

## The Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11, Hebrews 4:14-15, Isaiah 44:6, 2 Corinthians 5:21

### **Slide 1**

Have you ever felt that life just isn't fair? Now, I'm not talking about what we deem unjust or undeserved like illnesses or sudden deaths. That's an entirely different discussion.

I'm talking about a time when you stood up for what was right, and you became the victim. Maybe you proclaimed the message of Christ, and you lost your family and friends.

What if, after becoming a follower of Christ, your employer said, *"If you want to keep your job you can't talk about Jesus, or you're fired?"*

What if the government sent people to see who came to church on Sunday mornings or watched online and your taxes went up because you attended a worship service?

What if the government gave you a token, which meant you were in good standing with them, and you could keep your store open, you could buy, sell and trade with others, but without the token, your store would be closed.

What if, because of your faith, others were telling malicious lies about you? What if you were considering becoming a Christian and you saw this happening to friends?

As a Christian, if you saw this happening in the church, what would you think about God? Would you keep the faith? Would you run? Would you compromise your faith to survive?

Those are heavy questions. You may think they're far-fetched, but if you look at other countries, they're already there.

In 2019 a member of the Finnish Parliament was accused of “*criminal agitation against a minority group*” or “*ethnic agitation*” because she publicly questioned her own church leaders’ decision to affirm LGBT pride.

Even though, after two years of court battles and she was found not guilty, the prosecution lawyers are still appealing the decision.

Last week we began talking about some letters which were delivered to 7 churches in Revelation 2-3. That first letter was delivered to the church in Ephesus, today we’ll examine the letter Smyrna received.

### **Slide 2 - Map**

Where is Smyrna. On this map you see that it is only about 40 miles north of Ephesus.

### **Slide 3**

Today Smyrna is called Izmir, a leading city in Turkey.

### **Slide 4**

In Biblical times, because of its beauty, Smyrna was known as the “Ornament of Asia.”

In 26 AD, a competition was held to determine which city would win the right to build a temple for Caesar-worship. Smyrna won that contest and took great pride in its loyalty to Rome.

In fact, the people of Smyrna were so loyal to Rome and its emperor, they would publicly declare, “*Caesar is Lord.*”

Because of the paganism and emperor worship, the Christians in Smyrna found themselves under unrelenting pressure since they wouldn’t bow down to Caesar.

This caused the church to experience a great deal of suffering, yet Smyrna was one of only two churches in Revelation 2-3 in which Jesus didn't have a criticism.

Their suffering made them strong. Persecution had stripped them of everything, except Jesus.

### **Slide 5**

Revelation 2:8, *“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”*

The Jewish Christians would've clearly understood this was a letter from God because of what Isaiah written a few centuries before.

Isaiah 44:6, *“This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”*

That's pretty clear, God is the beginning and the end. He bookends all of life. Jesus was telling His followers He's been there, He's gone through the fires of life.

He's suffered and He knows what that was like. He had experienced death. But the good news is that death couldn't contain Him. He defeated death. It's similar to what the writer of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 4:14-15, *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”*

The writer wanted whoever was questioning, whoever was suffering to know, believe, and trust that according to the Jewish worship system, Jesus is the great high priest.

There's nobody above Him and because of this, hold fast to your beliefs in Who He is.

This great High Priest, Jesus, can sympathize with our pains in life, because He's been tempted just as we've been tempted. He's experienced the pain of life, as we have, yet He's without sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

Jesus didn't give in to temptations and because of being the perfect sacrifice, through Jesus and only Jesus, we're now viewed by God as righteous, forgiven, saved, and redeemed.

As a result, Hebrews 4:16 tells us, *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

This verse, in the original Greek, gives us the image of a bold confidence in the promises of Jesus, not arrogance.

With this confidence, we draw near to God. Now, notice who's doing the drawing!! WE ARE... God's already there!

Revelation 2:8 is also telling us that Jesus, as the author of life, was there at the beginning of time, and He'll be there at the end of time. There's no defeating Jesus. That's great news.

Let me add this, when someone is giving you comfort and encouragement, it helps to know they've experienced some of what you're going through.

When someone beats cancer, their encouragement takes on life, because they've been through the storm. Jesus is reminding us, *"I've overcome, I've been through it. Stick with me! Trust me!"*

## **Slide 6**

Now, in verse 9, Jesus describes their problems. Revelation 2:9a, *"I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!"*

The Greek word translated *"afflictions"* is not describing the ordinary troubles of life. It's more of a doomsday affliction.

Literally it means *"a narrow place that hems someone in;"* an internal pressure that causes a person to feel restricted, without options, like there's no way of escape.

It was used to describe what happened when people were making wine, and they crushed the grapes.

There's no escape for the grapes. These early believers were feeling crushed, helpless, trampled on with no way of escape.

Jesus was reminding them, *"I see what's happening, I'm not oblivious to it all and I'm with you."* Jesus also acknowledged their poverty.

The Greek word used here for *"poverty"* literally means *"totally destitute."* They didn't have enough money to buy the basics of life. Jesus knew this.

In order to do business in Smyrna, you needed to have a token which you would receive from the government each year when you proclaimed, *"Caesar is lord."*

Since the Christians didn't proclaim Caesar as lord, they didn't receive this token. This meant they couldn't shop at most stores, or own a business.

Yet, Jesus tells them that even though they're dirt poor, in His eyes they're rich. The word Jesus used for "*rich*" has the idea of being in a position of power and authority because of wealth.

That may sound strange, but to Jesus, His followers were in a position of authority because of the treasures they were storing up in heaven.

They were rich in the sight of God. They were physically poor, but spiritually wealthy!

For many people this is the breaking point. We value our prosperity. We value the fact we can afford luxuries, on top of the necessities of life.

Think about how many of us have computers, tablets, smart phones, smart watches, etc.

It's remarkable what an impact a man like Steve Jobs had. He helped change the world. While we may confess our indebtedness to Jobs, he still had to leave it all behind.

He's not using a Mac, iPhones do him no good, the money he earned isn't with him. He's passed from this life where he was revered into another realm where he must answer to the God who created him.

Whatever happened to him and wherever he is, it has nothing to do with his great wealth while he was on the earth.

His earthly wealth can protect him no more. How foolish we are to think that the little bit we accumulate in this life matters in eternity.

Will the God who made the universe be impressed by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, who just took delivery of his newest and largest yacht, the Koru, which cost more than \$500 million dollars?

Will God be blown away by a mansion or two, or three? Will He be impressed by a fleet of cars? He laughs at all our desires to be materially wealthy.

Now, let me add, there's nothing wrong with being wealthy, there's nothing wrong with money or possessions, but if they become your god, you're driving force, then there's a problem.

Jesus knows your poverty and He knows your riches. He sees your faith lived out. He notes the prayers you pray through your tears. He hears your desperate cries for help.

Oddly enough, those hated Christians in Smyrna were the richest people in town. I read this the other day:

*“You’ll never know if Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. When Jesus is all you have, then you discover Jesus is all you need.”*

Most of us have a hard time figuring this out. The Christians at Smyrna were so poor, they learned early on that Jesus was all they really needed. That's why Jesus told them, *“you're rich!”*

No person is poor when they've learned to depend and trust in Christ alone. Besides knowing our problems, Jesus also knows our enemies.

### **Slide 7**

At the end of verse 9, Jesus said, *“I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”*

Malicious lies were being told about the Christians. It was an all-out offensive to destroy them.

Ever have anyone tell lies about you? It can kill your reputation. It can get you fired, or at the minimum, you won't get the job or promotion because of those lies.

This was the daily situation in Smyrna: emails, text messages, Facebook comments, and tweets. Who were the culprits? They were called the “*synagogue of Satan?*”

It was their own people. This is a description of the Jewish people who banded together with the pagans to accuse the Jewish-Christians of treason against Rome.

Christians were despised and marginalized. They were treated like a virus, a disease that needed to be removed. This was like taking sides against Jesus Himself. God doesn't take lightly those who attack His children.

Think about when someone is hacking and coughing nowadays. Do we not move a little further away from them. We don't want to be around anyone who we think may have COVID.

These so-called Jews who attacked them were not really Jews at all. They were Jews in name only.

Too many times, religion itself gets in the way. Religion can blind a person of their need of God because they think they can contribute something to their own salvation.

Millions of people have a religion based on superstition. They believe they can work their way to heaven by doing good deeds. Now, doing good is great, but that doesn't get you the ultimate reward. It's faith!

Some people trust in inherited religion. In other words, since their “*Father was a deacon, or their Mother was a Sunday School teacher,*” this gives them a free ticket to heaven.

They act as if salvation is inherited like you inherit the color of your eyes. It doesn't work that way. No one else can believe for you. You have to believe for yourself.



So, don't be surprised when religious people hate you. They hated Jesus, and they crucified Him. So, Jesus tried to calm their fears and expectations.

### **Slide 8**

He tells them in verse 10a, *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”*

Remember Jesus has perfect knowledge about what's going on. He knows what has, what is, and what will happen. What surprises us does not surprise Him.

How did the devil put some of the believers in jail? He whipped up the Jews to work with the pagans, stirring up animosity so that many Christians were jailed and, being Christians, they had no way to refute the false accusations.

Jesus also said, *“you will suffer persecution for ten days.”* Some say the 10 days is a metaphor for a short period of time, others say it's a real 10 days. Regardless of the length of time, we need to focus on the fact it will end.

Think about it, 10 days. That's not so bad. Surely, I can endure 10 bad days.

But there will be that constant pressure, that hemmed in feeling with no way of escape. Feeling persecuted and stuck with no way out.

Some of you have been in the furnace of affliction far longer than ten days. For some it's more like ten years. For others it seems like a lifetime.

I can't explain why some people seem to suffer more than others. While it's true that *"into each life some rain must fall,"* some people seem to have a perpetual monsoon pouring down on them.

But take comfort in this, if Jesus said you'll suffer for ten days, no force on earth can make it last 11 days! It may not end early, but it won't go longer. The time limit on our trials has been determined by the Lord.

That's why He says, *"Fear not."* The Lord knows what He's doing. He'll accomplish His purpose concerning us.

Then, Jesus says at the end of verse 10, *"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."*

There's one important fact we must not miss. Jesus never promises to remove the trials of life.

He never said, *"Just believe in me and everything will get better."* Or *"Believe in me and I'll give you an easy life."* He said, *"Be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life."*

No doubt many of the believers in Smyrna paid the ultimate price for their faith. Having followed Jesus in life, they followed Him in death.

But, to the victor goes the crown of life. This is the crown which goes to the victor in a race. Paul mentioned it when he was facing his death.

All who call on Jesus will receive the crown of righteousness, the crown of victory!

## **Slide 9**

### Conclusion

Then John concludes his letter to the church at Smyrna with this admonition:

Revelation 2:11, *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.”*

He reminded the faithful, that while the first death is a physical death. The second death is what those who don't belong to Jesus will be subjected. It's hell.

It's what will happen to the devil, his angels and followers. It's eternal damnation.

Jesus promised that those who are faithful to Him will not experience this death, but will have eternal life with Him!

Jesus was encouraging the church in what they are doing. Jesus wanted them to know that He's with them and He's faithful. He'll do what He promises. It may look like He's not there, but He is.

When you're facing difficulties in life, rest assured, Jesus is there with you. He knows what you're going through. Jesus offers an eternal reward when you hold to Him!

Therefore, be encouraged, don't run from the troubles of life, embrace Jesus all the more. He's here with us all the time. We are richer than we think.