

# **Christ's Message to the Seven Churches**

## **Christ's Message to Smyrna**

*Revelation 2:8-11*

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# Christ's Message to Smyrna

## Scripture

We are currently in a series of messages titled, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches," that is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation 1 the resurrected and glorified Christ revealed himself to his Apostle John, and told him to write letters to seven churches in Asia. Today, we shall examine the second of those letters, and learn about Christ's message to his church in Smyrna.

Let's read Christ's message to Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11:

**<sup>8</sup> "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.**

**<sup>9</sup> " 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup> Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.' "** (Revelation 2:8-11)

## Introduction

The first church that Christ addressed was the church in Ephesus. And the second church Christ addressed was the church in Smyrna. It was the second church on the postal route in Asia.

John Stott wrote the following in his commentary titled, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*:

If the first mark of a true and living church is love [which was lacking in the church in Ephesus], the second is suffering. The one is naturally consequent on the other. A willingness to suffer proves the genuineness of love. We are willing to suffer for those we love. Evidently Christians in Smyrna had not lost their pristine love for Christ, as had the Christians in Ephesus, for they were prepared to suffer for him. Like Peter and John, they were “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [that is, Christ’s name]” (Acts 5:41).<sup>1</sup>

## Lesson

The analysis of Christ’s message to Smyrna as set forth in Revelation 2:8-11 teaches us that suffering is a characteristic of a true church of Jesus Christ.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Address (2:8a)
2. The Description (2:8b)
3. The Commendation (2:9)
4. The Complaint
5. The Command (2:10)
6. The Warning
7. The Appeal (2:11a)
8. The Promise (2:11b)

### I. The Address (2:8a)

First, let’s look at the address.

Christ said in verse 8a, “**And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write. . . .**” The letter was addressed to **the angel**, which also means “messenger.” In context of the letters, I take it to mean that each letter was addressed to the pastor of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 35.

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Commentator Grant Osborne tells us the following about **Smyrna**:

Smyrna is the only city that has continued to the present day, having the modern name Izmir. Another harbor city with a thriving export trade thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, it was renowned for its beauty and its civic pride, calling itself “the first in Asia.” . . . It maintained an excellent relationship with Rome. . . . It was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma (195 BC), and in 26 AD, because of its long loyalty to Rome, it beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius. In succeeding decades, it became a center of the imperial cult. In 600 BC it had been destroyed by Alyattes, king of Lydia, but when Alexander the Great came through in 334 BC he commissioned that it be rebuilt. This was done in 290 BC by Lysimachus and Antigonos, two of his successors. The city was rebuilt closer to the harbor, and its architecture made it one of the most pleasing cities in Asia: famous temples (the temples of Zeus and Cybele were connected by a mall that was the envy of the ancient world), a group of buildings called “the crown of Smyrna,” an acropolis on Mount Pagos, and a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold.”

It had a large Jewish population that virulently opposed Christians. This may have been occasioned by the destruction of the temple and consequent anti-Jewish feeling in the Roman Empire. Christianity thus became a double threat, not only religious but political. It is common to theorize that the edict under Domitian demanding emperor worship made it easy to persecute Christians, and that the Jews were active in denouncing Christians to the authorities, possibly to deflect attention from themselves. Rome had given the Jews the right to practice their religion, and they did not want this precious privilege threatened. In addition, in the 80s Judaism had excommunicated the Christian “heretics” from their synagogues, and they wanted nothing to do with them. In 155 AD the famous bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar “Lord” during an extensive persecution instigated by the Jews. The Smyrna church itself had been

founded either by some returning Jewish traveler present at Pentecost or (more likely) during the Pauline mission of Acts 19.<sup>2</sup>

## II. The Description (2:8b)

Second, notice the description.

In verse 8b Christ said to the church in Smyrna, **“The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.”** This description is from the description of the resurrected and glorified Christ that was given to the Apostle John in Revelation 1:17-18.

We learn two truths from Christ’s description of himself.

*First, Christ is eternal.* Christ is **“the first and the last.”** Earlier, in Revelation 1:17, Christ said to John, “Fear not, I am the first and the last.” “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” (Hebrews 13:8), “having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Hebrews 7:3). There is great comfort when the eternal Christ, the one who is **the first and the last**, speaks words of truth to anyone who experiences, or is facing, suffering.

*And second, Christ is victorious.* Christ **“died and came to life.”** We live and then we die. Christ lived, died, and then came back to life again! And because he lives, we too will live with him, if we have put our trust in him. His victory is our victory!

Christ, who is eternal and victorious, addressed words to the church in Smyrna. He wanted to encourage them in their suffering with the truth that he is eternal and victorious.

## III. The Commendation (2:9)

Third, observe the commendation.

Christ commended the church in Smyrna in three ways.

*First, Christ commended the church in Smyrna for the tribulation they experienced.* Christ said in verse 9a, **“I know your tribulation.”** The

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<sup>2</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 127.

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church in Smyrna was experiencing persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Smyrna took great pride in the fact that they beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius in 26 AD. The Christians in Smyrna refused to worship the emperor by saying, "Caesar is Lord." Obviously, for Christians only Jesus is Lord. And so the unwillingness of Christians to worship Caesar branded them as atheists and unpatriotic. It is likely that Christians in Smyrna were ostracized, work became unavailable, opportunities for growth vanished, and they were excluded from society.

*Second, Christ commended the church in Smyrna for the poverty they experienced.* Christ said in verse 9b, **"I know. . . your poverty."** Smyrna was a very wealthy city, and it is strange that a group should be singled out as being poor in such a city. Perhaps the Christians belonged to the lower ranks of society, for we know that "not many. . . were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26). Or, perhaps, the Christians' love for the poor caused them to give so generously that they themselves became poor in doing so. But these factors don't adequately explain how this would be the reason for their tribulation. More likely, however, is the fact that Christians would not conduct their business practices like everyone else in Smyrna. They would not participate in underhanded deals, and so they lost business. Non-Christians had very negative attitudes towards Christians, and so they simply refused to engage in any kind of business with them, and that led to the material poverty of the Christians.

**"But,"** said, Christ, **"you are rich"** (2:9b). Christ's values are not the same as the world's values. People in the world value material riches, whereas Christ values spiritual riches. As John Stott said, "Of course [Christ] cares deeply about the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. Scripture makes that plain. At the same time, it adds that those who lack much of this world's goods can still be

‘rich towards God,’ ‘rich in faith,’ ‘rich in good deeds,’ and have ‘treasures in heaven’ (Luke 12:21; James 2:5; 1 Timothy 6:18; Matthew 6:19, 20; 19:21).”<sup>3</sup>

*And third, Christ commended the church in Smyrna for the slander they experienced.* Christ said in verse 9c, **“I know. . . the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”** These words seem harsh to our ears, because we have become so “politically correct” in our culture. Remember that Christ was a Jew, John was a Jew, and they were speaking of fellow Jews here. Christ was asserting that Jews who hated and rejected him were just as much Satan’s followers as those who worshiped the emperor. John MacArthur noted:

Unbelieving Jews commonly accused Christians of cannibalism (based on a misunderstanding of the Lord’s Supper), immorality (based on a perversion of the holy kiss with which believers greeted each other; cf. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26), breaking up homes (when one spouse became a Christian and the other did not, it often caused conflict; cf. Luke 12:51–53), atheism (because, as already noted, Christians rejected the pagan pantheon of deities), and political disloyalty and rebellion (because Christians refused to offer the required sacrifices to the emperor). Hoping to destroy the Christian faith, some of Smyrna’s wealthy, influential Jews reported these blasphemous, false allegations to the Romans. These haters of the gospel were a **synagogue of Satan**, meaning they assembled to plan their attack on the church, thus doing Satan’s will. They may have claimed to be a synagogue of God, but they were just the opposite.<sup>4</sup>

So the church in Smyrna was commended by Christ for what they experienced in terms of affliction, poverty, and slander. This church experienced trial and difficulty and suffering, and yet they remained faithful to Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 71–72.

#### IV. The Complaint

Fourth, look at the complaint.

Actually, there was no complaint by Christ against the church in Smyrna. It is one of only two churches – the other being Philadelphia – for which Christ has no complaint.

#### V. The Command (2:10)

Fifth, notice the command.

There were two commands that Christ gave to the church.

*First, Christ commanded the church in Smyrna not to be afraid.* He said in verse 10a, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.”** After commending the Christians in the church in Smyrna for the suffering they had already endured, Christ warned them that more was on the way. He would give them the strength to endure it, for Christ had said to his disciples in John 16:33, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Because of Christ’s victory, Christians can say with the Psalmist, “In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 56:11). Most commentators think that the expression, **“and for ten days you will have tribulation,”** means a relatively short time rather than a literal **ten days**. Regardless, Christ commanded them not be afraid.

*And second, Christ commanded the church in Smyrna to be faithful.* He said in verse 10b, **“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** Though the Christians in Smyrna were experiencing tribulation, and more was to come their way, Christ encouraged them to remain faithful to him, even **unto death**. He also promised them a rich reward for remaining **faithful unto**

**death**, namely, he would give them **the crown of life**. As John MacArthur said, “The **crown** (reward, culmination, outcome) of genuine saving faith is eternal **life**, and perseverance proves the genuineness of their faith as they endure suffering.”<sup>5</sup>

Perseverance is not only the teaching of Scripture (Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 4:13-20; John 8:31; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 John 2:19), it is also the teaching of our own *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which states in 17-1: “They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”<sup>6</sup>

## VI. The Warning

Sixth, observe the warning.

Since there was no complaint against the church in Smyrna, there was no warning either.

## VII. The Appeal (2:11a)

Seventh, look at the appeal.

Christ said in verse 11a, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Christ appealed to believers to pay attention to what he said to them through the Spirit.

## VIII. The Promise (2:11b)

And eighth, notice the promise.

Christ said in verse 11b, **“The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”** The Bible talks about two kinds of death. The first death is physical death. And the second death is when non-Christians are sentenced to hell for all eternity. So,

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<sup>5</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 78–79.

<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

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John MacArthur said, “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).”<sup>7</sup> That is a wonderful promise to all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

John Stott tells the story of the death of Polycarp, who later became the Bishop of Smyrna:

It was 2 February, probably in the year 156 AD. The venerable bishop, who had fled from the city at the pleading of his congregation, was tracked down to his hiding-place. He made no attempt to flee. Instead, he offered food and drink to his captors and asked permission to retire for prayer, which he did for two hours.

Then, as they traveled into the city, the officer in charge urged him to recant. “What harm can it do,” he asked, “to sacrifice to the emperor?” Polycarp refused. On arrival, he was roughly pushed out of the carriage, and brought before the proconsul in the amphitheater, who address him: “Respect your years! . . . Swear by the genius of Caesar. . . .” And again, “Swear, and I will release you; revile Christ!” To which Polycarp replied: “For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The proconsul persisted: “Swear by the genius of Caesar. . . . I have wild beasts; if you will not change your mind, I will throw you to them. . . .” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “Since you make light of the beasts, I will have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude.”

Angry Jews and Gentiles then gathered wood for the pile. Polycarp stood by the stake, asking not to be fastened to it, and prayed, “O Lord, God Almighty, the Father of your beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know you. . . . I thank you for counting me worthy this day and hour of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of your martyrs.” The fire was lit, but as the wind drove the flames away from him and prolonged his suffering, a soldier put an end to his misery with a

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<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 79.

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## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Christ's message to Smyrna as set forth in Revelation 2:8-11, we should be willing to suffer for Jesus Christ.

Suffering for Jesus Christ is a mark of every true Christian and church. Persecution for the sake of Christ is repeatedly stressed in Scripture. Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus Christ himself experienced tribulation, poverty, and slander, which led to his unjust imprisonment and death. So, he himself experienced that of which he says to the church in Smyrna, and to Christians in all churches in all ages.

Throughout the Scriptures and the ages, God's children have endured suffering for the sake of Christ. There are countless illustrations of such suffering.

What about us? The sad truth is that we tend to shrink from suffering for Jesus Christ. And we do so chiefly through compromise. The world is opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our tendency is to dilute the gospel and lower the standards of God's truth so as not to give offense. We love the praise of men more than the praise of God.

We should not provoke suffering. Nevertheless, if we compromised less, we would suffer more. Smyrna was a suffering church because it was an uncompromising church. May God help us to be such a church. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 40-41.

## Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
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## **PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for Christ's message to the church in Smyrna.

The church in Smyrna was a suffering church. They experienced affliction, poverty, and slander for the sake of Christ. Our Savior had no complaint about the church in Smyrna, but commanded them, with all gentleness, not to be afraid of the coming suffering and to be faithful, even unto death.

O God, help us as individuals and as a church to be willing to suffer for Jesus Christ. Help us not to be afraid and to be faithful unto death.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

## **CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!