

Studying the book of Revelation (5)

@ Concord Community Church on 02/03/2025

Jesus's Message the Church of Smyrna: Revelation 2:8-11

The Rich Little Poor Church.

Introduction

The city of Smyrna was located some 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was a prosperous city with a population of over 100,000 in John's day. That location has been inhabited for over 3,000 years and no one knows for sure who founded Smyrna or when it was founded. The city was destroyed by a massive earthquake a few years before the birth of Jesus, but the city was rebuilt and thrived. It possessed a safe harbour, where ships from all over the world came to buy and sell goods. It was called "*The Crown City*" because it was surrounded by hills that resembled a crown. It was also called "*The Flower Of Asia*." When the city chose a motto to be imprinted on their coinage, they chose the phrase "*First in Asia in Size and Beauty*."

Several characteristics made the city of special in its day. First, it was famous for the production of myrrh. This substance came from a shrub-like tree that produced a bitter gum. When the leaves of this tree were crushed, they exuded a very fragrant odour. Myrrh was used as a fragrance by the living and an embalming agent for the dead. Myrrh was mentioned in association with the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, [Matt. 2:11](#); [Mark 15:23](#); [John 19:39](#). The word myrrh means "*bitter*" and it came to be associated with suffering and death.

Among the other factors that made the city of Smyrna special include the fact that it was a planned city. Most cities of that day just sprang up without design. Smyrna and its streets were planned down to the last detail. It was a very religious city with many temples dedicated to the pantheon of gods and goddesses they worshipped. There were temples dedicated to Zeus, Cybele, Asklepios, Apollo, and Aphrodite, among others. In fact, there was a street that was paved with gold that ran from the temple of Zeus to the temple of Cybele. While pagan religions dominated the life of Smyrna, there was also a thriving Jewish community there.

In this beautiful, wealthy pagan city, there existed a struggling Christian community. The church in Smyrna was undergoing intense and withering persecution. This terrible persecution inflicted upon the believers by Roman Emperors continued between the years 100AD and 312 AD.

I. Smyrna Was a Crushed Church ([v. 9b-10a](#))

A. They Faced Persecution

Notice that this persecution did not come from the pagans in Smyrna alone. [Verse 9](#) tells us that they were also suffering at the hands of the Jews. The Jews in Smyrna joined hands with the idolaters in that city to defeat and destroy the Christians by whatever means necessary. Jesus calls them “*the synagogue of Satan*” and accuses them of blaspheme (*slander*) against these believers. Why did the people of Smyrna hate the believers so? There are several reasons.

1. The Jews and the pagans accused the Christians of cannibalism. Christians kept communion and part of that observance was eating the bread and drinking from the cup. These represented the broken body and the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, [1 Cor. 11:24-26](#).
2. When the Christians gathered, they would often hold what they called “*Agape Feasts*”. These “*love feasts*” were nothing but times of fellowship, where believers enjoyed one another's company. The pagans, however, accused the Christians of engaging in orgies.
3. The Christians were hated because their beliefs and practices often split families. This was what Jesus said would happen, [Matt. 10:34-36](#). Thus, Christians were accused of being anti-family.
4. Christians were accused of being atheists because they did not worship the many gods of the pagans and because they used no statues and icons in their own worship. So, any natural disasters other calamities were blamed on the Christians for incurring the wrath of the gods.
5. Christians were accused of being political enemies of Rome because they refused to say, “*Caesar is Lord!*” Every Roman citizen was required to do this every year. To fail to do so brought severe punishment and even death.

B. They Faced Poverty

poverty — This word speaks of being “*absolutely destitute*”. These poor people had nothing of this world's goods because of their relationship with the Lord Jesus. They were denied jobs and promotions because of their testimony. These people had nothing in a city that possessed everything.

C. They Faced Prison

In [verse 10](#), Jesus tells them that there is more trouble ahead! They will face more persecution. The “*ten days*” mentioned here might refer to the ten persecutions the Christians suffered under the Romans. Or, it might simply mean that their persecution will be severe, but brief. Either way, they are informed that more pain and suffering is coming their way.

When a person went to prison in those days, it was to await execution. The only way you got out was to die. And, death was usually a horrible affair. You might be killed by a sword, burned alive, thrown to wild animals, or any of the dozens of other cruel methods of torture and torment they had devised. This was a suffering congregation!

(⇒ One example of their suffering comes to us from history, just a few years after they received this letter. In 155 AD, the Bishop of the church of Smyrna, a man named Polycarp, who was a disciple of John the Beloved, was martyred for Jesus. This man was arrested at the request of an angry mob that cried, “*Away with the Atheists; let Polycarp be sought out!*”

The old preacher, he was 86 at the time, was given the opportunity to renounce Jesus. The magistrate, who did not want to see the old man die, said, “*What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar?*” But, Polycarp refused! When they entered the stadium, where the executions took place, they tried again saying, “*Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists.*” Polycarp fixed his gaze on the crowd, waved his arms at them and said, “*Away with the atheists!*” The magistrate again attempted to get Polycarp to renounce his faith and said, “*Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ.*” To that, the old man cried, “*Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?*”

After a few more attempts to get the old preacher to renounce Jesus, they led him away to the stake to burn him alive. They were about to nail him to the post and Polycarp said, “*Leave me as I am; for He that giveth me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile.*” So, they left him loosely bound and they lit the fire. As the flames rose around him, he was heard to pray and rejoiced in Jesus. He died for his faith and in doing so he left an indelible imprint on the fabric of time.)

(Note: Let me just make a statement here. Everyone who will live a holy, separated, dedicated for Jesus Christ, in any generation, is going to face persecution, [2 Tim. 3:12](#). This should not shock us, nor should it surprise us. Jesus said that it would be this way, [John 15:18-25](#); [Mark 13:13](#); [John 16:33](#).

The reason the world hates the believer today is the same reason the world hated the believers then. The people of Smyrna hated the believers for just one reason: they loved Jesus! Folks that is why the world hates us tonight! That is why the liberals hate us. That is why the homosexuals, the lesbian, the abortion lobby and the rest of the perverts, infidels and in-for-hells hate us. That is why the

liquor and drug crowd hates us. That is why the Muslim, Hindus, Jew and the religionist hate old time fundamental believers.

II. Smyrna Was a Consistent Church ([v. 9a](#))

Even though they were paying a harsh price for their faithful love and service to the Lord Jesus, these people did not back up from their profession. They stayed the course and demonstrated a faithful testimony for the glory of God. Remember that Smyrna was famous for myrrh. It was only when the leaves of the tree were crushed that their fragrance was released. These people were being crushed under the terrible and terrifying pressure of persecution and they were releasing the fragrance of love and faithful to Jesus into the atmosphere of Smyrna. Let's examine their testimony for a few minutes.

A. They Had a Positive Testimony

Jesus sent seven letters to seven different churches. Five of the seven churches received words of rebuke and correction. Only this church and the church at Philadelphia received no corrective words. The Lord had been observing their walk and He was pleased. They were consistent!

B. They Had a Powerful Testimony

Jesus says to them *"I know thy works"* — The word *"works"* refers to that *"business which occupies a person's life."* In spite of all the darkness around them, these people continued to be a light for Jesus in the midst of an ever-darkening world. They were not intimidated by their enemies; they were not frightened by the hatred of their opponents. They proved they were genuine and that their faith was real by the way they carried themselves in that society. Their testimony was powerful because they stayed the course and stuck to the task for the glory of God! They were a consistent church!

(Note: What do our works say about us as a church? What do your works say about you as an individual? In a world like ours, where darkness, wickedness and opposition to our way of life abounds; there is a tendency to back of the message, to tone things down. The church has withdrawn from the public square, from the public schools and from the public arena. We have moved within the walls of our building where we are safe from the critics and the enemies of truth. What we fail to see is that we cannot impact the world if we never confront the world. If our message is maintained within the walls of our churches and never shared with a lost and dying world, we can never make a difference for the glory of the Lord.

We need to step out of our comfort zone and re-enter the world with the message of salvation. We need to publicly proclaim, without fear, the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We

need to take our stand for the Lord Jesus one more time and be willing to suffer or to die, if need be, for the glory of God. That was Paul's desire, [Phil. 3:8-10](#). It should be ours as well!

If we would be a powerful witness for the Lord Jesus, then we must live out our profession, regardless of the personal or public cost. Those men who walked with Jesus paid a terrible price for their faith. Every one of the disciples, with the exception John, died a horrible death for their testimony. Down through the years some 70 million believers have died for their faith in Jesus. Every year some 300,000 believers are martyred for their faith. One day, it may be our turn to take a stand for Jesus. If that day comes, are you ready to stand? Are you ready to die if necessary? Are you prepared to live out a powerful testimony?)

III. Smyrna Was a Comforted Church ([v. 8-11](#))

Jesus comes to this besieged little church and gives them a message of comfort they desperately needed to hear. Let's look into our Lord's precious message to this persecuted church.

A. They Had the Interest of Heaven ([v. 9a](#))

Jesus says *"I know thy works"* — The Lord of Glory has taken a personal interest in the church in Smyrna. The word *"know"* means *"to know by experience."* Jesus is saying, *"I know you folks are having it tough; but you need to know that I am in this with you. I experience everything they do to you. When they do it to you, they do it to me!"* He is telling them that what they are going through is bigger than they are. He is telling them that Satan is using the evil people of Smyrna to attack Jesus through His church. He just wants them to know that they are not alone in their struggle.

B. They Had the Involvement of Heaven ([v. 8](#))

When Jesus comes to this church, He comes as *"the first and the last"*. He comes as He *"which was dead, and is alive"*.

If you will remember from *chapter one*, the title *"first and last"* identifies Jesus as the *"I AM"*. It labels Him as the One Who is in control of all things. The people in the church in Smyrna might have thought things were out of control, but they were in the hand of the Lord. Jesus is still Sovereign! Let the devil do whatever he pleases, he controls nothing

The statement *"who was dead, and is alive"* identifies Jesus as the One Who has been there. He is telling these saints that He knows what they are facing because He has already faced it. The people hated Him. They persecuted Him. They crucified Him. They poured out all their wrath, hatred and anger upon Him; and He prevailed! Since He is the One Who has been through the trials and

conquered them all, He is able to help His people when they face the fires of persecution and hatred, [Heb. 2:18](#); [John 10:29](#); [2 Tim. 1:12](#).

C. They Had Their Investment in Heaven ([v. 9b](#))

Jesus says, “*I know...thy poverty*”. They were poor beyond belief, but then He adds this statement, “*but thou art rich*”. They may have lacked this world's goods, but their faith and the faithful display of their testimony had purchased them treasures in Heaven. They were poor here, but they were rich over there! The world may have taken everything they had down here, but they had treasures on the other side that were safe from the hands of any enemy, ⇒ [Matt. 6:19-21](#). These people had nothing, yet they possessed everything, [2 Cor. 6:10](#).

D. They Had Their Inheritance in Heaven ([v. 10b-11](#))

Their faith had purchased for them more than just a testimony here. Their faith had purchased eternal life for them in Heaven. Jesus is telling them that while they may lose it all down here, they might even lose their lives, but they will live forever over there. They may endure Hell on earth for a while, but there will be no Hell for them in eternity. He is telling them that they can't die but once!

He promises them “*a crown of life*”. That word for crown refers to the “*stephanos*” or the laurel crown that was given to victors in the ancient Greek games. You see, this church looked like a bunch of losers to the world around them. In reality, they were mighty victors, waging spiritual warfare in the name of Jesus Christ! The day would come when they and their faith would be vindicated!

The lost man will die twice. He will live without God in this world and he will die. After death, he will go to Hell. Then he will stand before the Lord at the Great White Throne judgment and he will be sentenced to the Lake of Fire for all eternity, [Rev. 20:11-15](#). That is the second death. The saints of God need never fear that happening to them. They have passed from death unto life, [John 5:24](#). Their faith has bought them eternal life and they will be crowned with victory and glory when they arrive home. Thank God, there is far more waiting on us there than we will ever have down here!

Conclusion: There may be pain and there may be persecutions. But, I want you to know that, at the end of the road, we're going home to be with Jesus. So, press on!