

THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

TEXT: REV. 2:8-11

INTRODUCTION:

1. The letter to the church in Smyrna is the shortest of the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3.
2. Smyrna was about 40 miles north of Ephesus. Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a wicked, idolatrous city. Smyrna is not mentioned in the book of Acts, or in any of the epistles.
3. Smyrna prided itself upon its Caesar-worship. In 26 AD, there were six great cities in Asia that were competing for the right and the privilege to build a temple to the Roman emperor Tiberius, and of those six cities, Smyrna gained the prerogative and the right.
4. Unlike Ephesus, which today is uninhabited, Smyrna is still a large city. Today the Turks call it “Izmir.” It is a seaport city, and it is dominated by Muslims.
5. The word “Smyrna” means “myrrh” (a sweet perfume used to embalm dead bodies), and suggests suffering and death (cf. Rev. 2:10).
6. In John 19:39, we read that Nicodemus went to the tomb of Jesus and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes.
7. Therefore, the church at Smyrna is often referred to as “the martyr church” (cf. Rev. 2:10). The persecution of Christians (by both heathen and Jews) in Asia Minor centered in Smyrna.
8. Polycarp lived between 70 and 155 A.D and was a close friend and disciple of the apostle John. He served as a pastor in Smyrna. Many Bible teachers believe Polycarp is the “angel of the church in Smyrna” (Rev. 2:8).
9. Back in the days of Polycarp, the Roman Empire vigorously enforced their anti-Christian laws. In 155 AD, the Roman authorities arrested Polycarp for preaching the Gospel.
10. The Romans told Polycarp that if he would deny Christ and offer up incense to Caesar’s statue, he could escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, “Four score and six years have I served the Lord, and He never wronged me. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?”
11. Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused to compromise his beliefs, and was burned alive at the stake.

12. We saw last week that the church at Ephesus received a strong commendation, but there was also a strong rebuke (2:2-5). But there is no word of rebuke for the church at Smyrna (and Philadelphia).

I. THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH (2:8).

1. The head of the church was the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, He is the head of every local church. Colossians 1:18 says Christ “is the head of the body, the church.”
2. To the church at Smyrna, Christ is introduced as “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive” (2:8). In describing Himself as “the first and the last,” Christ is relating Himself to time and eternity.
3. The Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal God who has always existed in the past, and who will always exist in the future. Our Lord said to the Pharisees, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).
4. “Then took they up stones to cast at Him” (John 8:59).
5. Our Lord is also described as He “which was dead, and is alive” (Rev. 2:8), referring to His substitutionary death and His resurrection from the dead (cf. Rev. 1:17, 18).
6. This is the message for Smyrna and this is the message for all Christians: Just as Christ suffered and died, and rose victoriously from the grave, so too will all those who suffer and die for Him (cf. 2:10).
7. Hebrews 11:35 says, “Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.”
8. “And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:)” (11:36—38).
9. Our Lord said in Matthew 10:28, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.”
10. The worse thing a man can do to a Christian is kill him, but then the Christian goes straight to heaven. The apostle Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).
11. Our Lord said, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

II. COMMENDATION OF THE CHURCH (2:9).

1. The church at Smyrna suffered greatly. Our Lord said in Rev. 2:9, “I know thy works, and tribulation...”

2. This “tribulation” does not refer to the normal trials and troubles all people have to contend with. Our Lord is referring specifically here to the trouble they had to endure for their stand for Christ.
3. Are you taking a stand for Christ? Do your coworkers know you are saved? Do you witness to your friends and neighbors and relatives?
4. Some people get upset when you give them the Gospel.
5. Second Timothy 3:12 says, “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution,”
6. The Barnabas Fund is a Christian organization that provides practical aid and financial support for persecuted Christians around the world. The Barnabas Fund makes the needs of persecuted Christians known to other Christians around the world, and encourages Christians to pray for their persecuted brethren.
7. According to the Barnabas Fund, one in ten Christians are being persecuted. These persecuted Christians are denied basic freedoms that we here in America often take for granted: to freely worship together in public, or to even own a Bible.
8. Back in the 1950’s, Vance Havner said, "It is not easy to preach on Smyrna nowadays. The average American congregation is in no mood to appreciate such a church. In a day of quick prosperity...it is not easy to interest a well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed Sunday morning crowd in the Smyrna brand of loyalty. We are more like Laodicea, rich and increased with goods and needing nothing. It does not cost much to be a Christian now...Everything is measured in terms of success and prosperity these days. We are not interested in what it costs to be a Christian but in what we get by being one...I am often amused and amazed at the way we equate Christianity with success, popularity and prosperity. We may not admit it but we use the same old gauge the world uses, except that we employ religious language” (*Messages on Revival*).
9. Vance Havner preached that 50 years ago. What would he think if he were around today, surrounded by all of these shameless health & wealth and prosperity preachers?
12. “People turn it on and assume that TBN is American Christianity, and Americans know everything, so why not listen to it?” says Bonnie Dolan, founder and director of Zambia’s Center for Christian Missions. “[W]e have Zambians looking to the West for direction, and they associate TBN with the West. And it’s killing our churches” (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/12.22.html>).

13. In March 2003, a cashier at a five-star hotel in Nigeria was arrested for allegedly stealing nearly 40 million naira (then about US \$400,000) from his employer. His colleagues were shocked because there was nothing to suggest that he was living above his means - he had no car and he lived in a rented apartment in a non-fashionable part of Lagos. The man confessed that he gave all the money to his Pentecostal church. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4619733.stm>).
14. James 2:5 says, "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith?" Poor financially, but "rich in faith."
15. In II Corinthians 6:10, the apostle Paul describes Bible preachers as "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." Our Lord said we should laying up treasures in heaven, not here on earth.
16. To the church at Smyrna, our Lord says, "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich)..." (2:9).
17. The church at Laodicea (3:15-17) was rich (financially) but poor (spiritually); whereas the church at Smyrna was rich (spiritually) but poor (financially).
18. Smyrna was a wealthy city. The Christians in Smyrna were in poverty because their property had been confiscated. This form of persecution has always been commonplace. The Nazis did it. The Communists do it. The Muslims do it.
19. And the pagans did it to the Christians in Smyrna.
20. The Lord informs the church at Smyrna that He knows the reviling of the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9). The meaning is not clear but it certainly has reference to religious Jews who persecuted the Christians at Smyrna.
21. Our Lord says, "I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not" (2:9).
22. The apostle Paul says in Romans 2:28, 29, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

III. AN ADMONITION TO THE CHURCH (2:10, 11).

1. The Christians in Smyrna were told by our Lord in verse 10, "ye shall have tribulation ten days." There are various interpretations and explanations given for these "ten days."

2. W.A. Criswell said, "Ten refers here to intensity," and he refers to the ten plagues in Egypt.
3. The Christians in Smyrna were not promised escape from this intense persecution and death. They were promised "a crown of life" (2:10).
4. The crown of life is also referred to in James 1:12, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."
5. The Christians in Smyrna were not promised deliverance from death, but deliverance from "the second death" (2:11).
6. The "second death" is eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14, 15).
7. There are many unsaved church members today who think everything is going to be OK, but some day they will wind up in hell.
8. Oh what a terrible shock! (Cf. Matthew 7:21-23).
9. We need more Bible preaching on holiness, righteousness, repentance, judgment, sin, and hell.
10. The Christians in Smyrna were persecuted but they stayed loyal to our Lord. But there are very few Smyrna Christians around today (cf. Matthew 13:19-21).
11. There are multitudes of church members today who would not hesitate to take the mark of the beast if it would mean no persecution, a better job, more money, etc.
12. They will have a nice car, a beautiful home, nice clothes, and plenty of money. But when they are cast off into hell, they will realize it was not worth it (Rev. 14:9-11).

CONCLUSION:

1. The city of Smyrna is only mentioned here in the book of Revelation, but the Greek word *Smyrna* is found three times in our New Testament.
2. The first time it is used is in Matthew 2:11, where we are told that the wise men from the east brought the young Christ child "gold, and frankincense and myrrh (*smyrna*)."
3. Gold for a King. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.
4. Frankincense for the sweet fragrance of His life. This signifies our Lord's deity.
5. Myrrh (Greek word is *smyrna*) is for our Saviour. Myrrh typifies the suffering of our Lord for our sins. Our Lord suffered and died on the cross for you and for me.

