



# World Christian Fellowship

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## Seven Churches

### Smyrna – Persecuted Church

**Revelation 2:8-11**, *“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: <sup>9</sup>“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. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>“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.”’*

### **Smyrna:**

Historians say that it was the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, can be a very beautiful place, even today.

Smyrna was called the crown of Asia Minor, magnificent city. However, the architect of the city had neglected proper

planning. Historians say in planning the city, they omitted the drains, so the streets ran like sewers in rainy times.

Smyrna means “myrrh.”

It’s a Greek word for myrrh.

### **Do you know what myrrh is?**

Myrrh is ointment that comes from a thorny tree.

It was used to create fragrances that were placed on bodies in embalming. It was a beautiful fragrance.

**Matthew 2** says wise men brought Jesus Smyrna – myrrh.

**Mark 15:** Christ was offered wine with myrrh; it also had sedative property.

So, the fragrance of Smyrna was not just myrrh.

Smyrna was old. It was as far back as history goes. There was a city there way back in human history. It was rebuilt 290 years before Christ. It suffered from earthquakes, fires, wars, and it was rebuilt.

Today, it is a major city in Turkey called Izmir.

If you go to Ephesus, you will find no city or church there.

You will find ruins that are magnificent, and the name they give to it is Kusadasi. It is Ephesus.

In Roman times, Smyrna was a great city with a harbour, one of the world's finest lovely place.

If you travel from Ephesus towards north for 35 miles you will reach the city Smyrna.

Ancient writers wrote about many poems and beautiful lines about this city especially the wind and its aroma.

The setting was beautiful. To some, they said it was the ideal city in the earth – began at the harbour, traversed the beautiful narrow foothills. Behind the city, there was a hill Pagos – a hill covered with temples and noble glorious buildings. It was a centre of science. It was even an ancient centre of medicine.

Smyrna was a free city. It had always been on the winner's side in all Roman civil wars, so it maintained its freedom. It was a stronghold of emperor worship, that's why Rome left it alone.

It was the centre of all kinds of pagan worship:

The worship of

- Cybele,
- Apollo,
- Asclepius,
- Aphrodite,
- Zeus, and
- Homer.

All of those deities had temples in Smyrna. There was also there a glorious temple in tribute to Homer, who was born there.

## **Church at Smyrna:**

We don't know when it was founded specifically. Perhaps during the three years that Paul was in Ephesus.

Paul was in Ephesus for three years and Smyrna is about 35 miles away. The church of Smyrna is never mentioned in the book of Acts.

It was a remarkable church, a pure church. We don't have anything specifically stated about it.

**Acts 19:10**, *And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.*

Asia Minor includes Smyrna. We can assume that during that explosion of the gospel, the preaching of the Word of God under the apostle Paul noted there in the 19th chapter of Acts, the gospel had gone throughout Asia.

All in Asia heard, and some in Smyrna were converted, and a church was born there.

**Author of the Letter:**

**V8**, *“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:*

John is told to write, *‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:*

**Revelation 2:1**, *“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:*

**Revelation 2:12**, *“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:*

**Revelation 2:18**, *“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass:*

**Revelation 3:1**, *“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.*

**Revelation 3:7**, *And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who*

*has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens*”:

**Revelation 3:14**, *“And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God*:

The introduction to Smyrna

*‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:*

**Revelation 1:17**, *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.*

Lord Jesus Christ is introduced from the magnificent, unparalleled picture that is given of Him.

The First and the Last is a title given to God!

**Isaiah 41:4**, *Who has performed and done it, Calling the generations from the beginning? ‘I, the Lord, am the first; And with the last I am He.’ ”*

**Isaiah 44:6**, *“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.*

**Isaiah 48:12**, *“Listen to Me, O Jacob, And Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last.*

God calls Himself the First and the Last, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, the eternal one, who always was and always will be, the first and the last.

This is used again in the book of Revelation in reference to Christ in the final chapter.

**Revelation 22:13**, *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.”*

This is to speak of the eternity of God and the eternity of Christ.

So, the letter to church at Smyrna is from the Lord Jesus Christ, from the eternal one, the eternal infinite God, already in existence when all things were created and remaining after all things are uncreated, transcending all time and all creation, the eternal God.

Not only that, but who was dead, and has come to life.

**If God is eternal, how can He be dead and come to life?**

Only in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the eternal living God, beyond all time, beyond all space, beyond all history,

everlastingly in existence, entered time and space in the form of Christ to die and rise again.

He died as a man for sin and now lives, risen to bring us justification.

**Hebrews 7:16**, *who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life.*

“Christ arose by the power of an endless life.” Death could not hold Him. The body of Jesus died and went into the grave. The Son of God did not die, and by the power of that endless life, raised the body in resurrection that did die.

How encouraging it would have been for the church at Smyrna to receive a letter from Lord Jesus Christ?

How would encourage us if we receive a letter from Lord Jesus Christ to our church today?

## **Status of the Church**

V9, *“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.*

## **Tribulation:**

Life was very dangerous for Christians at Smyrna, because they would not say something that everybody else had to say.

Everyone must confess that “Caesar is Lord.”

If you do not to say that Caesar is Lord could be fatal.

Mass executions of Christians occurred throughout that first century when they didn’t say “Caesar is Lord.”

## **What was the word, the testimony of Christians?**

“Jesus is Lord.”

That could be a death sentence.

Every year, every citizen of Smyrna had to burn incense to Caesar. There was as great altar there for Caesar known as Caesar’s altar. Citizens must go every year and burn incense to Caesar and receive a certificate that you had done that.

Without a certificate, you would be persecuted because you were violating the highest law in Smyrna. To be without a certificate, as must have been the case for Christians who would not say Caesar is Lord, but only Jesus is Lord, was to risk discovery and death.

Tribulation came to the church through three sources.

## **1. Opposition to Caesar**

For 200 years before Christ, Rome had personified Dea Roma, Rome itself, as a goddess, and she had been built in Smyrna. Rome was a goddess, and Caesar was God.

Smyrna became a centre of the worship of Rome and Caesar. Could be said there, "We have no god but Caesar."

The Christians, of course, would refuse to offer incense before the altar of the emperor. A great bust of the emperor was there. They would not call him Lord, so they were at odds with the government. The opposition came over the issue of emperor worship.

## **2. Pagan worship**

They worshipped all the gods as we saw earlier about the city. The city had many temples, festivals, gods, goddesses, by the thousands. The Christians would not involve themselves with any of those pagan worship.

They were out of sync with the culture in every way.

## **3. Jews**

There was opposition because of the Jews.

V9, *"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.*

They had always been a synagogue of God, always.

They would celebrate the fact that they worship the one true living God.

They had rejected, however, their Messiah and in rejecting their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, Judaism really demonstrated that it was as Satanic.

Emperor worship, or the worship of any other false god, or any false religion. They were blasphemers.

They say they are Jews, but they are guilty of blasphemy.

### **What is blasphemy?**

Words spoken against God, slandering God.

They hated Christ, therefore, they hated God.

They blasphemed Christ, therefore, they hated God.

Paul says that all Jews are not true Jews.

**Romans 2:28-29**, *For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;<sup>29</sup> but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the*

*heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

These were Christ-hating, gospel-hating Jewish people.

Synagogues in the town became synagogues of Satan and came against the true believers.

They were slandered at the hands of Jews. The Jews joined the heathens in putting them to death. The hatred of the Jews for Christians is a familiar thing in the book of Acts.

Acts chapter 13 at Antioch.

Acts chapter 14 at Iconium and Lystra.

Acts chapter 17 at Thessalonica.

The Jews persecuted Christians and they were brutal to them.

In the Roman Empire, there were many wealthy Jews who had great influence with the authorities. They sought to blot out the infant church.

The first Roman emperor to kill Christians was Nero. He chose two Jewish friends.

- one an actor named Aletourus, and
- the other his own lover, Poppaea.

Nero used them to kill Christians. They fed Nero the evil report and made the Christians life even more miserable.

In Smyrna, there was a significant Jewish population, and they poisoned the minds of the leaders and the people against the Christians.

### **Poverty**

It is a poor church.

Verse 9, "I know your poverty."

They didn't have human resources. Unlike Ephesus, they didn't abandon their first love. They loved the Lord with zeal, and that's why perhaps, they were so persecuted.

The more they loved the Lord, the more evident it became, the more of a problem they were.

So, we meet the church at Smyrna. A small group of Christ-loving saints, destitute, crushed, powerless, persecuted, but comforted in the presence of their Saviour.

They were poor. They didn't have resources. This kind of poverty here is a Greek word that means they had nothing. It doesn't mean they were sort of a middle-class or lower-middle-class, they were the lowest of the low. That was part of the persecution.

But parenthesis says, “You are poor, but you are rich.”

Contrast that with the church of Laodicea.

**Revelation 3:17**, *Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—*

The church in Smyrna had nothing and was spiritually rich!

The church in Laodicea had everything and was spiritually bankrupt!!

### **About to suffer:**

**V10**, *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.*

When our Lord said that He would build His church and gates of hades ca not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18,

The gates of hell that is a statement for death.

What Jesus was saying was that Satan was going to attack the church with deadly force.

Literally, there would be martyrdom. But even though believers were killed, even though they necessarily had to be faithful unto

death as those in Smyrna were told “the gates of hell, the power of death, and the hands of Satan could not overpower the church, could not prevail against it.”

Now, this assumes a relentless, hell-bent assailing of the church throughout its history, and it has been the case.

The world, of course,

- hates God,
- hates Jesus Christ,
- hates the Word of God,
- hates the followers of Christ, and
- hates the preachers of Scripture;

Consequently, persecution is a reality.

**John 16:33**, *These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*

**John 16:2**, *They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.*

**2 Timothy 3:12**, *Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

When Peter wrote his epistle, he warned that there would come suffering.

1 Peter chapter 2; in 3rd chapter; again, in the 4th chapter; and then again in the 5th chapter.

He basically repeatedly said,

- ❖ You are going to suffer
- ❖ You are going to suffer for godliness,
- ❖ You are going to suffer for righteousness sake.

Peter summarised it in,

**1 Peter 5:10**, *But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*

The fiercest persecution has the effect of perfecting, confirming, strengthening, and establishing the church.

Persecution doesn't destroy the church but rather it makes it strong.

Historically, Caesar was the persecutor, and the particular Caesar was a man named Domitian. He was a murderous dictator who launched extensive persecutions against the church – blood baths.

He launched them in the earliest years of the church in that very first century, and it moved throughout the Roman Empire. That persecution came down with full force in the city of Smyrna.

***Some of you are going to be killed.***

History has left us the details of the death of Polycarp. Polycarp followed the footsteps of Apostle John. Polycarp worked with John in the churches of Asia Minor.

Historians tell us that Polycarp was the pastor of the church at Smyrna.

Polycarp was murdered in 155 A.D. at the age of about 86. I'll read you one account.

Jews joined with heathen in clamouring that Polycarp, the Christian leader of Smyrna, should be cast to the lions or burned alive. They were bringing logs for the fire to burn him so that they can prevent the remains of the martyr from being delivered to his Christian friends for burial.

It was the time of the public games. The city was crowded, and they were excited. Suddenly, the shout went up, "Away with the atheists. Let Polycarp be searched for."

No doubt, says this historian, Polycarp could have escaped, but already he had had a dream in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire, and he had awakened to tell his disciples, "I will be burned alive."

His whereabouts were betrayed to the persecutors by a little slave girl who collapsed under torture, and they came to arrest him. Not even the soldier captain wished to see Polycarp die.

On the brief journey to the city, Soldier captain pled with the old man, “What harm is it to say, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and to offer sacrifice and save your life?”

But Polycarp was adamant that for him, only Jesus Christ was Lord. He entered the arena. The proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death.

Polycarp famous words are these: *“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”*

The proconsul threatened him with burning. Polycarp replied, *“You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and an everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will.”* He remained unmoved.

So, the crowds came flocking with sticks from the workshops and from the baths. The Jews even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were making so much of noise and bringing wood for the fire.

They were going to bind him to the stake.

Polycarp said, *“Leave me as I am, for He who gives me power to endure the fire will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved, even without the security you will give by the binding.”*

So, they left him loosely bound in the flames, and there he died for his Christ.

This is what happened to the pastor of the church at Smyrna. This is Polycarp who knew the apostle John.

Polycarp was a kind of fulfilment of what the Lord said was going to come.

*“Be faithful unto death, and I’ll give you the crown of life. Be faithful unto death.”*

Be faithful to the end!  
Persevere.

**Matthew 24:13**, *But he who endures to the end shall be saved.*

### **What Context Jesus said this?**

- They will deliver you to tribulation, kill you.
- You will be hated by all nations.
- False prophets will arise and mislead many.

- Because lawlessness has increased, most people's love will grow cold.

The one who endures to the end, he will be saved, the one who endures to the end.

- True faith survives.
- True faith endures.
- True faith is proven by persecution.

**Matthew 10:22**, *And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.*

### **Counsel from Jesus to Smyrna:**

You are going to be persecuted  
You are going to feel the persecution.  
You are going to be killed.  
It is going to be severe.

Satan is going to be unleashing on you the hostilities that are going to cause some of you to go to prison.  
There may be many of you who go to prison for a time.  
There may be some of you who are going to taste death.

But, "Be faithful and I will give you the crown of life."

### **What is the crown of life?**

The crown, which is life, the crown which is eternal life. All that is the promise of heaven.

The crown is eternal life.

## **Overcomer**

*V11, 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."*

### **Who is an overcomer?**

**1 John 5:4-5**, *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

If you have true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will overcome. You may be hurt by death, temporal death, the first death, you will never be hurt by the second death.

**Revelation 22:12-13**, *"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to everyone according to his work. <sup>13</sup> I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."*

**Revelation 20:12-15**, *And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. <sup>13</sup> The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. <sup>15</sup> And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.*

## **What an amazing church?**

Even today there are about 250 churches in Izmir. They would be Coptic churches, Catholic churches, Orthodox churches, Syriac churches – all kinds churches.

But there are believers in Izmir, still even to this day!  
Christ has His own there!

He removed the candle out of Ephesus.  
But never out of Smyrna.

Christians today are still persecuted there by Muslims, severely persecuted, with a deadly persecution.

Smyrna remained as a

- ❖ Little,
- ❖ Poor,
- ❖ Persecuted,
- ❖ Prisoned,
- ❖ Martyred,

Yet,

- ✓ Remained Faithful,
- ✓ Fragrant,
- ✓ Victorious,
- ✓ Willing to die once, and
- ✓ Eternally Triumphant!