



# Faithful in Smyrna

*Revelation 2:8-11*

## BIBLE PASSAGE

**[Rev 2:8-11 NKJV] 8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '**

## INTRO

Last week we looked at the first of even letters that Jesus wrote to His church. The Church of Ephesus was active but had drifted from the love that initially motivated them to action. Jesus calls them to repentance and the restoration of the first works. What good is a church that appears as a beautiful structure but has a faulty foundation?

One of the reasons these letters are so important for the church today is that many churches go through identity crises. They forget who they are, what they were called to do, and why they do what they do, and they even become blind to areas of weakness or failure.

- If we want to know who we are, what we should be doing, and whether or not we are on the correct tack, what better place to turn than to the head of the church, Jesus?

- These letters give us unfiltered access to the heart of Christ for His church.

Remember, the number 7 is the number of completion in the Bible. These letters, though addressed to the seven churches of the time, are also relevant to the entire church including us today.

In addition, many believe that the seven letters also represent seven epochs or periods of church history. The Church in Ephesus would have represented the first church during the apostolic age. The second church, Smyrna, would then represent what we would call the persecuted church from 100 – 313 AD.

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## ILLUSTRATION

In **313 AD, Emperor Constantine issued an edict of toleration** that forbade the persecution of Christians, which ended 200 years of persecution, during which countless Christians were martyred for their faith. Before that point, Emperor worship was mandated by the state. To convert to any other religion or God that was not approved by the state was illegal. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Christians were crucified, beheaded, thrown to wild beasts, placed in chains, burned, and tortured.

When you read the letter to the church of Smyrna, it certainly seems to line up with this reality.

NOTE: I mentioned last week the general outline for each letter. It's important to note that the church in Smyrna is one of only two churches (the other being Philadelphia) that does not receive a rebuke or correction from the Lord. This should cause us to pay that much more attention to what they are praised for.

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## BACKGROUND

**(PICTURE) The city of Smyrna was a coastal trading hub located in the Roman province of Asia. It is known today as the city of Izmir located about 35 miles north of Ephesus.**

It was the home to the great temple of the Emperor Tiberius. It was an area that was heavily populated by Jews (who hated Christians) and Romans (who also hated Christians and blamed them for everything), which made Smyrna a very difficult place to be a Christian.

## INTRODUCTION

Last week we saw the first two attributes of Christ as the one who holds the leadership of the church (7 stars) and walks among the church (7 lampstands) as our high priest.

In other words:

- He **HOLDS** the church
- He **walks with** with the church

And in this letter, He introduces himself as the **ETERNAL GOD** and the one who holds **POWER OVER DEATH**.

**And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:**

## HIS NATURE - THE FIRST AND THE LAST

We see this title used by God in Isaiah 44:6.

**“Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.”**

You and I might not catch it at first, but I can guarantee you that the Jewish mind would understand Christ's claim immediately. This is one of many places that we Jesus establishing Himself as the eternal God. What comes before the first, and what comes after the last? The terms within themselves teach us what Jesus is implying.

- **EXAMPLE:** If I run a race and come in first place, what does that imply? That there was no one in front of me. If I finish in last place, it implies that no one came in after me.
- Notice Jesus doesn't say, "I was the first one created." He simply states, "I am the first." In other words, there was no one and nothing before Jesus Christ.

We don't have time this evening to get into the whole doctrine of the trinity, but the Bible teaches very clearly that Jesus Christ is the creator, Eternal God.

- The book of Colossians teaches us that all things were “Created by Him.”
- John tells us in John chapter 1 that the “Word (Jesus) was God.” We could go down the list, but you get the picture.
- Paul tells Timothy, "Great is the mystery of godliness, that God was manifested in the flesh."

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## THE ONE WHO WAS DEAD, AND CAME TO LIFE

He refers to himself as the “One who was dead, and came to life.”

- When I think of the church in Smyrna (the persecuted church), and as we continue in the letter to see their sufferings, I can see why Jesus used this title.
- When you are told that you might end up losing your life, it is comforting to know that the one you follow died once as well. But He returned to life and promised His followers that same resurrection, that though we die in Christ, we will live forever with God.

**EXAMPLE:** In today’s Christian ease culture, the message seems to be, “In Christ, you can have an easy life here and now...” Hey, the guy we are following suffered and died innocently on a rugged cross! What do you expect? But the good news... He rose from the dead to give us hope beyond the current pain.

G. Campbell Morgan once said, “*The supreme need in every hour of difficulty and depression is a vision of Jesus.*”

- It is also comforting to know that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is alive and working in and through us today. The power of the Holy Spirit gives us life and victory over this world. We, too, can live the “resurrection life,” dead to sin and alive to Christ.

In other words, we have a Savior who can identify with us in our suffering and give us hope for future glory.

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## BIBLE PASSAGE

**[Heb 2:14-15 NKJV] 14** Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, **15** and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

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## BIBLE PASSAGE

**Verse 2 - I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

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## THOUGHTS

Notice the letter with the most continuous tone of praise from the Lord is addressed to those who suffered the most and possessed the least. Notice that the poor, suffering church gets the most praise and recognition from Jesus. This is in contrast to the last church, the church of Laodicea, which had the most physical wealth but were spiritual poppers, blind, naked, and destitute of any true substance. This should speak volumes to us today regarding what the true value of the church is. It's not in our buildings or bank accounts. It's not in our comfort and prosperity. It's not in our ability to wow a worldly crowd or impress the movers and shakers of society.

**TODAY: Church has become about being the biggest and the greatest. It's become about possessing material affluence rather than spiritual influence, worldly riches rather than heavenly resources, and leading people to be impressed with our churches rather than leaving them with a lasting impression of Christ.**

**Jesus said:**

**[Luk 6:20 NKJV] 20** Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

There is nothing inherently more spiritual about being poor or persecuted. Still, when you are, you become more aware of your desperate need for Jesus to be your everything and sustain you.

**[Jas 2:5 NKJV] 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?**

# 1 The Recognition

## 1 - WORKS

**Ergon:** the same word that was used for the church in Ephesus. To work with your hands... in other words, it represents practical things done in the name of Jesus.

- This is an interesting thought. This is a constant statement in every letter.
- **Verse 2 - I KNOW** – many times, we might think that what we do goes unnoticed by God. This is not true. Jesus takes a personal interest in everything his church does, from the smallest to the greatest.
- He knows our works. He knows if they are alive or dead, sincere or contrived, purely motivated or selfishly derived... He knows the quality, quantity, and value of our works

**[1Co 3:11-15 NKJV] 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation [with] gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on [it] endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.**

## 2 - TRIBULATION

**2 Timothy 3:12 – All who desire to live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.**

**GK Chesterton once said, “Jesus promised His disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, and absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.”**

## Are you willing to suffer for Christ? Don't look for trouble, don't try to make it... simply live ut your allegiance to Christ and His kingdom, come what may.

The word tribulation means “Pressing together or pressure.”

- You could say that choosing Jesus added pressure. Following Christ will naturally cause tension because now Christ is leading you contrary to a world constantly trying to press you into its mold.

When you make a decision to live for Jesus, there will always be pressure coming from somewhere for you to compromise your beliefs. You will find pressure and trouble when you stand up for truth, light, and righteousness in an environment that hates all of the above!

- For this church, it came most likely from the Jews and the Roman government. For us, it might come in different forms.
  - Our culture (entertainment, peer pressure, politics, the “American dream.”)
  - Our workplaces (pressure from bosses, company policies, etc.)

But here was the characteristic of the church in Smyrna; they stood underneath the pressure by the strength of Christ.

### ILLUSTRATION

One thing is certain about ancient Smyrna - the city gave off a pleasant aroma. The word “Smyrna” is an old Greek word for “myrrh” - which is an aromatic resin. Myrrh gum comes from trees that are slit open, then twisted. The harvesters wrench the limb over and over to bleed out the gum. This is what becomes the spice. How ironic; this is also how the believers in Smyrna became so pleasing to God. They were wounded and wrenched by the hands of persecution, until they bled sweetness. Rather than grow resentful or bitter toward God, the twisting of opposition caused a tighter and purer allegiance. It yielded a more pungent testimony. This church was a sweet fragrance to God.

- One of the most famous martyrs from Smyrna was one of the early church fathers and Bishop **Polycarp**, who was the 12<sup>th</sup> martyr from Smyrna. **He denied Caesar as Lord and was burned alive at the stake.**
- **According to historians the Apostle John had a disciple who pastored in Smyrna. Polycarp lived from 69 to 155 AD - and he left his church quite a legacy. When the Roman proconsul threatened to burn him at the stake, Polycarp replied, “Eighty**

and six years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me, how shall I blaspheme my King Who has saved me?" 7 Rather than nail him to the wood, his executioner tied him with ropes... Polycarp promised not to flinch. From the stake he shouted, "You threaten fire which burns for an hour and is soon quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment..."

## APPLICATION

Could our convictions of righteousness get us in trouble in courts?

- our stand on the right to live for the unborn?
- our unwillingness to acknowledge the secular culture's definition of gender, sexuality, and marriage?

## 3. POVERTY

*Poverty – the condition of one destitute of riches and abundance*

Jesus tells the church that He knows they are poor but in parentheses, he states, ***"But you are rich!"***

- It's interesting how God's economy works. You can be the poorest people on the block, but if you know Jesus, your riches are beyond compare. In fact, the Bible often praises and lifts up those who are poor in the wealth of this world.
- This ideology goes against everything our culture tells us. It breaks my heart to see so many churches and ministries that have taken the lead from the culture and are completely centered on physical wealth, health and prosperity.

**There is a website where you can calculate your wealth compared to the median income of the world. It tells you how rich you are physically compared to the rest of the world. You would be surprised at how much you have compared to the rest of the world. I did a little example.**

- **While I don't fully agree with the premise of this site, and there are many factors, such as cost of living, that play a part, the results are shocking and eye-opening.**



I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but the church in Smyrna is the opposite of the church in Laodicea. The Laodiceans thought they were rich with all of their material wealth, but in reality, they were wretched and poor before the Lord. God warned them if they didn't repent that, he would spew them out of his mouth... it makes him sick!

Again, Christ is not condemning riches, nor is he exalting poverty, but simply to say that with more money comes the tendency to trust in it and to worship it.

## QUOTE

“*If you're not rich in Christ, you'll never be rich with anything else, regardless of what you physically possess.*”

## APPLICATION

The faith and commitment of the church in Smyrna were not dependent on their wealth or the ease of their life. In fact, because they were poor and persecuted, their faith increased all the more!

When God see churches that should be focused on loving, serving, ministry, worship, discipleship and evangelism, making wealth their top priority, it must break His heart. To watch Christians who should be concerned with His kingdom prioritizing building and storing up for themselves treasures on earth.

**EXAMPLE:** Years ago I was able to talk with someone who did some work for the son of a famous televangelist. The son was in charge of running the family “business,” also called the ministry. In the one distribution center alone, he said that they moved \$10,000 a day just on selling water that was “anointed” by this self-proclaimed prophet!

## MOVEMENT:

Imagine if we created a movement called “*The Poverty movement.*” How many people do you think it would draw?

- Listen to what God tells His people in Isaiah:

### BIBLE PASSAGE

**“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good. And let your soul delight itself in abundance.” – Isaiah 55:1-2**

### APPLICATION

Again, God is not rebuking the riches, but rather the attitude that places wealth above God. The attitude that says, ***“I don’t need what Jesus has to offer because I can just buy it.”***

- Nowhere in the Bible does it even imply that it is God’s will for all his children to be materially rich. It never implies that it’s God’s will for us to have financial security...
- I’m not condemning these things; I’m simply teaching you what the Bible says about them. If your life is primarily consumed with these things, you are missing the point of life.
- Those who are consumed by material wealth are those who are bogged down with the most worries and are usually never satisfied.

### BIBLE PASSAGE

**[1Ti 6:9 NKJV] 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.**

## QUOTE

“Once Rockefeller was asked, “What does it take to completely satisfy a man?” His response was, “Just a little more than he has.”

What if God has blessed you financially and materially? Paul tells you how you should use it.

## BIBLE PASSAGE

**1 Timothy 6:17** - Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. **18** Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, **19** storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

## BIBLE PASSAGE

**Verse 2** - ...and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

## CONTEXT

The persecution mainly comes from *“those who say they are Jews but are not... those who are of the synagogue of Satan.”* The Religious Jews considered themselves to be the synagogue of God, but they were the synagogue of Satan.

Jesus had nice titles for the religious rulers of the day. Here are just a few of the kind things he called the Pharisees:

- **Sons of the devil**
- **Brood of Vipers**
- **Whitewashed Tombs**
- **Blind guides**
- **Hypocrites**

And I believe that Satan is still at the root of any "organized religion" that diminishes Christ's work on the cross and His divine nature, emphasizing man's good works and self-righteous attempts to earn God's favor.

Paul teaches us that a true spiritual Jew is not one who is circumcised outwardly but inwardly, one whose heart has been circumcised by God's grace (**Romans 2:28-29**). Paul says of the church in Philippians 3,

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#### **BIBLE PASSAGE**

Phillippians 3:3 - **"We are the true circumcision who worship God in spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh."**

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#### **ISRAEL**

This is a sensitive issue because some believe that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God. The problem is that they mix up the **spiritual** and **physical** people of God.

- Spiritually, the people of God are those who believe upon Christ and who are heirs of eternal life. But physically, God has made covenants with the nation of Israel that he promised He would never break physically.

That will finally culminate in Israel's eyes being opened and salvation coming to them at the end of the age:

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#### **BIBLE PASSAGE**

**Rom 11:25-29 NKJV - For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.**

### **BIBLE PASSAGE**

**10-11 - Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."**

### **DO NOT FEAR**

129 times in the Bible we have the command to **"Fear not"**. The natural human reaction to suffering is, of course, fear! I mean, who wants to suffer?

- To know suffering is coming and imminent would bring forth fear in any human being.
- Fear wants to make us think that it must call the shots; that our ultimate goal must be the avoidance of suffering.
- But Jesus says, "You can tell your fear to get in its rightful place because the subject of your fear is a reality, but the Savior is the greater reality.

Jesus flat-out tells them, ***"The devil is going to throw some of them into prison, and many of you will die."***

- Just the thought of this causes a sense of fear to well up within us, but here's the thing about following Christ. He will never allow something to happen to you through which He will not give you the strength and grace to endure.

## APPLICATION

**THE SOURCE:** Notice the source of the tribulation is the enemy, **SATAN**. Now I don't necessarily think that we can give credit to Satan for everything that goes wrong in our lives. The phrase, "The devil made me do it" won't get you very far. But he certainly does not have any sympathy for the suffering Christian.

- Some of you probably feel like Satan has thrown you into a prison and you're being tested. I can't tell you that it will get easier, or trials won't come, but I can encourage you in Christ to be faithful.

### ...and you will have tribulation ten days

- **10 days** – Whether this is a literal ten days or not is unsure. Some believe it refers to a limited predetermined time only known by the Lord.
- It's interesting that the Christians suffered major persecution for about 200 years under the reign of 10 separate Roman Emperors. It's possible that the 10 days refers to these 10 emperors who would persecute the church.

## BIBLE PASSAGE

**11 - Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.**

## APPLICATION

If Smyrna had a church website, its slogan under their name would be this line, "*Faithful until death.*"

- I wonder how many new members they would get? I wonder if that was an effective evangelism strategy.

- Oh, how we love our lives! Oh, how we've come to worship our lives in our culture!

Death comes to everyone. These Christians knew that they would have to die for Christ. It has been said that,

**“The first generation of Christians was born for evangelism and the second for martyrdom.”**

But I love the apostle Paul's attitude:

## BIBLE PASSAGE

**[Phi 1:20-21 NKJV] 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**

It's not my earnest hope that any of us will have to die for our faith, but there is no promise that the day will not come when we might have to. And there's nothing that says that it might not be Christ's will for us to do that very thing.

The two promises to those who overcome even unto death:

## A. CROWN OF LIFE

**Stephanos – [image] victors crown.**

This is not the diadem or the crown of royalty, but a victory crown that would have been awarded to athletes upon victorious competing. It says, “You endured and have overcome. Or as Paul put it...

**[2Ti 4:6-8 NKJV] 6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.**

**B. NOT BE HURT BY THE SECOND DEATH (ETERNAL HELL APART FROM GOD)**

Revelation 20 records the event that is called the second death. This results from the great White Throne judgment at the end of all time.

**[Rev 20:15 NKJV] 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.**

The only way to escape this judgment is to come to Jesus Christ. He took God's judgment upon himself for us so that we might be saved from God's wrath and given the gift of eternal life in heaven with Him.

- *If you don't want hell to grasp you for eternity, then you must place yourself within Christ's grasp now.*