

Finishing Well

Lesson #32

Spiritual Warfare: The Persecuted Church

August 16, 2023

Rev. 2:8-11 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: ⁹"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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Smyrna: The Persecuted Church
Church Under Pressure
Faith Over Fear Church

The Suffering Church
The Crushing Faithful
Suffering Steadfast Church

The Crushed Church
The Poor Rich Church

Smyrna: Oldest of the 7 churches in Revelation; Characteristic church from 100 AD - 313 AD
Idyllic City with a Satanic Undertone

- Located ~35-40 miles north of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia on the Aegean Sea
- It was the beginning of a well-traveled road to the interior of Asia.
- Population of 100,000 in 1st Century
- Recognized by Rome as its loyal ally and a center of emperor worship.

From a human perspective Smyrna would likely be the least of the seven churches one would want to belong to. Yet from the perspective of Christ, it is the one most affirmed and valued. The desired characteristic revealed to Smyrna is for their specific need >

- Stand firm in the midst of tribulation and suffering. Do not deny your Lord.

These Things Says The First & The Last, Who Was Dead, & Came To Life:

All through her long and eventful history the city of Smyrna has suffered from besieging armies, massacres, earthquakes, fires, and plagues. The city was founded twice.

- Once as a Greek colony in Western Anatolia [~1100 BCE].
- About 600 BC the Lydians captured and almost completely destroyed it.
- It lay in partial ruins for 400 years. It was crushed almost to death but was rebuilt by the Greeks and again became a flourishing city. It was restored to life and prosperity.

The city was destroyed by a terrible earthquake in AD 178, only 80 years after the church received the letter from Jesus. It was again crushed to death but was destined to recover, for it was "the city of life" or "The City That Died Yet Lives."

The city was restored to more than its former beauty and glory by Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Out of all seven cities mentioned in Revelation only Smyrna survives today as an inhabited city.

Today it is known as Izmir, a beautiful seacoast resort town in Turkey with an excellent harbor and a population of ~2.8 million.

Rev. 2:9a I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)

- Tribulation thlipsis pressure, a literal crushing beneath a weight.
- Poverty ptocheia describes absolute poverty or complete destitution.

The church in Smyrna was beleaguered, poor, downtrodden, hated, despised, and persecuted. Tribulation refers to how they suffered because of their uncompromising commitment to Christ.

1. Smyrna was a center of worship of Rome and Caesar.
Persecuted politically because they would not worship Caesar as a god.
2. Pagan worship. The city worshiped many gods and goddesses.
The Christians were out of sync with the culture in every way.
3. They suffered religious persecution through blasphemy or slander. A large Jewish population who lived here was used by Satan to hinder and persecute the church.
4. They suffered abject poverty because of persecution.

Because of their refusal to obey the Roman laws, they were not allowed to belong to the labor guilds. They were not able to obtain decent paying jobs to support their families. Christian shop owners were boycotted; thus, they went bankrupt and lived in poverty.

5. They suffered physical persecution.

The Lord allowed Satan to incarcerate some of the Christians in Smyrna to test them. The Lord commanded and counseled the church, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer" [2:10]. Christ assured them that He was in complete control of their circumstances. God limits what Satan can do to believers.

Idolatrous City

Smyrna came under Roman control about 27 BC.

The credit for the resurrection of Smyrna belonged almost entirely to Rome.

In the minds of the first century citizens of Smyrna, it was due to their allegiance to Rome and to the gods of the empire that their life as a major city had been restored.

195 BC: Cicero said Smyrna "was the city of our most faithful and most ancient allies.

26 AD: Smyrna went before the Roman Senate to argue for a temple to worship Emperor Tiberius. Request was granted. The Caesar-cult worship increased.

In response to the blessings bestowed upon it by Rome, Smyrna developed into a major center of cultic and emperor worship - a fanatical "religion" that later, under such emperors as Nero [54-68 A.D.] and Domitian [ruled 81-96 A.D.], brought severe persecution for the early church.

The citizens of Smyrna wanted the city to continue to be a place where the gods would show favor upon their faithful worshipers. They worshiped many pagan gods including Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Aesculapius, Cybele, Poseidon, Demeter, and later Caesar.

- Smyrna was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. 195 BC
- The patron deity, Cybele, the nature goddess, whose worship was based on her typical descent into death and resurrection to new life.

The "street of the gods" lined with temples to Greek and Roman gods, beautifully ornate buildings. Yet behind the beautiful city lurked a great evil...

The Synagogue of Satan

This false church was already developing in the days of the apostle John, masquerading as God's true church. It had congregations in the cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

In both cases, the synagogue of Satan is opposed to the mission and message of the church.

Rev. 2:9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Rev. 3:9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

Mark 13:9 But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

Synagogue comes from a Greek word meaning "assembly of men" or "congregation."

The "synagogue of Satan," is an assembly of individuals who "say they are Jews, and are not."

- They say they are the people of God.
- They persecute those who believe in Jesus the Messiah, the true people of God.
- By rejecting the Jewish Messiah, they have renounced their status as "true" Jews and Jesus calls them "liars."

By their persecution of the true people of God, these unbelieving Jews had become a synagogue of Satan—a gathering of people who were following the devil's priorities.

Early persecution of the Church was brought on by Jews not the Romans

Acts 13: 44-45 The next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy [jealousy], and spoke against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.

Acts 14:2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brothers.

Acts 17:13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also [50 miles], and stirred up the people.

Acts 18:5-6 [Paul] testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they opposed him, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said to them,

"Your blood be on your own heads; I am clean; from now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Much of the Roman persecution was an effort to appease the Jewish authorities.

- This is true of Pilate's condemnation of Jesus. John 19:1-16
- Paul's imprisonment by the Roman governors Felix [Acts 24:27] and Festus [Acts 25:16].

This pattern held true throughout the Roman world in the first century. As long as Christians were considered a sect of Judaism, they were exempt from the required observance of certain aspects of Roman state religion. However, as Christians were expelled from synagogues and denounced by the Jewish leadership, Rome began to see Christianity as a new religion that did not have these same exemptions. Therefore, Christians outside the protective umbrella of the synagogue were open to Roman persecution.

This church was hated, outlawed, and persecuted. When the people in the Roman Empire heard Christians were "eating the body and the blood of the Lord", they assumed they were cannibals. Rumors began that Christians eat little babies.

Later, that reason was used as a pretense for persecuting Christians. Instead of worshiping in magnificent buildings, they gathered in caves, catacombs and other hidden places.

They posted sentries at the door to warn them of approaching foes.

Persecuted Suffering Church

Domitian, Caesar at this time, was a murderous dictator who launched an extensive persecution against the church which intensified in Smyrna.

This Christian community was oppressed and severely pressured.

It existed between 2 extremes: the rich, nurturing, loving fellowship of the Christian church family and a cruel and hostile society.

Glen Spencer: Smyrna means myrrh [156x in Bible, is bitter until it is crushed],
a fragrant spice which must be crushed to bring forth its full fragrance.

Smyrna operated a trade in myrrh, an aromatic, resinous substance taken from a shrub-like tree which gives off a good smell when crushed.

Though it had a bitter taste, the resin of the tree was used in making:

Psalm 45:8	Perfume
Ex. 30:23	Ingredient in the anointing oil of the priests
John 19:39	Produced from the tree a gum was used for embalming dead bodies.

And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloe, about a hundred pounds.

Note: Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna.

Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant and allowing the sap to "bleed," the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a sweet smelling fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God and devotion until death.

Spencer: The Christians of this era were crushed and persecuted, but the more they suffered, the more fragrant was their testimony.

During this time thousands of Christians were brought into the theaters of Rome to be fed to lions while spectators cheered. Many were crucified, others were covered with animal skins and ripped apart by wild dogs. They were covered in tar and set on fire as human torches. They were boiled in oil and burned at the stake.

None of the other 7 cities written to were so stained with the blood of the martyrs like Smyrna. God permitted Satan to crush them to yield the sweetness of their aroma.

They were never as Christ-like as when they were suffering.

Spencer: Smyrna indicates suffering and persecution which prove a blessing. Smyrna would be crushed by cruel persecutions, but because of her sufferings would be anointed for a death and burial that would end in a resurrection and renewal of life. Although the afflictions would be bitter to the victim, they would result in releasing to the world the perfume of heaven.

The Smyrna period is known as the era of martyrdom. Justin Martyr, with six other Christians, was scourged and beheaded in AD 165. Irenaeus is believed to have been put to death in 202 during the persecutions of Severus. Eusebius said of these terrible times: "We saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the Divine and Sacred Scriptures committed to the flames. We have observed large crowds in one day; some suffering decapitation, others tortured by fire; so that the murderous sword was blunted, and becoming weak, was broken, and the very executioners grew weary and relieved each other."

[Ecclesiastical History, Book 8, Chapter 2.]

Historians tell us in Smyrna there were mass executions of Christians who refused to bow their knee to Caesar. The pagan Roman emperors attempted to destroy Christianity with the violence of the sword, considering it a form of treason.

As a demonstration of your loyalty to Domitian as a citizen of Rome it was required that you burn a pinch of incense to Caesar and say, "Caesar is lord."

Then you would receive a certificate from the priests that said, "We the representatives of the emperor have seen you sacrificing." The priests would then sign the certificate and date it.

You could return to worshipping the god of your choice.

Consequence for Not Participating:

1. Anyone refusing to burn his pinch of incense was rendered an outlaw.
2. Christians were seen as atheists because they did not believe in or worship the gods of Rome.
3. They were seen as traitors who were committing treason because they would not acknowledge the emperor as lord.

Christians could not compromise and give any man the name of their Messiah - *He alone was their Lord*. For a person to enter the church in Smyrna was to lay down their life.

Christians who refused to forsake their faith were threatened with the loss of all citizenship rights, confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, and death.

Consider: The church which suffers persecution becomes purged; then becomes pure.

Hypocrites don't stick around to be persecuted. Persecution, trials, tribulation, and suffering will destroy false faith, but those same things will strengthen true faith.

Polycarp, born in 69 AD and discipled by John, was the bishop of Smyrna from 115 -155 AD.

When Polycarp was in Rome, he met with Marcion of Sinope who asked Polycarp if he recognized him. Polycarp replied, "I recognize the son of Satan."

In 155 AD at age 86, he was condemned to the stake for his faith. Being a Christian was defined as a member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped.

It was the time of the public games. The city was crowded, and the crowds were excited. Suddenly the shout went up, "Away with the atheists, let Polycarp be searched for." No doubt Polycarp could have escaped but already he had a dream in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire and he had awakened to tell his disciples, "I must be burned alive."

Not even the soldier captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief journey to the city he pled with the old man, "What harm is it to say Caesar is lord and to sacrifice and save your life?" At his trial, the Roman Governor called upon Polycarp to recant his faith in Christ, to which he famously replied, "These eighty and six years have I served my Lord and He never did me any harm, and I cannot deny my Lord and Master now."

Further Plea: But on his persisting again and saying, 'Swear by the genius of Caesar,' he answered, 'If thou supposest vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as thou sayest, and feignest that thou art ignorant who I am, hear thou plainly, I am a Christian. But if thou wouldest learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing.' The crowds came flocking with their sticks from the workshops, from the baths and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in the clamor and bringing wood for the fire.

As they prepared the stake, the Roman Soldiers tried to secure Polycarp with rope or nails. Refusing, Polycarp said, "He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails." "The fires of the stake last but for a moment whereas the fires of hell last for an eternity. Thou art ignorant of the fire of future judgment, eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt." So amazing was his peace in this death that word spread far and wide. Fragrant aroma to God Oswald Chambers "*Suffering either gives me myself or it destroys myself. If you receive yourself in the fires of sorrow, God will make you nourishment for other people.*"

From 100 to 313, history records 10 separate attempts by 10 separate Roman emperors to exterminate and eradicate Christianity from the Roman Empire. During the rule of these 10 Caesars, it is estimated 5 million believers were killed by the Romans as well as by Jews that rejected their Messiah. Their bodies were torn apart on racks. Their fingernails were pulled off. They were hung by their thumbs, often for days. They were wrapped in animal skins and thrown out for bulls to gore and to pitch around. They were covered with tar and set alight in the gardens to light the festivities of the pagans. They, like the resin of the myrrh plant they represent, would be cut, bruised, wounded, crushed for Christ - but from that process of tribulation there would be a savor, and a fragrant smell that would ascend unto God. The church of myrrh and bitterness was agreeable and precious to Christ. Though it was persecuted unto death, the very crushing released the fragrance of love and grace and patient endurance that is so precious in the sight of the Master.

Someone has said that "during this persecution the alabaster box of Christian fragrance was broken, & the perfume has filled the centuries."

Reminds us of the believers in Hebrews 11:37-38: They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth.*

Heb. 11:35b Others were tortured, *not accepting deliverance,*
that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Acts 5:41 And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Rev. 2:10 Prophecy: Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.
[impending persecution] Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison,
that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.

Jesus promised a "crown of life" for faithfulness unto death.

Recall: What did Rome offer Smyrna for their faithfulness? Temple to honor Tiberius

A "crown of life" would have great significance to a resident of Smyrna.

Thirty-five miles of a deep harbor traversed narrow foothills before Smyrna came into view.

Behind the city rose Mount Pagos.

- In the first century Smyrna's most majestic buildings sat high up on Mount Pagos. Around the crest of Pagos they erected a number of pagan temples which formed a "rough circle." As you sailed into its port, you would see what poets spoke of as "the crown of Smyrna." The city fathers called it "the pride of Asia."
- Loveliest of all cities > "the Ornament" the "Crown of Asia," or "the Flower of Asia."
- Circling the base of the mount "like a necklace on a statue" was one of the finest streets of the ancient world, called The Street of Gold.

Note: Those who remained faithful during persecution will one day be compensated by receiving "the crown of life." The reward is not eternal life, which they already possessed by putting faith in Christ's finished work on the cross. It is the martyr's crown, given to those who are "faithful until death" in recognition of their unwavering faith.

- James 1:12 Blessed is the man that endures temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.
- Note: The reward is not eternal life. Eternal life is a gift through faith or personal belief in Jesus Christ. [John 1:11-12; 3:16; I John 5:11-12]
This is a special reward for endurance under persecution.

In the midst of Smyrna's suffering, the vision of Christ given to them is of: Eternal God One who suffered, who entered death > through a baptism of blood.

He was tested and tried, lived and died, and rose again.

He is our Great High Priest who knows the suffering of our infirmities.

"When fear grips the human heart, and our very life is threatened, nothing can bring tranquility like faith in Him who is both the first and the last."

II Cor. 4:14-16 knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. ¹⁵ For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

Matthew 5:11-12 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This portrait of Jesus carries a message of hope. Since many in this church died for their faith, Christ assures them of their future resurrection.

They could face martyrdom in full confidence.

Heb. 10:35-36 Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

Finding Joy In Suffering: Trials, tribulations and pressures are doing something valuable to us and for us. Victory in this present life is closely associated with occupation and orientation to the weightier things of eternity and the glories which shall follow.

II Cor. 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.

For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Rom. 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Rev. 2:10 Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. [Promise]

Rev. 2:11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Man of Sorrows, was associated with myrrh.

Matt. 2 Wise men brought gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Calvary > hanging on the cross > they try to give Him wine mingled with myrrh to dull the pain.

What suffering our Lord Jesus experienced from His birth, to the cross, to the tomb itself.

Isaiah 60:6b [Millennial Kingdom] They will bring gold and frankincense,

And proclaim good news of the praises of the LORD. [What is missing?]

He will not be coming as the Suffering Servant of Jehovah; He will be coming as the Sovereign King of Kings and the Lord of Lords to judge, to reign, and to rule for ever and ever.

Rev. 19:16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written,

KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

Hallelujah! What A Savior!