

## Smyrna: Suffering Victoriously

Rev. 2:8-11

Over the years, we've had some strong-willed boys and girls come through our children's programs. They often grow up to become pastors or missionaries! One family actually kept a paddle in my office in case they needed it. Legend has it that a Mayfair pastor who was due on the platform, had to bribe his 3 year old son with a buck to get him into Mrs. William's Sunday school class. What else could I do? Maybe you've heard the story of the boy in the beginner department who refused to sit down. Certain parental pressures eventually persuaded him to cooperate, but here's what he said, "You can make me sit down, but inside I'm still standing up." Now that's a strong-willed child! That's I'm not-givin-in-for-nothin', stubbornness! We can't applaud that attitude, but there is something redeeming about it. To be stubborn about faithfulness to Christ is a good thing. Last week we said the church at Ephesus was tough in a commendable way. In **vs. 3** Jesus said, "**You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.**" They served the Lord with rugged determination. The trouble at Ephesus was the fact that they allowed their love to grow stale.

This morning we come to Christ's letter to the church at Smyrna. Smyrna was the suffering church. I think the motto of the believers at Smyrna went something like this, "troubles may knock us down, but inside, we're still standing because of Jesus." As the Lord evaluated this church, he could only commend them for [suffering victoriously](#) and then encourage them to keep it up.

### [The commission - vs. 8a](#) "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a port city and a major commercial center in Asia Minor. It was nestled between seven hills on the Aegean Sea about 35 miles north of Ephesus. The city had wide, paved streets and ornate buildings. It was noted for its art / education / science / school of medicine / and library. Even though Smyrna was a free city, it paid total allegiance to the Roman Empire. Temples to pagan deities dotted the landscape. Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna continues as a functioning city that is today called Ismir. Visitors to Smyrna see modern buildings that tower over ancient ruins.

The Bible tells us nothing about the establishment of the church at Smyrna. In fact, Smyrna is only mentioned here in **Rev. 1 & 2**. The church at Smyrna existed alongside an assortment of temples dedicated to the Roman pantheon of gods. Despite the evil that surrounded them the church maintained a pure testimony. They refused to deny the Lord at a time when Christians were severely persecuted for their faith. Along with the letter to the church at Philadelphia, the church at Smyrna received no correction...only commendation. From His place of observation in the midst of His churches, the risen Christ sent this word to the messenger of the church. Once again, there are lessons for us in each of these seven letters.

Since the letter to Smyrna is so brief, I want to insert something I haven't yet mentioned in our study. While these 7 churches were actual churches that existed in the first century, they seem to have been chosen to be representative of churches throughout history. In other words, there will always be a church that has characteristics like the church at Ephesus and there will always be a church that has characteristics like the church at Smyrna and so on. So the significance of the letters to these churches is both [historical](#) and [representative](#). But it's hard to escape a third significance behind the choice of these churches. Many have observed a correlation between the character of each church and the character of successive periods of church history starting at the first century. For example, conditions surrounding the Church at Ephesus bear a striking resemblance to the characteristics of the period from AD 30 to AD 100 known as the Apostolic era.

In the same way, conditions affecting the church at Smyrna are remarkably similar to the period lasting from AD 100 - AD 312 when the Church was sorely persecuted. Because scholars can't agree on the dates, some have dismissed this interpretive significance. But in my opinion, the correlation is too obvious to overlook and nailing down precise dates is not the important thing. On the back of the sermon notes I've included a chart that gives one interpretation of this relationship. This prophetic correlation may not be the most important meaning attached to these letters, but it's certainly worth noting. And isn't it just like the Lord to include things in His Word that our human minds can't fully grasp apart from faith in the incomprehensible greatness of God? I'm reminded of **Isa. 55:9** which says, "**As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**" Things that amaze us serve as forensic evidence which proves that this book is unlike any other book...this is God's Word! Just when we think we have God and the Bible all figured out and boxed up, we don't! His wisdom is deeper and higher than we ever imagined! That makes Bible study an exciting adventure like panning for gold!

The name **Smyrna** is related to the word **myrrh** which was one of the principle products produced in Smyrna. **Myrrh** is an aromatic resin tapped from a thorny tree found in that region and was often associated with suffering. Up until the 15th century it was used to embalm dead bodies. Anticipating His sacrificial death, myrrh was among the gifts of gold and frankincense brought to the infant Jesus by the magi from the east. According to **John 19** Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to be wrapped in the cloth that covered the lifeless body of Jesus. Though the Jews couldn't accept it, their Messiah appeared the first time as the suffering savior. He comes as a mighty conquering king the next time. During His thousand year kingdom reign, the wealth of the nations will stream into Jerusalem, but **myrrh** is noticeably absent. **Isa. 60:6 - Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.** **Myrrh** is absent because Christ's suffered once for sin, the just for the unjust...His suffering is finished forever!

**The character - vs. 8b** As we said last time, each letter contains a specific title or attribute of the Lord Jesus which was chosen to minister strength, encouragement, or comfort. The characterization chosen for this letter applies to believers who are suffering. **These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.** The Lord revealed Himself two ways to the church at Smyrna. **First**, He is the Divine Lord. He is **the First and the Last**. He is the eternal Son of God who existed before creation and will be alive long after this present creation is dissolved by fire and remade for eternity. Then **secondly**, He is the crucified and resurrected Savior. Even though Jesus suffered and died for sin of mankind, He is alive today and forever. Unlike other religions, Christians don't worship a dead man. Jesus robbed death of its sting / He stripped the grave of its power / and today He stands victorious as the champion of all who trust Him. The persecuted believers at Smyrna are encouraged to remember that their lives are united to the risen Christ who causes us to be **more than conquerors. (Rom. 8:37)** In **Jn.16:33** Jesus said, "**I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**" To be **in Christ** is to be in the winner's circle. Jesus won the victory for us! Now by faith in His accomplishment, we're waiting for the ticker tape parade. We know it's coming, because Jesus is alive!

**The commendation - vs. 9 - I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.** As I mentioned before, Jesus had no criticism for the church at Smyrna. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia received no command to repent. Instead, Jesus had only words of approval and commendation. He was fully aware of their **afflictions** and their **poverty. vs. 9 and 10** include four different dimensions of suffering.

**First**, the believers at Smyrna suffered **political persecution**. When Jesus said, **I know your afflictions**, He used (thlipsin) a graphic term which signifies intense and persistent pressure that often leads to death. The Christians in Smyrna were literally having the life squeezed out of them by oppression and restrictions imposed by the Roman authorities. During the first three centuries, from the time of emperors Nero to Constantine, Christians suffered ten major persecutions. Among other cruel means of persecution, Christians were crucified / fed to lions / killed by wild dogs / tarred and set on fire / burned at the stake / and boiled in oil. Polycarp, the famous bishop of Smyrna, refused to recant his faith. When authorities threatened his life, he said this..."Eighty-six years I have served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King?" Polycarp was burned alive in a Roman arena.

I'm sure you realize that Christians are being terribly persecuted in many parts of the world. In countries where Islam is the dominant religion, Christianity is illegal and forced underground. Local authorities look the other way when Christians are beaten and martyred. Dr. Bob Evans, who was a keynote speaker in our Missions Conf. last Spring, sent a disturbing email back in November. All 43 pastors in India supported by BCM Intl., saw their homes and churches burned to the ground by Muslim extremists. The Indian authorities simply paid no attention as these violent attacks were carried out. We may not approve of decisions made on Capitol Hill that seem to ignore the intentions of our Founding Fathers and strip away our liberties, but we still have no experience with the intensity of suffering Christians are experiencing in other places. But stay tuned. If legislation like the Fairness Doctrine passes, freedom of speech will be greatly limited. From what the NT says, we should expect conditions to go from bad to worse until the church is raptured.

**Second**, Jesus was fully aware of the **economic persecution** they suffered. The word translated **poverty** signifies abject poverty; to be destitute, possessing absolutely nothing. Historians suspect their poverty resulted from their faithfulness to Christ. Their persecutors no doubt cut off some of their incomes or made it difficult for them to find employment. The believers at Smyrna were blackballed and shut out of the job market. Shop owners were boycotted. Homes were robbed and vandalized.

Yet even though these Christians were poor materially, Jesus encouraged them that they were rich spiritually. He said, "**yet you are rich!**" Every Christian has a decision to make. Which would you rather have...a portfolio and estate that can be lost in a moment, or untold spiritual wealth that lasts forever? And by the way, those who lose material wealth now for the sake of Christ will experience full restoration with interest, of all that was temporarily lost? When we come to the letter to the church at Laodicea, the situation is reversed. The church at Smyrna was poor and needed to hear how rich they were in Christ, but the Laodiceans were rich and needed to realize how poor they really were. **Rev. 3:17 - You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.**

Some of today's television preachers would have us believe these Christians were out of God's will and needed some kind of anointing. If they had more faith, they could name it and claim it or lip it and grip it. The prosperity gospel is terrible heresy! I remember Al Smith telling the story of the retired missionary couple who wrote the song, God Leads Us Along. While gathering information for his book of hymn stories, Mr. Lillenas found them happy as clams living in a county poor house in Appalachia where they'd ministered. The chorus of that beloved song goes like this..."*Some through the water; some through the flood; some through the fire; but all through the blood. Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song -.in the night seasons and all the day long.*" God loves us just as He loves His only begotten Son. But in this present evil age, neither He nor we are exempt from suffering. Here's a principle worth writing down somewhere. "*Persecution has never been fatal to Christianity, but prosperity often has!*"

Along with political and economic persecution, the Christians at Smyrna suffered **religious persecution** from unsaved Jews. Jesus said, **I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.** This kind of persecution appears all through the book of Acts but there's no historical confirmation for what was happening at Smyrna. Like the Jewish leaders who hated Jesus, the Jews hated Christ's followers and often stirred up opposition among the Gentiles. They made false accusations / spread malicious rumors / created riots / and stooped at nothing to incite the Roman authorities to use their authority to persecute Christians. Because they were thoroughly anti-God, Jesus called them **a synagogue (or a gathering) of Satan.** Energizing their efforts was the devil himself.

The **fourth** and final form of suffering the believers at Smyrna would endure is actual **physical persecution.** In **vs. 10** Jesus said, **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.** Physical persecutions comes in many forms. Faithworks listed the various degrees of persecution a believer might suffer. Disapproval / ridicule / pressure to conform / loss of educational opportunities / economic sanctions / shunning / alienation from community / loss of employment / loss of property / physical abuse / mob violence / harassment by officials / kidnapping / forced labor / imprisonment / physical torture / murder or execution.

Does God allow this to happen to His children? Would Jesus allow these crimes to be committed against His bride? We don't have to theorize. The answer is revealed in the Bible and in real time. A large portion of our Bibles tells the story of many godly men and women who suffered because of their faith. **Heb. 11:36-39 - Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned ; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith...**

If you've never experienced suffering because your faith, cheer up. As we near the time of the Lord's return, the opportunity may come for many of us. **II Tim. 3:12 - In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...** The question is...how will you respond? Are you prepared to suffer for the sake of Christ? This question leads to the next point.

**The challenge - vs. 10, 11 - vs. 10** begins, **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.** The Greek phrase literally means, fear nothing. Remember what I said two weeks ago? (of course you do!) I said, no command in the Bible is repeated more than **fear not.** In **Luke 12:4,5** Jesus said, **"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him.** Jesus expects His followers to be fearless with one exception...we should fear God. We should maintain a reverential awe for God that keeps us humble and on track, but fearless when it comes to everything else. I don't know what worries or stresses you are carrying today, but God wants you to give them up to Him. Peter echoed what he learned from Jesus when he wrote, **Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. - I Pet. 3:14b**

Now you're thinking...that's easier said than done! No it isn't. Practicing fearlessness isn't a 12 step process. Fearlessness is simply the result of trusting. When we trust the God who is lovingly in control of every situation that affects us, fear is eliminated! And there's something we need to remember: God doesn't give suffering grace when we're safe and feeling no pain. He reserves suffering grace for times of suffering. So the hypothetical questions that ask, "what would you do if..." can't factor in the grace God promises when we need it.

If painful circumstances should arise...I'm sure many of you would remain true to Christ! I know that, because you're true to Him today. You've established a track record of faithfulness and you wouldn't deviate from it in trying circumstances. But there's another side to this. There's no point imagining how I would respond in some extreme hypothetical situation, if I get all shook up by one of the lighter forms of persecution given in the list. If we cave in when ridiculed, we probably wouldn't remain faithful if imprisoned. If we vacillate when faithfulness to Christ costs losing an educational opportunity, we probably wouldn't be faithful when tortured physically.

**vs. 10** continues...**I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.** The **ten days** of **vs.10** are interpreted several ways. Since no known event of history corresponds to 10 literal 24 hour periods of imprisonment and suffering, another meaning may be intended. The fact that their suffering would last **ten days** may mean that it wouldn't last forever. In other words, their suffering would have a beginning and an ending. This idea gains support when we remember that Daniel and his companions were tested for **ten days** and **Daniel** has such close ties to **Revelation. Dan. 1:12-15 - "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."** So he agreed to this and tested them for **ten days**. At the end of the **ten days** they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the **ten days** of **Rev. 2:10** may signify a time period that is fixed and limited and entirely under the Lord's sovereign control.

The primary challenge is found in the end of **vs. 10- Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.** Would you notice that Jesus didn't command us to be successful... He commands us to be faithful. Our faithfulness to Christ is to be endless. In every situation, we're to be faithful. We're to be faithful even to the point of death. This means there's to be no end to our faithfulness to Christ. Having given His life for us, He is worthy of nothing less than a life of faithfulness returned to Him. The crown promised here is the **stephanos**, the victor's crown. It's promised to all who endure the trials and tests of life without denying Christ.

**vs. 11 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.** As in the letter to the church at Ephesus, **He who overcomes** is not a super-saint, but a born again believer in Jesus Christ. The second death is eternal separation from God in the Lake of Fire. That will be the sentence handed down to every unbeliever at the Great White Throne Judgment of **Rev. 20:11ff.** **vs. 11** contains a double negative which is the strongest way to emphasize something in the Greek language. The verse literally means, the one who overcomes will not in any way be injured by the second death. The first death may hurt us briefly, but the second death can't touch us.

The believers at Smyrna suffered intense pressure. Like the trees of their region which produced an aromatic resin when tapped, the believers were a sweet aroma to God as they remained faithful to Christ. Under the pressure of persecution they were tough like the Ephesian believers. Their motto could have been something like that of the stubborn little boy. ""You can make me sit down, but inside I'm still standing up." That's what Paul meant when he wrote these lines...**We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. II Cor. 4:8,9** Can you honestly make that claim? Is your earnest ambition to be faithful to death? The Christ who delivered us from the second death is worthy of nothing less.