

Smyrna: The Church Told not to Dismay

Revelation 2:8-11

Today we want to turn our attention to the church that was in Smyrna. This is the church that was told not to dismay. Take your Bible and turn with me to **Revelation 2:8-11**.

Please stand to honor the reading of God's Word.

An affluent city
An awesome Christ
An afflicted church
An affirming counsel
An abiding church

I. AN AFFLUENT CITY – v. 8a

What we can learn about the city of Smyrna itself gives us a clue as to why Christ wrote the things He did to this local assembly.

Smyrna was a coastal town about 35 miles to the north of Ephesus. It boasted a beautiful harbor with a major sea port that had a direct route across to Athens. There was also a major interior trade route that came from the north and east to this city. The town itself is still in existence today in Turkey and is known as Izmir with a present population of about 200,000.

History records that a city was located here dating back to about 3,000B.C. It was then a Hittite city. About 600B.C. the city was destroyed and a small remnant of people continued to live there until the time of Alexander the Great who had the city rebuilt into a beautiful city in 290B.C.

With its trade routes, Smyrna was a very wealthy city. Like Ephesus, it had earned the right from Rome to be self-governing. The city was so infatuated with Rome that when it heard that Roman soldiers were facing a bitter winter, the people of Smyrna took off their clothes to send them to the

troops. This act of support earned them with the reward of becoming the seat of Emperor worship. A temple to the Roman Emperor Tiberius was erected in 26B.C. Toward the end of the second century when the city was destroyed by an earthquake, Emperor Marcus Aurelius rebuilt it.

The city boasted noble buildings and temples to their gods. Smyrna was known for a most famous road called the "Street of Gold" that curved around the slopes of the Pagos, known today as the velvet castle. At one end of the street was the temple Cybele and at the other end was the temple to Zeus. Along the road were temples to Apollo, Asclepius and Aphrodite.

Although other cities boasted greater political or economic status Smyrna was considered the most beautiful city of Asia Minor. The acropolis was well landscaped encircled by flowers, hedges, and myrtle trees. It had a theater, a musical center and a stadium where the games were held. It was in this stadium that Polycarp, the student of the Apostle John and bishop of the church was martyred in A.D. 155. Because of its natural and architectural beauty, the city of Smyrna was considered the most beautiful city in all of Asia Minor and was known as the crown of Asia Minor.

The name Smyrna means myrrh which was an important resin used as a perfume for the living and a fragrance in the embalming practice for the dead. Smyrna shipped this resin to all parts of the world.

We see in both the Old and New Testaments the use of myrrh. In **Exodus 30:23** we see that myrrh was used in the Tabernacle.

In **Song of Solomon 3:6** it was used as a fragrant perfume.

In **Matthew 2:11** it was a gift by the magi who came to worship the Christ child.

In **Mark 15:23** mixed with wine it was offered to Jesus during the crucifixion as a potion to dull the pain of His suffering.

In **John 19:39** it was used in the burial process of Christ after His death.

That is the city of Smyrna, the crown of Asia Minor, with a name coming from the spice it produced. It was an affluent city.

II. AN AWESOME CHRIST – v. 8b

Again, as we said last week, Jesus is in some way revealed. The reference here is to the One **“who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”**

This of course speaks to His eternal existence, that He always has been and always will be. He is the One who has sovereign control over all things. Nothing that happens escapes His watchful eye. Nothing that happens is outside of His control. Some things He allows to happen. Some things He allows not to happen. If something happened that was outside His control He would not be all powerful and therefore would not be God.

That Christ is eternal is seen in **Isaiah 9:6** where in this prophecy He is declared **“the Everlasting Father.”**

Micah 5:2 prophesying about Christ said He would be born in Bethlehem and that His **“goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”**

John 1:1 declares that **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

Jesus said of Himself in **John 8:58** **“Before Abraham was, I am.”**

Paul states about Christ in **Colossians 1:17** that **“He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.”**

Not only is Christ eternal, He also emphatically claimed to be the resurrection and the life. He has power over death. He who had died had come back to life again of His own accord. Because He has

power over death to give life again, He has the power over our death to raise us to life again.

I Corinthians 15:51-58

I Thessalonians 4:16-18

Not only is Christ all-knowing, He is also all-powerful. This description of Himself was meant to be an encouragement to a church that was suffering persecution. They needed to know that Christ was still in control of all things and He reminds them that not only is He in control but He know all about them and can identify with them. These words are meant to encourage us as well. Maybe you're going through something right now that this description of Christ will serve to encourage you. He is **“the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”** Because He lives, we too shall live.

It was an affluent city.

We see an awesome Christ.

There was an afflicted church.

III. AN AFFLICTED CHURCH – v. 9

“I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

He first of all tells them He understands their plight. He says here **“I know.”** We saw last week that the word know does not mean a progressive understanding of facts where over time we gain a better knowledge of something, but rather that it means a full or complete knowledge. He knows everything about them right now and He fully understands what they are going through. **How does He have such a complete knowledge?**

First, Christ has complete knowledge about the church of Smyrna because He is omniscient. He knows everything.

Writing about omniscience Lewis Sperry Chafer defines it “that God knows to an infinite degree and

eternally all that is knowable whether actual or possible.” His knowledge will never increase or decrease. It is beyond the ability to reason. His knowledge is eternal, incomprehensible, and all wise. The omniscience of Christ makes Him capable of knowing everything about the church of Smyrna that was happening to them. It goes without saying then that He knows the same about us, too. Nothing escapes His all-knowing eye.

Second, Christ has complete knowledge about the church of Smyrna because He Himself knows exactly what they are going through. He too was scorned and rejected by men. He was ridiculed and despised. He was mocked and beaten and He suffered the greatest humiliation by being crucified. He was persecuted just like them.

NLT Hebrews 4:15 “This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same temptations we do, yet He did not sin.”

If you are prone to despair in times of trial and persecution, let the words of the writer of Hebrews encourage you. We have an awesome Christ who knows exactly what we are going through when we are afflicted. He knows and endured the same experiences and they serve as a testimony to us. That others have gone through similar experiences should also encourage us, but most of all consider Christ and keep going.

Hebrews 12:1-3

Our text tells us that Christ knows about those who are being afflicted for their faith.

Hebrews 11:37-38 “They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.”

I want to read an article in the most recent edition of the Voice of Martyr’s newsletter.

We in Western culture should not think of ourselves as somehow being immune from persecution for our faith. I think we have begun to see ripples of persecution already. When students can’t name Jesus in a speech or draw pictures of the cross in art class - that is a form of persecution.

When students are told they cannot pray or bring a Bible to class or write a report on Jesus - that is a form of persecution.

When companies are told they must deny their convictions and provide employees with insurance that covers abortions, that is a form of persecution.

This past week on Fox News there was a story about a college freshman at orientation who was told to take off the cross necklace she was wearing because it might be offensive to non-Christians, that is a form of persecution.

There will be more to follow I am sure. A nation who espouses tolerance is being less and less tolerant of those who want to express their Christian faith in some visible or audible way. They tell us we can express our faith but it has to be within certain parameters. The noose of our religious freedom is growing tighter and tighter.

The church at Smyrna knew full well and all too keenly the persecution of the Emperor. Perhaps the best known martyr in Smyrna was Polycarp. He had been the Bishop of the church there for a number of years. As I said earlier, Polycarp was a student of the Apostle John. He was put to death in the stadium that hosted athletic games. Here is the excerpt from the *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*.

Polycarp “heard that soldiers were looking for him and tried to escape but was discovered by a child. After feeding the guards who captured him, he asked for an hour in prayer, which they gave him. He prayed with such fervency, that his guards said they were sorry that they were the ones who captured him. Nevertheless, he was taken before

the governor and condemned to be burned in the market place.

After his sentence was given, the governor said to him, 'Reproach Christ and I will release you.' Polycarp answered, 'Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How then shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me?'

In the market place, he was tied to the stake rather than nailed, as was the usual custom, because he assured them he would stand immovable in the flames and not fight them. As the dry sticks placed around him were lit, the flames rose up and circled his body without touching him. The executioner was then ordered to pierce him with a sword. Witnesses would later testify that when he did, a great quantity of blood gushed out and put out the fire. Although his Christian friends asked to be given his body as it was so they could bury him, the enemies of the Gospel insisted that it be burned in the fire, which was done."

Foxe's Book of Martyrs estimates that from A.D. 100 to A.D. 314 at the rise of Constantine an estimated 5 million people died for their faith in Christ. Persecution continues around the world today where people stand for their faith.

In Christian literature, the name Smyrna became associated with suffering. They had to learn to navigate in a society that would not allow them to socialize or buy merchandise unless they had given allegiance to the Emperor by worshipping him as lord and savior. The church of Smyrna would not. Keep in mind the opening remarks about the wealth of Smyrna and its very religious culture. Christ is saying that He knows all about their affliction and their poverty.

The word tribulation literally means to press. The dictionary defines it as a great misery or distress, as from oppression. This is not speaking about the great tribulation yet to come and will last for only a

short duration that Daniel speaks about but about general persecution that can come at any time.

Poverty here means abject poverty, deficient of the basic necessities of life. Because of their faith those who one time had been wealthy had their property and possessions confiscated. Christ says He knows their affliction and their poverty.

Let Isaiah's words comfort and encourage you today.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak."
(Isaiah 40:28-29)

Notice though that Christ says even though they were poor yet they are rich. They may not have had two nickels to rub together, but they were rich in the promises of God. Their reward was yet to come.

James 2:5 "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?"

II Corinthians 6:4-5, 10b "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger...poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

In Christ, you are rich, riches that await you in heaven.

Our faith may one day result in our becoming poor, but Christ is telling us to take heart, because all the wealth of heaven is ours.

Christ not only knew about their tribulation and poverty, He also knew they were being slandered. Christians in Smyrna were not only experiencing hardship at the hands of pagans but also the Jews. That is not surprising. From the very birth of Christianity on the day of Pentecost, Christians have been harassed by Jews. Wherever the gospel was preached, the Jews were close behind bringing scathing accusations against them. They were accused of cannibalism because at communion they ate the body and drank the blood of Christ.

They were accused of atheism because they believed in a God you cannot see as opposed to believing in all the other deities who had forms depicted in art.

Rome was big on family and they were accused of breaking up the family through tensions that often arouse when one spouse became a Christian and the other was not.

They were falsely accused of many things.

Jews were part of the slander, but from this verse we see that Christ does not consider Jews who reject Christ to be true Jews. **Romans 9:6 "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."** **Romans 2:28 "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly..."**

John Piper says "In other words the Jewish synagogue was speaking things about the Christians which the Christians regarded as slander." Their accusations against the Christians, just as their accusations against Christ, were false.

Piper goes on to say "This slander was probably in the form of official indictments to the Roman authorities that the Christians put another king above Caesar (which was true), and that they were rebellious and dangerous (which was false). The Jewish community did not have the right and power to punish the Christians, so they sought to get them in trouble with the Roman government. For example, when Paul planted the church in

Thessalonica the Jews stirred up a mob and said to the authorities, "These men have upset the world . . . and act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7)

Some of these Christians were thrown in jail, some were killed, many lost jobs and income. **Why are these Jews considered part of the synagogue of Satan?** It's because like Satan, they sought to lie and destroy Christians. Even though they don't know it and wouldn't admit it, they were under the influence of Satan. **Isn't that where Saul was before his conversion on the road going to Damascus?**

John Walvoord writes "False religion has been most zealous in opposing that which is true... They had few friends among the hostile world around them."

Jesus told us not to be surprised when we face persecution and hardship on account of His name. James (1:2) adds that when we face trials of many kinds we are to consider it pure joy. He adds that when our faith is tested it develops our perseverance and that when perseverance has done its work in us we will have developed maturity.

John MacArthur states "The purest Christian graces are forged in the furnace of adversity... Persecution had purified and purged it (Smyrna church) from sin and affirmed the reality of its members' faith. Hypocrites do not stay to face persecution, because false believers do not want to endure the pain."

The sweet aroma of myrrh is not released until the plant has been crushed and ground. So it is that the crushing nature of persecution brings out the sweet aroma of the Christian who endures. Because they loved God, they were hated. Because they were hated, they loved God all the more.

May that be true of us.

This was an afflicted church.
Notice in verse 10 an affirming counsel.

IV. AN AFFIRMING COUNSEL – v. 10

If things aren't already bad for the believers in Smyrna, they go from bad to worse. They have been persecuted and slandered at the hands of non-Christians and Jews alike. Now Jesus informs them that even Satan is part of the ongoing persecution. Some of them will be put in prison and some will experience even more intense tribulation. Evil will be emboldened to take more drastic measures to attempt to eradicate Christianity.

Remember that **“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”** (Ephesians 6:12)

Non-Christians aren't the only enemy and neither is victory wrought through human means. That this is a spiritual warfare means we must use spiritual weapons. Satan will do all he can to oppose us.

Some take this 10 day period to mean 10 periods in history where there was intense suffering and persecution under 10 different Roman Emperors beginning with Nero and ending just before Constantine.

But most Bible scholars believe this to mean that the persecution spoken of here will be just for a limited time.

What is the counsel of the One whose eyes see all?
“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life.”

He is literally telling them to stop being afraid.

You may have watched the recent crossing of the Grand Canyon by tight rope walker Nik Walenda, without the security of a safety net. In an interview he was asked if he was afraid. I think his best answer was in what he said while he was traversing the canyon. Repeatedly He gave praise to the Lord.

Christ was telling the church in Smyrna and all who go through persecution not to be afraid, that He is still in control and praise to Him is evidence of our trust when humanly speaking we'd rather be fearful.

Be faithful to Him. Don't give up. Don't give in. Paul told the Philippians not to be anxious or fearful about anything. **(Philippians 4:6)**

Repeatedly God told Joshua not to be fearful as they entered the Promised Land filled with Giants and well trained and equipped armies.

Solomon advises that we trust in the Lord with our whole heart. If we trust Him with all our heart there isn't any room left for fear or doubt or discouragement.

Nearing the end of his life knowing that he was about to become a martyr himself Paul wrote to Timothy **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.”**
(II Timothy 4:7)

Will we say that? Can we say that? To the church in Smyrna and to us **“Don't be afraid...be faithful.”**

Smyrna was considered the crown of Asia Minor. Jesus was not referring in His letter to a royal crown worn by kings and princes, but rather to a crown that was worn by those who were victorious in the games. It was symbolic. That there was a stadium where the games were held would remind His audience of faithful believers that just as the winners were given a crown for a victory, they would be given an eternal crown that would not fade. His counsel is to be faithful.

While things may look bad and things may get worse, be comforted, be encouraged, gain new strength in knowing that your reward is coming. This is not a perishable reward but one that will never perish. No one can take it away from you.

James 1:12 “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.”

This is a tremendous word of affirmation, especially if you are now experiencing some kind of tribulation for your faith. Keep it up. Stand strong

in the power of God's might, put on the full armor of God to help you stand against the devil's schemes. **(Ephesians 6:10-18)**

We are so soon given to despair when we should stand and take courage, when we should not be afraid, when we should be faithful.

Here's why we have nothing to fear.

1. The eternal Christ is with us and knows our plight. He is not some distant despot, but a present, all-knowing sovereign King. He may not remove the pain, but it serves to help us grow in our faith and trust Him more. He does care for us and will one day deliver us from it, if not in this life, surely in the life to come.
2. The eternal Christ who died rose again and is alive. We will also triumph over death.
3. We have riches beyond our comprehension. **"If you are children of God, then you are heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . . the sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that is about to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:15-18)**
4. In the end we will receive a reward that will be accompanied with things like no more death, no more persecution, no more slander, no more poverty, no more pain, no more imprisonment. Like Lazarus who experienced bad things in this life, we will receive good things in the life to come and enjoy Christ forever.
5. You will not be hurt by the second death.

That's my last point.

V. AN ABIDING CHURCH – v. 11

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

This is again an open invitation to individuals. Take heed, listen carefully and be obedient.

In a midnight meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus said that if he wanted to have eternal life, he needed to be born again, born again in a spiritual fashion. He

needed to know that God loved the world so much that He sent His son who would die for the sin of the world and that by believing on Him he (Nicodemus) would have eternal life. **(John 3:16)**

The writer of **Hebrews (9:27)** reminds us that it's appointed to man to die once and after that comes judgment. It is at the judgment where it will be determined if the person will be taken by the second death or not be subject to the second death. The first death concerns the body. The second death concerns the soul and spirit.

D.L. Moody writes **"He who is born once will die twice, but he who is born twice will die only once."**

No believer will experience the second death when those who have rejected Christ as Savior are thrown into the lake of fire where they are forever separated from God and the eternal life they could have had but refused. The second death is not annihilation, but separation.

Alexander MacLaren the great 19th century preacher said **"Death is separation from Him who is the fountain of life...Separation from God, that is death."**

Christ was telling the believers of Smyrna that they may experience physical death through persecution and martyrdom, but they will not experience the second death, spiritual death.

The all-seeing watchful eye of Christ looked at the church at Smyrna and concluded that there was nothing to condemn them about only to commend them for. He did see that they needed to be encouraged to remain strong and faithful.

The Lord is inviting us to stand strong in our faith even in the face of persecution and to be faithful in praying for the persecuted church around the world. In the end there is a crown, the reward of eternal life, but it is only available to those who by faith trust in Christ as Savior.

Like the church of Smyrna who was told not to dismay, what Christ has to say to them is for us as well. Don't be afraid. Be faithful even to the end. He who knows all is with us all the time.

Let Paul's aim to finish well with an eye on the prize be ours. Let's listen for Christ's **"well done good and faithful servant, come and share your Master's happiness."**