

THE FAITHFUL BUT PERSECUTED CHURCH

(Rev 2:8-11) 10/28/18

Grace Bible Church, Gillette, Wyoming

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I. THE CITY OF SMYRNA

- A. Smyrna was approximately thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. Like Ephesus, it was a seaport along the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea.
- B. The ancient city was one of the finest cities of its time, of which it was said to be, “the lovely—the crown of Ionia—the ornament of Asia.”
- C. Smyrna was one of the main cities where emperor worship was practiced. Each citizen had to burn incense to Caesar and proclaim that Caesar was Lord. They would receive a certificate as proof of their loyalty. Domitian demanded to be addressed as *Dominus et Deus* (“Lord and God”) and brought punishment and death to those who did not.
- D. Pagan worship was rampant in Smyrna. There was a street known as the “street of gold,” in which a pagan temple of Cybele (goddess of nature) was at one end and the temple of Zeus at the other. There were shrines to various pagan gods, including Demeter (the goddess of grain), Poseidon (the god of the sea and earthquakes), and Artemis (the goddess of fertility and the hunt).
- E. We know that Paul spent three years in Ephesus (Act 20:31). Apparently, the gospel went out from that location throughout Asia (Act 19:10, 26). It is most likely then that a church was planted in Smyrna by Paul.

II. THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

- A. Christ, the Martyr’s Example (8)
 1. The second letter began with the typical address to the **angel of the church**. However, this church was in **Smyrna**. The name Smyrna means “myrrh (*smyrna*).” It is a spice that is taken from a type of Commiphora tree and crushed. It was used during Jesus’ birth (Mat 2:11), crucifixion (Mar 15:23), and burial (Joh 19:39). It was a fitting name for the church that would experience persecution and martyrdom.
 2. The Lord identified Himself with previous descriptions in the book of Revelation. Christ is the **first and the last** (Rev 1:17 cf. Rev 2:8), a title that would have challenged the pagan worship in Smyrna (cf. Isa 44:6; 48:11-13). It also would have brought comfort to the church which was about to experience suffering and martyrdom. Christ is the eternal God who sovereignly rules all things, including their tribulation. Christ **was dead** (Rev 1:18 cf. Rev 2:8) through crucifixion to atone for man’s sin. However, Christ is also the martyr’s example and would have emboldened those faced with martyrdom (Php 2:8; 1Pe 2:21). Christ has **come to life** (Rev 1:18 cf. Rev 2:8) and provides resurrection hope for all believers who will experience death. He was more than qualified to speak to the churches.
- B. Jewish Persecution (9)
 1. The phrase, “I know thy works” (KJV) is omitted in the best manuscripts (Walvoord). Therefore, the phrase “I know your tribulation” becomes more direct and consolatory.
 2. The word “**tribulation**” (*thlipsis* - lit. *pressing together, fig. suffering brought on by outward circumstances*) is used five times in Revelation. Four times it refers to tribulation in general (Rev 1:9; 2:9, 10, 22) and once it refers to the “great tribulation” (Rev 7:14). Here, Jesus was referring to tribulation in general, but severe tribulation nonetheless.
 3. The Christians in Smyrna were undergoing intense tribulation and persecution because of their faithfulness to Christ.
 4. We can attribute at least four reasons for such tribulation: 1) They refused to submit to emperor worship. Domitian demanded such worship and Smyrna was a center for such worship. The Christians were called, “atheists.” 2) Domitian did not take kindly to those who refused to submit to emperor worship. As a result, Christians had their property confiscated and fell into **poverty** (*ptōcheia* - *destitute*). Such poverty brought its own brand of trials and tribulations. Nevertheless, Jesus stated that they were **rich** in regard to treasures in heaven. 3) They refused to engage in pagan worship and were no doubt ostracized because of their refusal to join the pagans. This contributed to a lack of employment for Christians in a wealthy pagan city. 4) The fourth reason for Christian tribulation and persecution was described by Jesus as Jewish persecution (9b).
 5. Much the same way that the Jews blasphemed against Christ (Mat 27:39; Luk 22:65), they “**blasphemed**” (*blasphēmia* - *slandorous speech*) against his followers (Act 13:45). Typically, the Jews blasphemed against Christians with numerous false accusations. They

charged them with cannibalism (Joh 6:52; 1Co 11:24-25). They charged them with immorality (Rom 16:16; 1Th 5:26). They charged them with breaking up homes and families (Luk 12:51-53). They charged them with forsaking the Law (Act 21:21). They charged them with doing evil so that good may come (Rom 3:8). They charged them with preaching a false Messiah (Mar 15:31-32; Act 5:40).

6. However, Jesus had something to say about these **Jews** who merely claimed to be Jews. They were **not** true Jews because they had rejected God by rejecting His Son (cf. Rom 2:28-29). In fact, Jesus gave a blistering description of them as a **synagogue of Satan**. Since these Jews rejected Christ, they were just as much influenced by, and followers of, Satan as pagan religions and all unbelievers (Joh 8:44; Eph 2:1-2; 1Jo 5:19).
7. The book of Acts is filled with persecution from the Jews against Christians (Act 9:23, 29; 13:45; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:11, 27; 23:12; 24:5; 25:7).

C. Coming Persecution (10a)

1. These believers were told **not to fear** because they were about to face even more suffering by persecution. “**Suffering**” is the Greek word *paschō* and means to experience suffering, usually caused by persecution [NT], including death. It was used of Christ’s death by crucifixion (Mat 16:21; Luk 22:15; Act 1:3; 3:18; 17:3; Heb 13:12). It was used of persecution against believers (Php 1:29; 1Th 2:14; 2Th 1:5; 1Pe 2:19, 21, 23; 3:14; 4:19; 5:10).
2. Another reference is made to the **devil** which reiterates that Satan is the enemy of Christ and therefore the enemy of His church. He will do whatever is necessary to destroy Christ’s church. Acts records numerous satanic attempts to thwart the church (Act 5:3; 10:38; 13:10; 26:18). In regard to Smyrna, the devil would **cast** some of them into **prison** (Act 16:23; 2Co 11:23).
3. The Lord would allow it in order to **test** (*peirazō* - *make proof of, test, or tempt*) the church. When believers successfully endure trials and testing, they give proof of the reality of their faith (Jam 1:2-4) and the enabling power of the grace of God (2Co 12:9-10).
4. They would have tribulation for **ten days**. Here, the word “tribulation” does not refer to the “great tribulation.” But there is much debate in regard to the meaning of “ten days.” Some take this phrase to mean ten periods of persecution under each of the Roman emperors beginning with Nero. Some hold that the “ten days” are literal ten days of persecution (cf. Dan 1:12-15). Others maintain that it has the figurative meaning of intense but brief persecution.

D. Motivation to Endure Persecution (10b-11)

1. It is obvious that their persecution would be severe and possibly entail martyrdom. Therefore, the Lord exhorted them to motivate them to endure persecution. He said, “**be faithful unto death**.” I’m not sure we fully understand the implications of martyrdom in America, but Christians around the world do. *Over 900,000 Christians have been martyred in the last 10 years, a Christian research firm affiliated with Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts estimates.* In 2014, VOM gave the total number of martyrs since the time of Jesus as 70 million (Christianity Today). True believers will persevere unto the end, even if that end is martyrdom (Mat 10:22; 24:13; Joh 8:31; Php 1:6; Col 1:23; 1Jo 2:19).
2. The persecuted believers in Smyrna were also encouraged with the promise that Jesus would give them the **crown of (eternal) life**. Of the several crowns (*stephanos* - *victor’s wreath made of garland*) rewarded to believers, the crown of life is given for enduring trials (Jam 1:12) and martyrdom (Rev 2:10). The crown is the believer’s victory of eternal life itself through Christ. *The glories of life eternal stand in contrast to the trials of martyrdom and erase the dark shadows of persecution and death* (Walvoord).
3. John included his typical exhortation to the **churches** from the **Holy Spirit**. Only those with the Holy Spirit will be illuminated and be able to apply this message (“**ear**” ... “**hear**”).
4. In closing, John gave a final motivation for the church to endure persecution. It is the promise to true believers (“**He who overcomes**”) that they will not be **hurt** by the **second death**. The “second death” is mentioned four times in the book of Revelation. The first death (physical death) is appointed to every person (Heb 9:27 cf. Mat 10:28). The second death is the eternal separation of an unbeliever from the presence of the Lord in heaven. True believers are a part of the first resurrection and will not experience the second death (Rev 20:6). The second death is also connected with the eternal punishment of unbelievers (Rev 20:14; 21:8).

- III. THE END OF SMYRNA
- IV. THE MARTYR OF SMYRNA