**Revelation Bible Study**

**The Church at Smyrna**

**Revelation 2:8-11**

**May 18, 2024**

**The City of Smyrna:**

Smyrna (modern day Izmir) is located on the Aegean Sea on the west coast of Asia Minor (Turkey) 40 miles north of Ephesus. Its harbor was large and well protected and very important in stimulating trade and commerce that rivaled Ephesus and eventually replaced it; it helped develop the city into a major commercial metropolitan center. In Paul’s day, the estimated population was 250,000; the population today is 3,000,000 (it is the 3rd largest city in Turkey). It is the only one of the seven cities addressed in Revelation that is still inhabited today (Schreiner 131).

At the time of John’s writing, politically, the city allied itself with the Romans. In 195 B.C., it built a temple to the goddess of Rome, “Dea Roma”. In 26 A.D., it won an honor to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius, and became a center for emperor worship (Morris 63); eventually, the emperor was seen as divine. Domitian had inscriptions describing him as emperor, son of god, and high priest.

Smyrna was extolled in ancient times as the most beautiful city because of its architecture and multiple temples to the gods (including Zeus [father of all gods and humans] and Cybele [great mother of the gods]) and its paved streets. It competed with Ephesus for the title of “First City of Asia” (Morris 62). There was an acropolis, aqueducts, a library, gymnasium, and a stadium (Schreiner, 131) and was known as the “Crown of Smyrna”. There were multiple trades in the city and it even had a medical school. In addition, the city was naturally blessed with groves of trees, including myrrh trees, which produced a brown or reddish- or yellowish-brown aromatic gum called myrrh. Myrrh (*smyrna,* Greek) is one of the gifts brought by the wise men to Jesus at his birth, and as an embalming ingredient Nicodemus brought for Jesus’ burial (Matt 2:11; John 19:39).

The Jewish population in Smyrna was large and was a hostile force against true believers. They slandered the Christians and aggressively opposed them. They called themselves Jews, but really belonged to the “synagogue of Satan”, who persecuted the church (2:9-10).

The Jewish opposition to Christianity is connected to the persecution and martyrdom of Polycarp on February 23, 155. He was a disciple of the Apostle John and bishop in Smyrna for 45 years; and, at the age of 86 years was given the choice to renounce his faith and offer incense to the Roman emperor or confess the name of Christ. He responded by saying one of the greatest recorded confessions of Christianity. He said, “Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Immediately, he was condemned to die by burning at the stake. Records indicate that the Jews enthusiastically gathered wood for the fire, even though it was the Jewish Sabbath and had to transgress their own laws against working on the Sabbath. However, the wind prevented the fire from reaching him and eventually, he was stabbed to death.

The beginning of the church at Smyrna is not known. Devout Jews from the province of Asia were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:9) and some might have taken the gospel back to Smyrna. Alternatively, Paul came to Ephesus in the early 50’s and he and his associates might have traveled 40 miles north to start the church. However, Polycarp’s letter to the church at Philippi seems to indicate that the gospel had not yet come to Smyrna by the time that Paul wrote his letter to Philippi in 62 A.D. (Polycarp wrote, “for we did not yet know him [Christ]”). So, it seems that the beginning of the church at Smyrna was sometime after Paul; our first record of its existence is here in the book of Revelation.

**Overview of the Letter to the Church in Smyrna:**

The letter is addressed to the “angel” of the church (probably the pastor) in Smyrna. The Lord Jesus is sovereign and is alive forever more and addresses this church. He is aware of their tribulation and poverty; yet, he says they are spiritually rich. The Jews in the synagogue are likely informing the Roman authorities that Christians should not be considered a sect of Judaism but are deviant and should not be a protected class. Jesus is warning that greater suffering is coming and that they should not fear. Satan with the help of outward Judaism and the Roman authorities will cast some of them into prison and some even may experience death. Jesus encourages them reminding them that those who remain faithful unto death will receive the crown of eternal life and will escape the second death. This is both an encouragement and warning not only for the church at Smyrna but all churches throughout time (Schreiner 132).

**2:8 *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*.**

In the opening of each of the 7 letters in chapters 2 and 3, Christ identifies himself with some characteristic of him described in the initial vision in 1:12-20. There is also in each letter a certain appropriateness between the identifying characteristic and the church that is addressed. E.g., since the church of Smyrna was severely persecuted and some of its members would face death, it is appropriate that the letter come from the One who experienced death (“*who was dead, and came to life”,* 2:80*;* and who is sovereign (“*the First and the Last*”, 1:17). Because he was victorious over death, so they too can face martyrdom knowing that their faithfulness will be rewarded with resurrection unto eternal life.

“*I am the First and the Last*” is from 1:17 and ascribes the attribute of sovereignty to the Son. Isaiah wrote, “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God” (44:6; cf. 48:12). The phrase “*Who was dead, and came to life*” comes from 1:18 where Jesus said, “I died and behold I am alive forever more.” Together, these two statements give strong encouragement and hope to each church member threatened with death for the sake of the Lord. Like Christ, the church at Smyrna can expect ultimate victory; just as the grave could not hold Christ, neither will it hold believers.

**2:9 *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 of the synagogue of Satan”.***

*I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich);* “Works” is omitted in the

best manuscripts, thus putting the emphasis upon their

tribulation and corresponding poverty. Jesus addresses the individual believer by using the singular possessive pronoun, “your”. KEY: He is aware of each Christian’s persecution and poverty in Smyrna and what they have to endure for his sake. "Tribulation" (*thilipsis*, Gk) is living in oppression from your enemies. It means pressure, affliction, or distress. Tribulation will “mark the life of believers until the return of Christ and is characteristic of the present evil age” (Schreiner 134).

Here it is in the singular which means a very serious problem existed; i.e., it is a “burden that crushes” (Morris 63). The church at Smyrna is in serious distress probably related to their poverty. “Poverty” (*ptocha*, Gk) means extreme abject poverty (Morris 63), either by being robbed by their persecutors or simply because they were inherently a poor class of people. It is best to understand that their tribulation led to their poverty. Oppression would result in poverty when work and resources are cut off because of one’s testimony for Christ. Believers in Smyrna apparently experienced the confiscation of their earthly belongings, leaving them in abject poverty. Their poverty reflected material deprivation that left the believers struggling to subsist in their daily lives (Schreiner 134)

NOTE: The similarity of our Lord’s suffering and humiliation should not be missed: “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty (*ptocha*) might become rich” (II Cor 8:9). The expression “but you are rich" means either that the believers at Smyrna were rich in faith; or, it refers to their blessed future inheritance in Christ (best). By reminding them of their rich future spiritual inheritance, Jesus is encouraging them to be faithful to him and his word even when they go through hardship, abuse, and even death, itself. It is then that they will be spiritually blessed (James 1:12; 2:5; Matt 5:11-12).

*And I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not.* The primary reason for the church’s poverty and deprivation is now stated (Schreiner 135). Their tribulation and subsequent poverty are the result of slanderous blasphemous accusations made against them. Perhaps believers lost their jobs due to discrimination; or because they didn’t participate in trade guilds. Jesus knows (Gk *oida*; full complete knowledge) of these slanderous accusations made not only against the church but also against him by the Jewish population of Smyrna.

The persecutors not only were pagans, but Jews, who often times in the NT were openly hostile to both Jesus and Christianity. "Blasphemy" (*blasphemia*, Gk) means to slander, defame, or speak against God. As the Messiah, Jesus has equal authority to the Father, so that anyone rejecting him would be guilty of rejecting and blaspheming God. The Jews in Smyrna committed blasphemy by refusing to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and cursed him and aggressively slandered and opposed his followers resulting in the loss of jobs and other income sources, bringing distress and poverty to the Christians (Schreiner 134)

Jesus no longer called these persons “Jews”, i.e., spiritual sons of Abraham. By this, he is making an important distinction between inward and outward Judaism. The Jews at Smyrna were Jews outwardly (ethnically, institutionally), referring to their outward race and religion, who met together in the synagogue to worship God. But in reality, i.e., inwardly*,* they were not true Jews, because they had rejected the Messiah and confirmed their rejection by persecuting his followers, i.e., the church. The Asian Jews were formidable foes to the church and were responsible for persecuting the apostle Paul on multiple occasions (Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 21:27-36; Wilson 21). These Jews were doing Satan’s work, “who is the accuser of our brothers” (12:10).

Who then are the true Jews? John does not offer an explicit answer, but the implication is clear: true Jews are the people of the Messiah. Paul says the same thing very clearly: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter” (Rom 2:28-29). This “inward Judaism” or “Judaism of the heart” is not limited to believing Jews but includes all believing gentiles, as well. Paul wrote, “For ***we*** (all Christians) are the true circumcision, who worship God in Spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:3). In place of the Jews with only an outward Judaism, Christians are called sons and daughters of Abraham; and, the Jews who rejected Jesus are identified with the devil (John 8:44).

NOTE: We might be able to understand the persecution at Smyrna by looking at examples of persecution in the early church. The apostle Paul was accused by the Jews before the authorities in Thessalonica of “turning the world upside down” and “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). This accusation created such a dangerous situation that Paul had to leave Thessalonica. Previously, at Ephesus, Paul’s preaching was so successful that the townspeople rioted when they thought that the preaching of the gospel would overturn the worship of the goddess Dianna and destroy their idol trade and livelihood. As a result, when he wanted to defend himself publicly before the townspeople, Paul’s followers would not let him enter into the public arena where the rioters had assembled fearing they would kill him *instantly*.

*But they are of the synagogue of Satan* is a reference to non-Messianic ethnic Jews in the synagogue. They strongly opposed Christianity and had informed the Roman authorities that Messianic Jews did not qualify for protection for not worshipping the Emperor because they left the synagogue. By reporting the Messianic Jews to the authorities, they became agents of Satan, who ruled their synagogue. This is like the Jews of John 8:31-47 who claimed to be descendants of Abraham, but instead, were descendants of their father, the devil. By their bitter opposition to Jesus and to the church at Smyrna and its message, the Jews blasphemed God and slandered the Christians. Their synagogue became a place of hatred that carried out the activities of God’s supreme adversary, Satan.

NOTE: Unfortunately, many Christians over the centuries have understood these verses to provide a basis for antisemitism and persecution of the Jews. E.g., in the fourth century, John Chrysostom from Antioch accused the Jews of participating at a “table of demons” and admonished Christians not to fellowship with them. In 1543, Martin Luther advised Germans to “set fire to their synagogues and schools, and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them” (Tonstad 74). Luther believed that forgiveness was needed for the church for its past leniency towards the Jews and not for present severity. He went on to say that “this is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of Christians” (Tonstad 74).

**2:10 *Do not fear any of those things 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*.**

*Do not fear any of those things you are about to suffer*: Once again, Jesus uses the words, “do not fear” (Rev 1:17; John 14:27; 16:33; Matt 14:27; 17:7). He said this repeatedly on multiple occasions to the disciples and, now it is a blessed reminder of his faithfulness and the comfort he provides for his children. Here, he addresses *every* believer and expands his earlier words by saying, “do not fear ***any*** *of the things* you are about to suffer”. He is in full control of every situation and knows what lies ahead for his people; he reveals that they are about to enter a period of suffering. “The Lord who knows them intimately, wants to fortify them for the spiritual and emotional battle that is coming” (Fanning 129).

*Indeed, the devil* (Gk *diabolos*) *is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested.* Imprisonment will occur for some of the believers. Christians in Smyrna must be fully aware that they are fighting a spiritual war in which they are confronting the devil. Their suffering, following the pattern of the suffering of Job and the Lord Jesus will be instigated by the devil (Fanning 129). Thus, they are told to be alert, for the devil will incite the authorities so that some members of the congregation will be arrested and imprisoned with the distinct possibility of being put to death. This would not be the result of actions of a mob but from hostile proceedings by local authorities in Smyrna, responding to complaints by the local Jewish believers (Fanning 129). This would strike fear into the hearts of the believers, who could expect to endure confiscation of property and goods, extreme poverty, and slander. And, incarceration, at times without a trial, may result in death. Jesus says this threat to their lives is to test their faith in him. Everyone who professes discipleship to Christ must be ready to go to prison and if need be, to lay down his life for the Lord.

*And you will have tribulation ten days:* This is thesecond time that the word “tribulation” occurs (2:9). But here its duration is specified: for a 10-day period. Probably, the number 10 conveys two ideas: 1. the idea of completeness; and, 2. the idea of limited duration. It should not be taken literally but symbolically to represent a limited period of suffering, which is not lengthy, but is long enough to genuinely test the believers. Overall, the emphasis is upon a relatively short period of persecution that will fully (completely) test the genuineness of believers. It also reminds the church that the trial, no matter how intense, is only temporary compared to God’s eternal reward for those who endure (Rom 8:18; II Cor 4:17-18; I Pet 1:6-7; Fanning 130).

*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*. Throughout the long history of the city of Smyrna, the citizens had been faithful; first to the Greeks and then to the Romans. Indeed, faithfulness to Rome was a well- known characteristic of the people in Smyrna. Now, however, Jesus calls his followers to be faithful to him. In Revelation, Jesus is called “the faithful one” and so is Antipas, the martyr in Pergamum (2:13). Now the Saints are asked to follow the steps of their Savior and to be willing to pay the ultimate price for him, i.e., to be faithful unto death. “unto death” means to be faithful under all circumstances even to the extent of giving your life, if necessary, for him. This is a reminder of actual danger for them (Tonstad 75).

Polycarp, the longstanding bishop of Smyrna, faced this danger of Roman persecution head-on in 155 AD. After refusing an opportunity to recant his faith and to save his own life, he was martyred for his faithfulness to Christ.

The promised reward for faithfulness is “the crown of the life.” “The life” means eternal life (Morris 64). The crown (Gk *stephanos*; a wreath trophy of leaves awarded to the victor of a sporting event) of life is *not* a special reward for martyrs; **all** who belong to Christ will receive this crown. The crown is eternal life. It is referred to in James 1:12 and can be translated as “the crown, which is life”. It is emblematic of the eternal and highest joy and gladness and glory afforded to every believer. If the saints in Smyrna pay with their lives for the testimony of Jesus, they will be rewarded with an indestructible life in eternal glory. Jesus introduces the promise of “the crown of life” in this context to remind the Smyrneans that although they might suffer physical death, they are assured of the prize of eternal life. No matter what. No one can take it away.

In historical times, the city of Smyrna was known as the “the crown of Smyrna” because of the beauty of the city with the layout of its streets and its beautiful architecture. Accordingly, some scholars see a play on words (a pun) between “the crown of Smyrna” and “the crown of life” promised to the faithful followers of Christ. In other words, the “crown of Smyrna” is not the prize we should be seeking for, but “the crown of life”; referring to the reward of eternal life given to all true followers of Christ.

**2:11 *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.***

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches:* This phrase is repeated to each of the 7 letters to the churches, 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22. It describes the true believer, who has the God-given capability (i.e., “ears to hear”) to both hear and obey the message given to the individual churches. See the full comments on 2:7.

*He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death*. Once again, the phrase “He who overcomes” is repeated in the promise of reward to the church; it is a reference to all believers,who are given the promise that they will be unaffected by the second death. The second death is explained in 20:6, 14; 21:8 in terms of “the lake of fire” and refers in some way to nearly unbearable eternal suffering (cf. “outer darkness”; “weeping and gnashing of teeth”; Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25;30). The word “not” is an emphatic double negative and means that the overcomer will “absolutely not” or “certainly not” or “never ever” be affected by the second death (Morris 65).

The phrase “*him who overcomes*” (Gk *nikaw,* cf. “Nike”) is a present tense participle emphasizing continuous action. It is a reminder of the continuous battle all believers face throughout their spiritual lives, as well as the continuous victory that is ours through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 4:14-16; 13:5b). The term does not refer to some special class of believers who have attained to a higher level of the Christian life, but applies to **all** Christians. The apostle John applied the term to all true believers in the letter of I John. He wrote, *whoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. And who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* All true believers, thus, are overcomers, who by God’s grace and power have overcome the devil and the evil world system (Eph 6:10-18).

The first death refers to one’s physical death. The second death refers to spiritual death, being cut off forever from God and suffering eternal punishment in the lake of fire (20:6, 11, 14, 15; 21:8). Saints may suffer physical death at the hands of persecutors, but they will never be separated from the love of God (Rom 8:35-39). "Churches" is plural, and refers to all churches in all locations from the time of the writing of this letter up until the 2nd coming of Christ (see the full discussion of “churches” in 2:7). Thus, the potential trials, persecution, warnings, punishment, and reward promised to the church at Smyrna is applicable to **all** churches throughout the church age including those in existence at the 2nd coming of Christ.