

Checkin' Out My Walk
3 Smyrna: The Persecuted & Crowned Church
Lose The Old To Gain The New

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.

"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."

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 particular need > Stand firm in the midst of tribulation and suffering, and do not deny your Lord.

Smyrna: Oldest of the 7 > probably established not long after the great flood.

I. Idyllic City with a Satanic Undertone

a. Located 35 miles north of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia on the Aegean Sea

b. Population of 100,000 in 1st Century

c. Beautiful seacoast resort town with excellent harbor in Turkey today called Izmir.

d. Known for its safe harbors, it controlled the trade of the rich Hermus Valley and was a great, wealthy, and important city

e. Loveliest of all cities > called "the Ornament" the "Crown of Asia," or "the Flower of Asia."

Note: Jesus promised a "crown of life" for faithfulness unto death. This 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 Pagus.

Around the crest of Pagus 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."

f. 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 Satanic opposition to Christ in the whole of Asia.

g. This Christian community was oppressed and severely pressured. It existed between two extremes: the rich, nurturing, loving fellowship of the Christian church family, and a cruel and hostile society.

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

They suffered more than the other seven.

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 strength true faith.

Jesus taught throughout His earthly ministry:

1. There would be a tribulation period second to none in the history and prophecy of this world.

2. All churches throughout every age would face impending tribulation and persecution for their faith during the whole of the church age.

John 16:33 In the world ye shall have tribulation, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

II Tim. 3:12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

h. Smyrna, unlike the city of Ephesus, stands today. Though many of the believers died a martyr's death, Satan could not stamp out their testimony.

Note: Suffering has a way of keeping us pure in our devotion to Christ.

II. Industrious City

Aroma of Smyrna: A constant west wind caused a problem. Sewage drained into the gulf and the west wind blew it back into the city rather than out to the sea.

a. Operated a trade in myrrh, an aromatic, resinous substance taken from a shrub-like tree.

b. Myrrh > Gives off a good smell when crushed

c. Hebrew word for myrrh = The Greek word myrrha which was translated 'Smyrna' in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament)

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

1. Perfume > Ps. 45:8

2. Ingredient in the anointing oil of the priests > Ex. 30:23 Also take for yourself quality spices—five hundred shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much sweet-smelling cinnamon (two hundred and fifty *shekels*), two hundred and fifty *shekels* of sweet-smelling cane,

3. They produced from the tree a gum that was used for embalming dead bodies.

John 19:39 And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, 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. 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. Our Lord Jesus Christ, Man of Sorrows, the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, 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. Nicodemus brought an embalming ointment of myrrh to prepare His dead body for the tomb. What suffering our Lord Jesus experienced from His birth, to the cross, to the tomb itself. Myrrh is used as a type of our Lord Jesus Christ in His suffering.

Isaiah 60:6 They shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, He will be presented with gold and frankincense,

Note: The myrrh isn't there!

Isaiah 60:2 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.

Fix your eyes on Him; for just one glimpse of Him in glory will the toils of life repay.

III. Idolatrous City

a. 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 Roma and to the gods of the empire that their life as a major city had been restored. Smyrna came under Roman control about 27 BC. A major temple was given in honor to the Emperor Tiberius.

b. 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 (ruled 54-68 A.D.) and Domitian (ruled 81-96 A.D.), brought on severe persecution for the early church.

c. 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, Aprodite, Aesculapius, Cybele, Poseidon, Demeter, and later Caesar. They all had temples erected to them.

Christ's Letter To Smyrna:

I. Notice Christ's title: The Christ, the Author and Answer

Rev. 2:8 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:

Scripture tells us God took this name for Himself.

Isaiah 41:4 Who has performed and done *it*, calling the generations from the beginning?

'I, the LORD, am the first; And with the last I *am* He.'

Isaiah 43:10 That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I *am* He.

Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me.

¹¹ I, *even I, am* the LORD, and besides Me *there is* no savior.

Isaiah 44:6 "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I *am* the First and I *am* the Last; Besides Me *there is* no God.

Isaiah 48:12 "Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called: I *am* He, I *am* the First, I *am* also the Last.

Notice: The SAME title is used to designate Jesus Christ.

Rev. 1:17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.

Rev. 2:8 These things says the *First and the Last*,

Rev. 22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.*"

Truth: Jesus Christ is none other than God Himself. Though they be one He is distinct. He is the eternal infinite God, already in existence when all things were created and remaining after all things are destroyed. He is the first, He preexisted. He is the last, He will go on forever. He is the First and the Last, the eternal One. He transcends time, He transcends space, He transcends creation.

Paradox: The same One who is eternal, who was before all things and will live forever, who transcends all things was dead and has come to life.

Question: How can the eternally living God who is beyond all time, beyond all space, beyond all history die? But He did. The Lord Jesus Christ, as you know, was God incarnate, entering into time, space and history for the very purpose of dying. That is the heart of the gospel.

Answer: How could the eternally living One die? He could only die as a man. He never could die as the eternal God in whom is unending life. But He died as man for sin and now lives by resurrection as the glorified God/Man.

Hebrews 7:16 there arises another priest (Jesus Christ) who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life.

A. Extremes: First versus Last; Dead versus Life

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

Jesus presents himself as the Lord of the extremes.

He encompasses all the forces and events between these two extremes.

Matt. 28:18 "All power in heaven and on earth has been given unto me,"

He is Lord of all heavenly and earthly forces.

B. First & Last: Smyrna, known for its "municipal rivalry and pride," became a center of science and of medicine. For its allegiance to Rome in all its civil wars, it was a free city, and given the privilege of self-governing.

So, we understand the reason that Christ spoke of Himself as "the first and the last."
In comparison with His glory, all earthly distinctions are pure emptiness.
Being first in something pales into insignificance in view of His eternal glories.

Phil. 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted (to evaluate or consider) loss for Christ.

Consider: Paul considered his "assets" as liabilities. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is the only asset he considers. It changed him in a way his own righteousness could never do.

Consider: Loss can be a Pivot Point in our lives if we allow it. Remember:

- a. Lot's wife, who would not let go of Sodom but looked back.
- b. The rich young ruler, who would not let go of his riches
- c. Achan, who would not let go of his spoils of war
- d. King Saul, who would not let go of his bitterness
- e. Judas, who would not let go of the moneybag
- f. King Solomon, who could not let go of his foreign wives
- g. Demas, who couldn't let go of the world

Matt. 10:39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Consider: Losses can actually become my Gain.

Apostle Paul > what I once considered an "asset," I now count as a liability.

Note: The Greek word for loss used is *zemain*. Only other place it is used is in Acts 27:10, 21 > Here it describes the loss and damage the ship suffered while taking Paul as a prisoner to Rome. The cargo, which was meant to bring gain to its owner, was thrown overboard so the crew could be saved. For Paul, the "cargo" of his past life had to be thrown overboard so he might be saved and gain his spiritual life in Christ.

Admonition: Do not be afraid to let go of things that keep you from God.

When God takes things from your life, do not waste your time in regret.

When God allows you to escape Sodom, do not look back.

When God asks you to suffer for Him, count it all joy.

Poem: Author Unknown

I counted dollars while God counted crosses.

I counted gain while He counted losses.

I counted my worth by the things gained in the store,

But he sized me up by the scars that I bore.

I coveted honors, and sought for degrees.

He wept as he counted the hours on my knees.

I never knew till one day by a grave,

How vain are the things that we spend life to save.

I did not yet know, 'til a Friend from above,

Said, richest is he who is rich in God's love!

C. Dead & Came to Life:

Smyrna had been a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B.C. Around 600 B.C. it was invaded and destroyed by the Lydeans and for 400 years there was no city there at all. Around 200 B.C. Lysimachus had it rebuilt with streets that were broad, straight, sweeping, and beautifully paved. The rebuilt city of Smyrna boasted a famous stadium, library and the largest public theater in Asia. Smyrna became the first city to build a temple to the honor of the goddess Roma (195 BC). Later in 23 BC it was awarded the honor of building an additional temple to the emperor Tiberius. The city's ability to emerge from this period of abandonment and become one of the preeminent cities of the empire gave Smyrna the title: "The City That Died Yet Lives." They had experienced death and literally been brought back to life.

It is undoubtedly because of Smyrna's historical past, Christ refers to Himself as, "He who was dead and has come to life."

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.

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. They would be resurrected to eternal life by the One who himself was victorious over death through a resurrection.

2 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.

1 Pet. 1:3; Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Acts 2:24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

Consider: The risen Christ is one who has experienced the worst life could do to Him.

Thus no matter what might happen to the Christians at Smyrna or to us, our Savior has gone through the worst life can bring. He feels for us in our suffering with special love and compassion and is ever present to come to our aid and comfort.

Heb. 2:15-18 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. ¹⁶ For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

Heb. 4:15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as *we are*, yet without sin.

Hallelujah! Our risen Christ has conquered the worst that life can do. He triumphed over pain, the cross, the devil, sin, and death. He defeated all the enemies and He offers victory and the conqueror's crown.

Encouragement: Should they die in the persecution, they'll not experience anything He hasn't experienced. Should they die, they will not be cut off from His eternal resurrection power.

The Church and Its Affairs (Rev. 2:9-10)

II. Praise & Commendation: The Comfort and Approval

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

a. "Tribulation" = thlipsis = "pressure, a literal crushing beneath a weight."

The Smyrna (martyr) era covers the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, a period of intense Roman persecution of the Church.

This church was hated, outlawed, and persecuted. People in the Roman Empire believed Christians were cannibals because they had heard about "the Last Supper," or "the breaking of bread." When they heard Christians were "eating the body and the blood of the Lord", they assumed they were cannibals. Rumors began that Christians ate 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.

There were violent persecutions as forces tried to "crush the Christianity out of them."

It was very dangerous being a Christian in this town which had an unusual affinity for Rome and Caesar. Smyrna, very patriotic to Rome, (1) built the first Roman temple in honor of Tiberius and (2) accepted the principle of Caesar worship.

Historians tell us in Smyrna there were mass executions of Christians who refused to bow their knee to Caesar. That doesn't mean they wouldn't knuckle under the political leader. Caesar was proclaimed as a god and was to be worshiped as deity. A great deal of pressure and persecution came upon this church because of their unwillingness to say "Caesar is Lord." 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 worshiping 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.

Without this certificate, persecution, imprisonment and suffering were sure to befall you at any time. 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.

One of its most famous martyrs was Polycarp who was born in 69 AD and discipled by John. According to Ignatius, Polycarp became the Head minister of the church of Smyrna shortly after the book of Revelation was written. He retained this position for more than 40 years. 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.

In a letter addressed by the church at Smyrna to the churches in the Christian world, it is related that Jews joined with heathen in clamoring that Polycarp should be cast to the lions or burned alive.

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." His whereabouts were betrayed to the persecutors by a little slave girl who collapsed under torture and they came to arrest him. 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?" But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

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.'

Then he said to him again, 'I will cause thee to be consumed by fire unless thou repent.' But Polycarp said; the "fires of the stake last but a moment, whereas the fires of hell last for an eternity. Thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt.'

So 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. They endeavored to prevent the remains of the martyr from being delivered to Christian friends for burial.

As they prepared the stake, the Roman Soldiers tried to secure Polycarp with rope or nails. Refusing, Polycarp told them, "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." Thus did Polycarp die at the stake. So amazing was his peace in this death that word spread far and wide. Polycarp's martyrdom attracted non-Christians to Christ, inspired Christians of his day, and continues to inspire us today.

Ponder: As we face various forms of opposition, we should take encouragement from the example of Polycarp. Taking strength from his faith in Christ, he remained faithful to Christ through his life and through his death.

Walvoord writes: The Faithfulness of Polycarp to the end seems to have characterized this church in Smyrna in its entire testimony and resulted in this church's continuous faithful witness for God after many others of the early churches had long lost their fervor.

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.*"

Spurgeon: There are NO crown-wearers in Heaven who were not cross-bearers here below.