials come, and remember, his grace is sufficient. Stand on the Rock, the Rock is Christ. The Rock will never move, and you will get a reward.

6. The Second Death

Verse 11: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of *the second death*.” The first death comes to us all, but the second

² Patrick Hamilton (1504–1528), was a Scottish Catholic Priest and early Protestant Reformer who was tried for heresy by Archbishop James Beaton in St. Andrews, where he was found guilty and burned at the stake.

³ George Wishart (c. 1513–1546), was a Scottish Protestant Reformer and one of the early Protestant martyrs burned at the state as a heretic.

death, that's hell. It's an eternal dying, and not being able to escape by death. It's being in that lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched, the worm always eating away, the fire always burning. Oh, the awfulness of hell, and the pain of hell—misery forever. Make sure you stand firm. Stand on the Lord's side. Be an overcomer. By God's grace, you can overcome. "We are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Romans 8:37), and gave himself for us.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. Listen! Take heed! Think of Paul, think of his long life of suffering, and then remember what he said at the end: "The time of my departure is at hand." "I am now ready to be offered...I have fought a good fight...I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6–8). Do you love the appearing of Christ? Are you looking forward to it? standing fast, whatever trials and troubles come, standing firm, like the church at Smyrna. It stood firm, and they were blessed. Be strong. Be faithful unto death. Amen.