

## Smyrna: Riches within Poverty

Revelation 2: 8-11

Today we come to Smyrna, the second church within the series of letters John was instructed to write in the Revelation. It is interesting to note, that of the seven churches, only two received all praise and encouragement from the Lord, with no rebuke for willful sin. Smyrna is one, and Philadelphia is the other.

Smyrna (modern Izmir) was a harbor city located about forty miles northwest of Ephesus and the second stop for a messenger traveling the counterclockwise loop to visit the seven churches. Smyrna maintained strong ties to Rome as the first city to build a temple to the goddess Roma (195 BC) and the guardian of the second imperial cult temple in Asia (AD 26). While Smyrna was well known in the ancient world as a city of beauty, especially regarding its architecture, some portray it as a city of suffering by connecting its name with the Greek word for “myrrh,” a costly spice used in burial rituals. For Christians, the reality of suffering was strongly tied to the local unbelieving Jewish community that instigated persecution against Christians, perhaps by accusing them before the Roman authorities. Witherington notes that according to one estimation the total population of the Roman Empire in the late first century was sixty million, of which five million were Jews and fifty thousand were Christians. The Jewish condemnation of Christians in Smyrna continued into the second century, when the Jews betrayed Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John and bishop of Smyrna, resulting in his martyrdom.<sup>i</sup>

As we consider the letter to Smyrna, we find that Jesus encouraged the church to faithfully endure suffering, being confident that He was able to bring life out of death and blessing out of adversity. While we examine the [details](#) of this letter, I want to consider: [Smyrna – Riches within Poverty](#).

**I. The Authority of the Church (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.** The word **church** means a “*called out assembly*”. This was no ordinary group; they had been called out, separated unto the Lord to serve and follow Him. Unlike most of that day, they weren’t serving idols, but a risen Savior.

- The message was given by Christ himself. Notice His authority – He is the **First and the Last**. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. He is the one **which was dead, and is alive**. Jesus also suffered, was rejected and crucified at the hands of sinful men, but He overcame death and rose again victorious. This wasn’t a group with no purpose, with no hope for the future; they were the church of the living God. He was their authority for existence and their provision to endure faithful.

- We have the same authority today. We aren't serving a dead idol, but a risen Savior. We can declare like Job, "I know that my Redeemer lives!" We don't have to look to others for our authority. We are not depending on society, the culture around us, or even denominational leaders to guide our service and worship. Christ is our example, our authority, and we must be determined to follow Him.

**II. The Acknowledgment of the Church (9a) – I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).** Christ was well aware of their position. He knew where they were and the problems they faced. **Nah.1:7 – The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust him.** We may feel at times that we are alone, but Christ knows those who are His. Notice:

**A. Jesus knew their Works – I know thy works.** Christ was aware of the work they were doing through the faith. He realized they were laboring in the harvest, even in the face of death.

- He is aware of our works as well. We all endure difficulties as we strive to serve, but we must abide faithful, even in the face of adversity. You may feel that your work is in vain and unnoticed, but we are assured that our Lord is aware and He is able to provide.

**B. Jesus knew their Worry – I know thy works, and tribulation.** He was aware of their tribulation. Tribulation has a meaning of "pressure; or pressing together." It carries the idea of a great millstone, crushing and grinding the chaff from the wheat. He was aware of the great pressure they were under, and the afflictions they endured. The believers in Smyrna suffered greatly for their faith and commitment to Christ.

- We aren't dealing with such affliction today, but we too must deal with the pressure brought about by those who deny the faith and would rather the church be silenced. We can be strong when pressures come, confident Christ is aware of the afflictions we face. We don't have to bear it alone.

**C. Jesus knew their Wealth – I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich.)** Poverty has the idea of "being absolutely destitute." They lived in a wealthy city, but didn't share in the wealth of this world. Likely they faced economic persecution, being overlooked or shunned in employment or business due to their faith in Christ. The church was in poverty by the world's standard, but they were rich in Christ.

- One can lack material wealth and still be rich in Christ. [Prov.13:7 – There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.](#) One life will soon be past; only what is done for Christ will last. Our wealth isn't measured by this world's standard. We have a Father in heaven who owns it all. The church is wealthy in Christ Jesus!

**III. The Adversity of the Church (9b)** – [I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.](#) The church dealt with much opposition. Many of the Jews persecuted them because of Christ. These were of the synagogue of Satan. Within the Roman Empire, Jews were exempt from emperor worship because Judaism was viewed as an ancient form of worship that held to one God. These appeared outwardly religious, but they were not committed to Christ or sympathetic to the church.

- Satan likes to work among those who are religious, but lack a relationship. Many today are religious, but do not know the Lord or serve Him. The Bible warns of [those having a form of religion, but denying the power thereof; from such turn away.](#)
- We have an adversary who seeks to destroy, but we must remain faithful. [2 Tim.3:12, 14 – Yea, and all that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.](#) <sup>[14]</sup> [But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them.](#) We are living in a dark day, but we must press on for the glory of God. Smyrna dealt with Satan and so shall we. We must be on guard against his attack. In Christ, we can overcome and be victorious.

**IV. The Assurance of the Church (10-11)** – [Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.](#) <sup>[11]</sup> [He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.](#) They seemingly had nothing to rejoice about. There was suffering and persecution on every hand. It would have been easy to want to give up and quit. Some would be cast in prison; some would even die for their faith.

- Some believe the “ten days of tribulation” refer to the persecution of the church under the ten Roman emperors from AD 64 - 312. It's also possible that Jesus meant more suffering would come; it would be severe, but it would not last forever.
- It was here that the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, a disciple of John was brought to be burned at the stake. He was called upon to deny Christ and proclaim Caesar as Lord. To which he

replied, “*Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?*”

- The letter to Smyrna wasn't a message most would like to receive. They probably had hoped for a message of deliverance, but theirs was a message of endurance. Christ did deliver a message of hope. **Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.** He promised a crown of life to the faithful. A crown, (*wreath or garland*), was given to those who were victorious. What a picture to those who overcome. These would receive the crown of resurrection life!
- Jesus also promised life beyond the grave. **Verse 11 – He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.** We know the second death refers to the judgment of God reserved for those who deny Christ. Those in Smyrna may have been called upon to give their very lives for their faith; but death would not be the end – only the beginning. The great evangelist D.L. Moody said this, "*He who is born once will die twice; he who is born twice will die once.*"
- I can't say what lies ahead for us; there will likely be some dark days to come. For the saved, there is a brighter day ahead. **Jam.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.** What a day, glorious day that will be!

**Conclusion:** On the surface it would appear that Smyrna had little to be desired, but the Lord was aware of their faithful commitment to Him. They may have been poor by this world's standard, but they were rich in grace. The Lord would abide faithful to them, even in death. He promised the crown of life for those who overcome.

The western church has little in common with Smyrna at this point. By the grace of God, we have faced little serious persecution. Unfortunately, however, we lack the commitment of Smyrna. If the Lord has spoken to you today, I urge you to respond to the Spirit's leading. If you are yet unsaved, apart from Christ eternal death will be your reality. Why not come in repentance and faith, and be saved today?

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<sup>i</sup> Duvall, J. S. (2014). [\*Revelation\*](#). (M. L. Strauss & J. H. Walton, Eds.) (pp. 46–47). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.