

## Revelation 2:8-11 – The Church at Smyrna

**Special blessing attached:** Rev. 1:3 – Blessed is the one who reads, and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

**Divine Outline of Revelation:** Revelation 1:19 – write, therefore, the things which you have seen (past tense), the things which are (church age), and the things which shall be after these things (chps 4-18)

### Seven (7) letters to 7 churches: Four distinct levels of meaning/application

1. Local: Individual churches in John's day with the actual problems described
2. Warning (reproof, correction): “to the churches” (applicable to all churches)
3. Personal (homiletic): “he that hath an ear” (personal/individual application)
4. Prophetic: lays out church history

### Seven design elements regarding each church

1. Name of the church
2. Title Jesus calls Himself
3. Commendation
4. Concern
5. Exhortation
6. Promise to the Overcomer
7. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says...”

## Last week – Ephesus

### First Love

**Do the first works:** This means that they must go back to the basics, to the very first things they did when you first fell in love with Jesus. These are the things that we never grow beyond.

i. What are **the first works**?

- Remember how you used to spend time in His Word?
- Remember how you used to pray?
- Remember the joy in getting together with other Christians?
- Remember how excited you were about telling others about Jesus?

Letter to Smyrna “Suffering” or “Death”

The church is nearest to Christ when it is sharing in His sufferings. Paul said it like this in

**Philippians 3:10** - “that I might know Him, the power of His resurrection, and *the fellowship of His sufferings*, being conformed unto His death.”

That is a perfect image of the church at Smyrna – the persecuted church.

Jesus warned His disciples (and us) of this in **John 16:33** – **I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.**”

The original Greek word for “world” in this verse is *kosmos* and it is referring to this evil world system as it is organized and controlled by Satan. He is the prince of the power of the air. The reason we are guaranteed to have pressure or testing in this world is because we are not OF this world system. We have been translated out of this kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. That's why later in His Upper Room discourse as Jesus prayed to the Father in

**John 17:14** He stated, **“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.**

As the Bible puts it, we are pilgrims and sojourners just passing through this physical realm on our way into eternity with God.

We should expect to be opposed and rejected and, frankly, if we are not, I have to seriously question myself and my life and try to determine whether or not I am truly making a difference in Christ's Kingdom.

The word for 'tribulation' in the original Greek text is *thlipsis* and it means *affliction*. This primarily means "a pressing, pressure", anything which burdens the spirit. This is not referring to the “Great Tribulation” but to the affliction we face right now on a daily basis as Christians.

Admittedly, we have not had to suffer much for the cause of Christ in the American church in our lifetimes. Yet, our brothers and sisters around the world have known suffering and death for their testimony of Jesus unlike the world has ever known. More Christians were killed for their faith in the 20th century than at any other time in human history. That's a pretty remarkable thought.

## Revelation 2:8-11 – The Church at Smyrna

Revelation chapter 2 verse 8 . . .

**“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write;**

The Greek name “Smyrna” comes from the Hebrew root that is translated “myrrh.” Thus... death...

Myrrh is a costly perfume which exudes from a certain tree or shrub in Arabia and Ethiopia, or is obtained by incisions made in the bark: as an antiseptic it was used for embalming. It was also an ingredient in perfume (Ps 45:8), prominent in Song of Solomon, etc. It was also an ingredient in holy anointing oil for priests (Ex 30:23) and the purification of women (Esther 2:12). It was used in embalming (Jn 19:39) and was a gift of the Magi at Christ’s birth (Mt 2:11):

Gold = royalty; Frankincense = priesthood; Myrrh = suffering, death.

One interesting note is the fact that at Jesus’ Second Coming gold and frankincense are offered, but NO myrrh (Isa 60:6). Why, because His death is now behind him and He is never to die again—but it was offered to Christ at cross (Mk 15:23). The body of Jesus was embalmed by Joseph & Nicodemus (Jn 19:39-40). Myrrh yields fragrance by being crushed. Note the “death” theme throughout this letter.

**Background History:** Smyrna Today Smyrna is called Izmir, and it is the second largest city in Turkey. It exports tobacco, grapes, figs, cotton, olives, and olive oil. Smyrna possesses an excellent harbor and is encircled by cypress hills. Smyrna was inhabited in about 3000 B.C., with indications of later Hittite influence. During the period around 900 B.C. the poet Homer was born, lived and died in Smyrna. In the 4th century, Alexander the Great, in response to a dream, ordered Lysimachus, one of his four generals, to rebuild the formerly devastated city of Smyrna. It prospered into one of the greatest of the then-known world. Smyrna came under control of the Romans in 27 B.C. From 27 B.C. to 324 A.D. she enjoyed great material prosperity. Strabo described it as the most beautiful city in the world. It was about 42 miles north of Ephesus and possessed an excellent double harbor. The outer harbor was a deep water mooring ground; the inner (now silted in) had a narrow entrance that could be blocked with a chain. Even today, bustling Izmir has been termed the “Paris of the Levant.”

### **Pagan Worship**

At the foot of mount Pagos stood the temple of Zeus, the father of the gods, reputed to be the lord of the sky, rain, clouds, and thunder. Along the Golden Street stood the shrines of Apollo the sun-god, Aphrodite the goddess of love and beauty, Aesculapius the god of medicine, and finally, close to the sea, Cybele, a Phrygian nature goddess Mount Pagos resulted in the title

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“the crown of Smyrna.”. At the Agora (the commercial and political center) were statues of Poseidon the sea-god, and Demeter the goddess of corn. The priests of the various deities were termed stephanophori, in reference to the laurel or golden crowns which they used to wear in public processions. They were awarded this honor at the end of their year of office. (The term stephanos is alluded to in Rev 2:10.) The tutelary goddess of Smyrna was Cybele (later, the Greek Rhea, the daughter of the sky and the earth and the mother of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades). Her worship was wild and unrestrained. As the giver of wealth, she became recognized in the great cities as the goddess of the settled life and of towns, hence her crown of walled cities. She appears on Smyrnead coins depicted as enthroned and wearing a crown of battlements and towers. [Goddess of fortresses, (“god of forces”) Daniel 11:38?] In addition to the usual deities, Smyrna readily accepted Caesar worship. In 196 B.C. Smyrna built the first temple to Dea Roma - the goddess of Rome, the spiritual symbol of the Roman Empire. Once the “spirit” of Rome was worshipped, it wasn’t much of a step to worship the dead Emperors of Rome. Then it was only another small step to worship the living Emperors, and then to demand such worship as a evidence of political allegiance and civic pride.

In 23 A.D. Smyrna won the privilege (over 11 other cities) to build the first temple to worship the Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna was a leading city in the ***Roman cult of Emperor worship***.

The Roman Emperor Domitian (a.d. 81-96) was the first to ***demand*** worship under the title “Lord” from the people of the Roman Empire as a test of political loyalty. According to ancient church history, it was under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision.

“Emperor worship had begun as spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, the final step was taken and *Caesar worship became compulsory*. Once a year the Roman citizen must burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar; and having done so, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty.” (Barclay)

“All that the Christians had to do was to burn that pinch of incense, say, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not even formally conform.” (Barclay)

In 155 A.D., the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, refused to recant. “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong. How can I now speak evil of my King who has saved me?” The old man was burned at the stake on the sabbath day, an object of Jewish hatred as well as from the Roman persecution.

**Title of Christ** 2:8 “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith **the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;**

When Jesus appeared to John He used the First and the Last title for Himself. **Revelation 1:17-18** states, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, ***I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.***

This church at Smyrna was severely persecuted for their faith . . .even to the point of martyrdom. That is the reason Jesus used this particular title for Himself when addressing this church.

The “First and the Last” title speaks of His eternal character and it is a title that only belongs to Yahweh according to Isa 41:4; Isa 44:6; Isa 48:12. Therefore, once again Jesus is declaring Himself to be God.

Jesus concludes the Bible by the using this same title of Himself in Revelation 22:13, ““Behold, ***I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.***”

**Commendation** 2:9 “I know your tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

“**I know**” – once again Jesus reminds these believers (and us) that He walks among the churches. He is intimately aware of everything going on in the lives of His people. He is the Great and the faithful Good Shepherd of His sheep.

**Your tribulation** – Greek word *thlipsis*: *pressure*. These Christians were in an important city which celebrated the Imperial Roman cult of Emperor worship. One day out of every year all the people were required to go to the local altar in their town erected to pay homage to Caesar. Once there, they were to offer a pinch of incense on the altar and verbally state, “Caesar is lord!” For that act of worship they would receive a piece of parchment stating they had been “loyal” to Caesar. They could then go and worship whatever gods they wanted and would face no reprisals.

Their “suffering” could have been relieved simply by a pinch of incense offered to Caesar...but they would not compromise and declare that Caesar was Lord.

- **Early persecution was brought on by the Jews not the Romans** – in Antioch Acts 13:50 – in Iconium Acts 14:2,5 – in Lystra Acts 14:19 – in Thessalonica Acts 17:5

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One tragic heresy of the Church today is the view that Israel has been “replaced.” This view is held by many mainline denominations as well. The justification for this doctrine is that Israel rejected her Messiah and crucified Him on a cross. In fact, it was you and I that crucified Jesus. He died on that cross for ALL of our sins. It was God's predetermined plan before the foundation of the world was even laid.

Replacement Theology created an atmosphere of antisemitism very early in Church history. This became tragic for the Jews who suffered numerous atrocities under the banner of “Christ”, but also for the Church because we lost our Jewish “roots.” Christian knowledge of the Old Testament is tragically lacking.

These Christians were not willing to bow to the pressure but because of that they were being excluded for everyday social life in Smyrna. This created extreme financial consequences for themselves and their families. Hence, the next phrase, I know . . .

**Your poverty:** According to history, Smyrna was a prosperous city. Yet the Christians there were poor. “The word used for ‘poverty’ is the word for abject poverty. They were not just poor – financially speaking they were as beggars.” This church would certainly not make it in the age of the “prosperity gospel” of today.

- ii. The Christians of Smyrna knew **poverty** because they were kicked out of the local trade guilds which meant the loss of their jobs and livelihood. This happened not only because they shared the gospel but because they would not compromise and declare Ceasar to be Lord. Christ alone is Lord and that is what they proclaimed.
- iii. Early Christians *joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven* (Heb. 10:34). This kind of economic persecution was one important reason why Christians were poor in Smyrna. Even today, this is a common form of persecution against Christians around the world and it will find it's final form of coercion in the tribulation. At that time people in general will not be able to buy or sell – to take part in the financial system of the day unless they swear allegiance to the “Beast” - Satan's end times False Christ.

**But thou art rich . . .**

These Christians kept an 'eternal perspective' and lived lives reflecting those eternal, godly values! In fact, the more they suffered for Christ the greater their treasure in heaven. That is the kind of bank account that can never be taken away. I pray we never have to face the choice in this country where you will have to decide whether you will compromise and deny your Lord Jesus Christ in order to provide for yourself or your family financially – or worse – compromise your testimony and confession of faith in order to save your very life. More than once the **Apostle Paul** exhorted his readers, “follow me as I follow Christ.” That



sounds great on the surface but remember what Paul was willing to endure for the cause of Christ.

**In 2 Corinthians 6:4-10**, “but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much **endurance**, in afflictions, in hardships, in difficulties, in beatings, in imprisonments, in mob attacks, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in **genuine love**, in **the word of truth**, (**John 17:17**) and in the **power of God**; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; **regarded as deceivers and yet true**; as unknown and yet well known, as **dying and yet behold, we are alive**; as punished and yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet **possessing all things**.

The **Old Testament Minor prophet Zephaniah** offers a harsh commentary on today's prosperity gospel as well as on those who are living for the material things of the world when he wrote in **chapter 1 verse 14**, “The great day of the LORD is near,

Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly.

**15** That day is a day of anger, A day of trouble and distress, A day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness,

**16** A day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities And the high corner towers.

**17** I will bring distress on mankind So that they will walk like those who are blind, Because they have sinned against the LORD; And their blood will be poured out like dust,

And their flesh like dung.

**18** Neither their silver nor their gold Will be able to save them On the day of the LORD'S anger; And all the earth will be devoured By the fire of His jealousy, For He will make a complete end, Indeed a horrifying one, Of all the inhabitants of the earth. This directly relates to the final destruction of the One-world financial system by God in Revelation chapter 18 which we will look at more closely in the following weeks.

Please don't mistake what I am saying here. Our Heavenly Father loves His children and He loves giving good gifts to us. He blesses people with wealth and material things. However, we must never cling too tightly to those material things. We are called to be good stewards of what He has entrusted to us. That means being willing to redirect those resources to others as God may direct us. It is perfectly alright to possess things – as long as those things do not possess you. Guard your heart against clinging too tightly to material things. One day it may come down to a difficult choice like the Christians at Smyrna had to make ... confessing Christ and suffering hardship from the world or forsaking Christ and potentially gaining the whole world but losing your own soul.

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Just as a reminder, the letter to the church at Smyrna was written by Jesus Himself. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to a church not far from Smyrna. In Colossians 3:1-6 Paul exhorts the believers this way, “

“Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things *that are* above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on the things *that are* above, not on the things that are on earth. **3** For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. **4** When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. **5** Therefore, treat the parts of your earthly body as dead *to* sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. **6** *For it is* because of these things *that* the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience,

We all need to set our minds on things above ... on eternal things. The return of our lord is near – so keep an eternal perspective on all these things.

### **I know the blasphemy of those who SAY they are Jews:**

Some of the “blasphemies” addressed in these seven letters . . .

- Legalism: denial of Christ’s completed work.
- Gnosticism: denial of Christ’s humanity.
- Caesar worship: denial of Christ’s Lordship. Exhortation [Note: No “Criticism” in this letter. The Lord has no word of complaint. They were satisfying His heart (2 Cor 8:9).]

Consider the term **blasphemy**, particularly in regard to the Jewish perspective. The offense of blasphemy was punishable by death under Jewish law. Here again we have the theme of death being played out in this letter.

In Smyrna the Christians were facing persecution and suffering not only at the hands of the Romans but particularly at the hands of the local Jewish community. Just as the church at Ephesus had tares trying to enter the church and declare themselves to be Apostles, so Smyrna had people coming in claiming to be Jews but really were not.

This is nothing new. In one of Jesus many encounters with the Pharisees – the Jewish religious leaders of His day – Jesus overtly condemned them when He said in . . .

**John 8:44-45** -- You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he tells [a]a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, because he is a liar and the father of lies. **45** But because I say the truth, you do not believe Me.



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The Jews hated both the Christians as well as the Romans but they were masters at manipulation and using the Roman authorities for their own ends (much like at the trial of Jesus). The Jews in Smyrna would go to the Roman authorities and accuse the Christians as being disloyal to Caesar which would increase the persecution by the government.

Revelation 2:10 – Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

### Tribulation

- Tribulation = thlipsis. 1) a pressing, pressing together, pressure. 2) metaphor for oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress, straits.
- Not the specific “Great Tribulation”; we all shall have tribulation, trouble, persecution (Jn 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12, etc.).
- “Poverty but rich”: vs. Laodicea, rich but poor (Rev 3:17; 2 Cor 8:9). • Two words for poverty in the Greek: penia, the state of having nothing superfluous; and ptocheia (here), the state of one who has nothing at all; implies beggary.

10 Days” used elsewhere in scripture referring to a limited time of testing.

Genesis 24:55 – Before Rebekah could leave her household and marry Isaac

1 Samuel 25:38 – Nabal sifted for ten days then judged by the Lord (death)

Jeremiah 42:7 – time testing on people of Judah before God answers

Daniel 1:12, 14 – dietary test for Daniel, Hannaniah, Azariah, Misheal in Nebuchanezzars court  
There will be suffering but it is (1) known to God and (2) is limited by God's divine sovereignty.

Some believe the “ten days” relates to ten historical periods of persecution under future Roman Emperors. They are detailed as . . .

### Persecution under Roman Caesars

54-68 Nero (Paul beheaded; Peter crucified upside-down)

95-96 Domitian (John exiled)

104-117 Trajan (Ignatius burned at the stake)

161-180 Marcus Aurelius (Polycarp martyred)

200-211 Septimus Severus (killed Irenaeus)

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235-237 Maximinus (killed Ursula and Hippolytus)

249-251 Decius

257-260 Valerian

270-275 Aurelian

303-313 Diocletian (Worst of all) 10 total 250 years!

### Roman Persecution

- Famine and pestilence falls on Rome. Diseases brought back from the Parthian wars devastated much of Rome and inundation from the Tiber put much of the grain storehouses under water.
- The Christians were a convenient scapegoat. These disasters were brought on by this new religion, so Christianity became a crime...
- 5 million believers died for Christ during this period...Fox's Book of Martyrs.

“**Crown**” of life: The term is stephanos, not diadem. A diadem is for a King, representing his authority. The term for this crown, however, stephanos, means the winner of an athletic contest – the victors crown. Even the false priests in Smyrna celebrated in such a way. In Smyrna, the priests of the various deities in Smyrna were termed stephanophori, in reference to the laurel or golden crowns which they used to wear in public processions. They were awarded this honor at the end of their year of office.

As believers we have nothing to fear in this life. Even if we are one day martyred for the faith we will be ushered into glory – wearing the victors crown. We will never face the judgment of the second death (eternal separation from God in the lake of fire as described in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8).

### Believers Crowns Promised

“Crown”: Reward for works (not salvation) Jas 1:12. Their reward is with Him: “Bema” seat.

- Crown of Life (Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10) for those who have suffered for His sake.
- Crown of Righteousness (2 Tim 4:8) for those who loved His appearing.
- Crown of Glory (1 Pet 5:4) for those who fed the flock.
- Crown Incorruptible (1 Cor 9:25) for those who press on steadfastly.
- Crown of Rejoicing (1 Thess 2:19) for those who win souls.

### Promise to the Overcomer

Revelation 2:11 – The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’

“**Second death**”: Rev 20:6; cf. Jude 12, “twice dead.” He who is born one dies twice. He who is

born twice dies only once” You must be born again!

### Final Application

**Admonitory Level** (to all churches) • Don’t confuse persecution with the specific “Great Tribulation”... • Cf: Most of the Body, in most of the world, for most of the past 1900 years has suffered persecution.

- Underground church in America? Is the time approaching?
- “Non-Jews”? Replacement theology? Each of the letters = for all churches...More Christians have been killed in the 20th Century than all the other centuries added together!

**Personal Level** (Homiletics) 2 Timothy 3:12 “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution ( Paul is in Mammertime Prison, knowing his execution is near, and yet is encouraging Timothy... We are promised persecution.)

### Why Do Christians Have Trials?

1. To glorify God (Dan 3:16-18, 24-25)
2. To Discipline for known sin (Heb 12:5-11; James 4:17 Rom 14:23; 1 John 1:9)
3. To prevent us from falling into sin (1 Pet 4:1-2)
4. To keep us from Pride (2 Cor 12:7-10) Paul's “thorn in the flesh.
5. To build faith (1 Pet 1:6-7 6).
6. To cause growth (Rom 5:3-5 7).
7. To teach obedience and discipline (Acts 9:15-16; Phil 4:11-13)
8. To equip us to comfort others (2 Cor 1:3-4 9).
9. To prove the reality of Christ in us (2 Cor 4:7-11)
10. For testimony to the angels (Job 1:8; Eph 3:8-11; 1 Pet 1:12)

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. James 1:2-4

### Prophetic Profile

Smyrna represents the Persecuted Church. (100 A.D – 313 A.D.)

It should embolden us to seek His help.

It should inspire us with invincible courage.

It should clothe us with humility.

**2 Corinthians 4:7-17** – “But we have this treasure in earthen containers, so that the extraordinary greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

2 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who live are constantly being handed over to death because of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our mortal flesh.

12 So death works in us, but life in you.

13 But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written: “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we also believe, therefore we also speak,

14 knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus, and will present us with you.

15 For all things are for your sakes, so that grace, having spread to more and more people, will cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer person is decaying, yet our inner person is being renewed day by day.

17 For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,