

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

The Message to the Church in Smyrna: (2:8-11)

The Persecuted Church

The Commission to Write to the Church in Smyrna:⁹¹

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write (2:8a):

The City of Smyrna:

Geographically: The next stop on the circular route was the city of Smyrna which was located about 35 to 40 miles north of Ephesus near the bottom of the gulf of the Aegean in the province of Ionia. Smyrna had a very wealthy and commercial seaport with a magnificent harbor not plagued by the problems of Ephesus. The smaller inner port had a narrow entrance which was of value during times of war. Smyrna was also located at the end of a road which served the Hermas River Valley. This facilitated trade from that valley and gave the Hermas River Valley an outlet for trade through Smyrna's port. Smyrna profited from its location as a city surrounded by the natural beauty of the country side, seven hills, and excellent harbors.

Historically: Smyrna is said to have been inhabited as early as 3000 B.C. The first Greek settlement dates back to about 1000 B.C. In 627 B.C. it was destroyed by the Lydians and lay in ruins until 290 B.C. when two of Alexander the Great's successors, Lysimachus and Antigonus, had the city rebuilt. Smyrna came into contact with Rome because of its harbor and became a staunch ally of Rome. The citizens of Smyrna were infatuated with Rome and in 195 B.C., they built a temple in which Rome was worshiped. Due to Smyrna's loyalty to Rome, a new temple was built and dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius in A.D. 26. In A.D. 177 a great earthquake destroyed the city, but it was rebuilt by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Smyrna suffered many earthquakes and fires, however it is the only city of the seven which remains today. It is currently known as the Turkish city of Izmir.

Culturally: The city of Smyrna was known for its extreme beauty. Its claim to be the chief city of Asia was contested by Ephesus and Pergamum, but in beauty it was easily first. The city was well designed with excellently paved streets and was surrounded by groves. The city was well walled with splendid buildings in orderly arrangement. One street called "the street of Gold" was likened to a golden necklace with jewels on it. The jewels symbolized the beautiful temple buildings in order along a sloping hill called "the pagos." The city was benefited by wind during the hottest part of the day. Smyrna was known as a center of learning, especially in science and medicine, and boasted to be the birth place of Homer.

Economically: Smyrna was a large prosperous city of about 200,000 residents. It benefitted from a great harbor as well as an outlet for the Hermas River Valley. It like Ephesus was a free city thus it was self governing and self sufficient. It boasted of a great stadium, library and public theatre and epitomized social sophistication. Smyrna was an extremely wealthy city.

Religiously: The protecting deity of the city was a local variation of Cybele, known as the Sybeline Mother. The towers and battlements of her head-dress bore an obvious resemblance to the appearance of the city. Only here in the Greek world was she worshiped. Smyrna was also an enthusiastic center for Caesar worship. In fact this would pose an extreme danger to anyone who became a Christian. The acropolis on Mount Pagos was known as the crown of Smyrna. The temple

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

to Cybele sat on one side while a temple to the chief god of the Greek pantheon, Zeus, sat on the other side. In between were the pagan temples of Apollo, Asclepia, Aphrodite, and Emperor Tiberius.

The Church in Smyrna:

There is no record of the founding of the Christian church in Smyrna. It is only mentioned in Revelation 1:11 & 2:8-11. It was likely founded as a result of Paul's Ephesian ministry either by Paul himself or by his converts. (cf. Acts 19:11) At the end of the first century, life was very dangerous for believers in Smyrna. Since the city was such a strong ally to Rome and a major center of Emperor worship, many Christians were persecuted. Under Emperor Domitian, it became a capital offense to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor. As a result many Christians faced execution. The Greek word translated "Smyrna" is the same word for myrrh, a resinous gum used as an agent for embalming. "Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church in Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant, the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God."⁹²

The Picture of Christ to the Church in Smyrna (2:8b):

The first and the last: This title is used before in Revelation 1:17 and again in 22:13. It is an Old Testament title for God (Isaiah 41:4,5; 44:6; 48:12). We see that this title is taken from the Vision of Christ in 1:12-20. As it is used again here, it identifies Him as the glorified, exalted Lord Jesus Christ. It affirms His equality of nature with God. It emphasizes that He is the eternal and infinite God and that He is Creator and Consummator. This term speaks of His continual existence.

Who was dead, and has come to life: This description is also taken from the Vision of Christ in 1:17-18. The speaker here is not just the eternal God, but He became a man and died, and was resurrected to life. The emphasis here is definitely on the resurrection and is a description of what Jesus accomplished while on earth. He is the eternally living Savior. This title would be an encouragement to those in Smyrna who were suffering extreme persecution. As the Lord experienced persecution unto death and rose in triumph over it, so the martyrs of Smyrna will do likewise. He could sympathize with the suffering church of Smyrna. (cf. Heb. 2:17)

The Commendation to the Church in Smyrna: (2:9)

I know your Tribulation: "Nothing escapes the vision of the glorious Lord of the Smyrna church, who knows every detail about the churches under His care. He began His commendation of those believers by assuring them that He knew their tribulation."⁹³ The Greek word for tribulation, *thlipsis* literally means "pressure or affliction." This is an affliction or pressure that presses in and burdens the spirit. It is used of the calamities of war, the distress of a woman in childbirth, and of persecution. The church in Smyrna received this pressure from all sides. First and foremost would have been the government of Smyrna which would have forced emperor worship upon every citizen with the threat of death for disobedience. Those believers in Smyrna refused and were thus persecuted for their faith in Christ. Many would meet a Martyr's death for such faithfulness. The most striking and well known example was that of Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna, some 60 years later as the persecution of the church in Smyrna reached its peak. He was burned at the stake before great crowds and remained faithful to Christ.* Believers from Smyrna would suffer persecution in many ways. "Politically, they suffered persecution from the Roman Empire.

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

Physically, they were fed to lions or set upon by wild dogs, crucified, tarred, burned at the stake, and boiled in oil."⁹⁴ "Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* reports various kinds of punishments and cruelties imposed on early Christians. These included imprisonment, racking, searing, boiling, burning, scourging, stoning, and hanging. Many were lacerated with red hot pincers, and some were thrown upon the horns of wild bulls. Others were sewed up in the skins of wild beasts and then mauled by dogs; while still others were dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to trees and set on fire."⁹⁵ Christ was commending the believers in Smyrna for their faithfulness to Him while enduring severe persecution even unto death.

And your Poverty (but you are rich): Christ was also aware not only of the terrible persecution of the believers in Smyrna but also of their poverty. There are two Greek words for poor or poverty. *Penes* describes one who struggles to meet basic needs. As is here, *ptochos* describes one who has nothing at all. Those who must acquire the necessities of life through petition. It describes a poor beggar completely destitute. The believers in Smyrna were driven to absolute poverty because of their faithfulness to Christ. "Christianity had its economic implications. Undoubtedly it affected employment. Even if a person were self-employed, it had an impact on the customers. Many were disinherited by their family and were ostracized by the community for their loyalty to Christ."⁹⁶ Yet Christ told them they were rich. They may have been physically and temporarily poor. But they were rich spiritually and eternally. We will see later that the opposite was true of the church in Laodicea (cf. 3:17). "It's better to be poor and commended, from Christ's perspective, than to be rich and condemned."⁹⁷

And the Blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan: "In addition to pressure from the government and poverty from the economic community, Christ also points to persecution from the religious establishment. Christ declares that those who say they are of God, but attack Christians, are really of Satan. To blaspheme a Christian amounted to blaspheming Christ, just as persecuting a Christian was equivalent to persecuting Christ (cf. Acts 9:4-5)."⁹⁸ Those who claimed to be Jews were indeed actual physical descendants of Abraham but were not of the spiritual family of God, they were of the synagogue of Satan. These unbelieving Jews led the charge against Christians. There were 5 major slanders made against the early church:

- Because Christians partook of Christ's body and blood, they were called cannibals.
- Because they gathered together for a common meal of fellowship, they were accused of gathering together for orgies of lust.
- Because Christianity at times resulted in split families, they were accused of being anti-family.
- Because Christians worshiped without images, they were called atheists.
- Because Christians would not say that Caesar is Lord, they were accused of being politically disloyal (rebels).

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

The Condemnation to the Church in Smyrna:

There is no condemnation by Christ to the church in Smyrna. They were a faithful and obedient church that could only be commended in their suffering for Christ.

The Counsel given to the Church in Smyrna: (2:10)

Do not fear: After commending them for faithfully enduring persecution, Jesus warned the believers in Smyrna that they would face further persecution leading unto death. They were to trust God and not fear the persecution of man. Notice the source of their persecution is the devil. He is ultimately behind it. *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual [forces] of wickedness in the heavenly [places.]* (Eph. 6:12). These believers in Smyrna were to expect imprisonment and tribulation for ten literal days which likely would lead to death. This phrase has been taken as a symbolic statement by some to represent 10 periods of general church persecution. It is more acceptable however to take it literally since Christ is speaking directly to the church in Smyrna, not to mention that it makes perfect sense when taken literally. They were not to fear the coming of further and more intense tribulation, imprisonment and likely death.

Be faithful: They were then given the temporary assignment of being faithful. How long? Until death. As Christ was faithful unto death so were these believers in Smyrna to be faithful as well. Christ exhorted them to not fear and to continue in their faithfulness. As a result they would receive the crown of life. This crown (or wreath) which was the victor's crown at an athletic event symbolizes eternal life. Most take the crown of life as a statement of apposition which literally reads, "a crown which is life." This would be in contrast to the temporary physical tribulation and death that the believers in Smyrna were facing.

The Challenge to the Overcomers in Smyrna: (2:11)

Remember that the overcomer is a reference to the true believer in Christ. Remember that it is not a reference to someone who might have gained some sort of spiritual victory in life but to all who become genuine believers in Christ. "Though persecuted believers may suffer the first (physical) death, they will never experience the second death (which is not annihilation but conscious, eternal damnation in hell; Rev. 20:14; 21:8). The Greek term *not* is the strongest negation the Greek language can express. The persecuted, suffering, yet faithful church at Smyrna stands for all time as an example of those who 'have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance' (Luke 18:15). Because they loyally confessed Him before men, Jesus will confess them before the Father (Matt. 10:32)."⁹⁹ These indeed would be comforting and encouraging words to hear from the Lord when suffering extreme persecution. What an encouragement for us today as we may face trials and persecutions.