

The Book of the Revelation to John

Study 2

Chapter 3.

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Smyrna

Smyrna and Philadelphia are the only two churches who did not receive a rebuke from Jesus but He did give them a lot of encouragement.

The City of Smyrna-today's Izmir in Turkey.

Smyrna is about 35 miles north of Ephesus still on the Aegean Sea. It was one of the loveliest of all the cities for miles around. It had been a Greek colony as far back as 1000BC but around 600 BC it was invaded and destroyed by the Lydeans and for 400 years the area became barren and lifeless. Around 200 BC Smyrna was rebuilt with the latest planning with wide straight streets that were sweeping and beautifully paved with stunning marble ornaments and pagan Temples scattered everywhere. Although the city had experienced death it had literally been brought back to life.

It was the first city in the world to erect a Temple to the goddess Roma and thereby embrace the spirit of Rome. This, together with its modernised city, its beauty and gracefulness, vanity and pride sprang up in the hearts of the people. Everyone wished to exalt their city of Smyrna and was proud to be associated with it. The One true God was kept at very low key.

One of Smyrna's exports was perfume, made from a gum taken from a shrub-like tree. It had a bitter taste but the resin of the tree mixed and treated produced oil that was used to anoint the priests from as far back as the time of the anointing of Aaron and his sons. (Exodus. 30v23). Smyrna is Greek for myrrh, a fragrant perfume used in burial. Some believe that this church represents the many martyrs of all time and called it the Martyr church.

Another fact of importance was that there were large populations of Jews there. They were Jews whose birth and ancestry were not in doubt, these people knew their heritage and from whence they came. They knew the reason for their being a nation belonging to God. They were very influential and did everything they could to hurt the church in Smyrna. Many of these Jews resented the new Christian church and stirred up trouble by blaming the Christians for any misfortune that happened. But God knew those who were not Jews at heart: He knew their minds, motives and ambitions. He knew their circumcision was only of the flesh and not of the heart. They rejected Jesus as their promised Messiah and were wilfully blind to the truth. In 155AD the people of Smyrna including these trouble making Jews demanded the death of Polycarp who was the Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of John, an influential leader and possibly the angel of the Church referred to in the first verse. At the age of 86 he was taken to the Stadium of Smyrna and after a great beating and much cruelty he died a brave and glorious martyr's death.

They worshipped at the great Temple of Cybele, which was restored and was now much larger and more illustrious than the older Temple of Zeus.

Revelation 2v9 Jesus said:

I know your works and tribulation and poverty, but you are rich, I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not but are from the Synagogue of Satan.

God saw the struggles of the Smyrna Church; He recognised their tribulation and their poverty. They may have been poverty stricken on the outside but God looks at the heart and saw their Spiritual richness and commended them for it. He called the Jews blasphemous who rejected Him as Messiah and made trouble for the Church. These were the religious Jews who claimed to be of the seed of Abraham which of cause they were but only physically, spiritually they were of the congregation of Satan.

Jesus in the midst of the candlestick saw all that went on in the church

Although the members of the Church at Smyrna may never have seen Jesus physically; nevertheless He was in the midst of the seven golden Candlesticks in their church and had seen all of their trials and tribulation. Although the Bible gives little detail of the tribulation this Church went through, History books and early manuscripts describe the tribulation that the Smyrna Church experienced superseded what any of the other six churches experienced. The word tribulation comes from the Greek word *thlipsis* which was frequently used in the New Testament especially in the writings of St Paul, to describe the very difficult times and events he and his team went through.

So strong was this word *thlipsis* that the Greeks used that it was impossible to misunderstand the intensity of these trials. The word conveys heavy pressure and was used to describe the tortures act of tying a man with rope, laying him on his back then placing a huge boulder on top of him until his lungs burst and his body was crushed. Other outlandish atrocities were devised to punish and all under the name of *thlipsis*.

Paul, for example wrote in 2 Corinthians 1v8

For we would not have you ignorant brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia...the word trouble is this word thlipsis. This was the practice to punish the wrong doer, so there is no reason to suspect that Paul and his team did not experience similar torture after all he was preaching in Asia and particularly in Ephesus and Smyrna where by using this word thlipsis he was telling his readers his visit to Asia Minor included some of the most gruelling and harrowing experiences he had ever experienced and had it not been for the sustaining power of God he may well have been unable to survive it. In Hebrews 11v35-38 Paul switches from explaining the suffering of the Old Testament Saints to the persecution of the early Christian Martyrs. Under the rule of Emperor Nero (54-68 AD) and even worse under Domitian which we have written about in study 1, the persecution of Christians was very serious indeed. And it is written in the book of Hebrews

...and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection and others had trial of cruel mocking's and scourging, yea moreover of bonds and of imprisonment they were stoned, sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins being destitute, afflicted, tormented...They wandered on deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.

The Church is encouraged not to compromise with the world and this church in Smyrna certainly did not compromise and suffered for it. They could have accepted deliverance from their tortures if they renounced Christ but they persevered and overcame the *thlipsis* that they may obtain a better resurrection. To the point that Jesus told them to persevere and overcome, He offered them a prize of a crown of life if they did. He told them they would be put in prison, and that they would encounter tribulation. What a contrast to today's Christian and today's Church. The sad truth is Christians tend to avoid suffering by compromising with the world, there is very little difference between the church and the world, there is very little in our Christian lives for the world to hate. So overcoming doesn't come into the equation, certainly not in the western world, but may be so later

Jesus described them as the Synagogue of Satan, not that the Synagogue of Satan was in their city, or that they attended the Synagogue of Satan, He said they were the Synagogue of Satan, Satan dwelt in them and they worshipped him from within their spirits.

The reward for overcoming prison, tribulation, or even death is a crown of life.

Verse 10

Fear none of those things which you shall suffer: behold the Devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days be thou faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life.

With all this torture, suffering and tribulation all around the Smyrna church one can almost hear the frustration of its followers from here. What! Fear not the suffering of my family, the imprisonment of my wife and child, the beatings I have had for the sake of the Lord, how can you say fear not. And on top of that you say be faithful unto death! The Church of Smyrna suffered greatly but held the trophy of being one of two congregations among the seven churches to receive only commendations with no rebuke from the Lord in His message to each of them.

Fear none of those things which you shall suffer, the Devil shall put some of you into prison, you shall be tried, and you shall have tribulation ten days. But be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life.

As we have said before it is not easy to belong to Christ, He said we will have tribulation and persecution and there are many out there who can testify to being assaulted on every side by the enemy. It has been the testimony of the Church Universal that when believers remain steadfast to their faith, regardless of the cost, the light of Jesus and His truth will eventually break through the darkness as one by one He calls them from the kingdom of Satan into the glorious Kingdom of God.

He who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death (The lake of Fire)
The second death is, as we learn from Rev; 20v6, 14 and 21v8, is the final destruction awaiting the devil and his followers.
Hold on with all your might, our reward is unspeakable and full of Glory and we don't want to miss it or it be taken away. Our verse says suffering would come for ten days, or rather a short time if we compare it to our life with Christ for eternity.

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