

# The Letter to the Church at Smyrna – Revelation Ch. 2 vs. 8 – 11

## *Bible Study Notes on the Letter to the Church at Smyrna*

### **Smyrna – History**

An ancient city - the initial settlement (Old Smyrna) was founded around the 11th century BC, first as an Aeolian settlement, and later taken over and developed during the Archaic Period by the Ionians.

Old Smyrna was devastated by Lyattes, king of Lydia, and ceased to exist for three centuries. Smyrna proper, the new city was moved into from the older one in the 4th century BC - its foundation was inspired by Alexander the Great who ordered Lysimachus to build a strong, well planned city, the most beautiful in Ionia (it became known as ‘The flower of Ionia’).

It prospered and became one of the greatest cities of the then known world – and in 27BC it came under the control of the Romans, having proved a faithful ally to Rome in the Syrian and Mithridatic wars. From 27BC to 324AD Smyrna enjoyed great material prosperity

Earthquakes: In the reign of Tiberius it was almost blotted out by an earthquake  
Between 178AD and 180AD a series of seismic disturbances reduced the city to ruins  
It was restored by Marcus Aurelius...parts of his agora are still standing  
In 378AD another earthquake destroyed the city, but it was again rebuilt

### **Smyrna - Geography**

Smyrna is 42 miles north of Ephesus and it possessed an excellent double harbour – the outer harbour was a deep water mooring ground, the inner harbour (now silted in) had a narrow entrance that could be blocked with a chain – hence it was (and is) a major trading port. *See Supplementary Note 11 ‘Smyrna Maps’*

Today Smyrna is called Izmir, a thriving city and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest in Turkey

- Population 300,000 (in NT times 100,000?)
- Exports tobacco, oil, grapes, figs, cotton, olives and olive oil

Smyrna stood at the entrance to the broad fertile valley of Mermus, at the mouth of the river Meles and on the well sheltered gulf of Smyrna. It was strategically placed for trade between Europe and Asia – thus it was a rival to Sardis and the Lydian kingdom

Strabo (Greek historian 63BC-24AD) described it as the most beautiful city in the world. Even today, bustling Izmir has been termed the “Paris of the Levant”

### **Pagan Worship**

At the foot of the mountain stood the temple of Zeus, the father of the gods, regarded as the lord of the sky, rain, clouds and thunder  
Along the Golden Street stood many shrines

- Apollo, the sun god

- Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty
- Aesculapius, the god of medicine
- Cybele, a Phrygian nature goddess

At the Agora, the commercial and political centre, were statues of:

- Poseidon, the sea god
- Demeter, the goddess of corn

Cybele was the primary goddess worshipped in Smyrna, later also the Greek goddess Rhea (the daughter of the sky and the earth and the mother of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades):

- Her worship was wild and unrestrained,
- As the giver of wealth she was depicted as enthroned and wearing a crown of battlements and towers – she is possibly ‘Goddess of fortresses’ (*Daniel 11: 38*)

## Caesar Worship

Smyrna was one of the early places to sponsor Caesar worship

It readily accepted Caesar worship

- In 196BC the Smyrneans erected a temple to Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome
- They built a temple to Tiberius in 26AD, winning a contest to do so

The worship of the emperor was compulsory

- For most, this was a token gesture - each year a Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on the altar and to acknowledge publicly that Caesar was supreme lord
- In return the citizen received a formal certificate that he/she had done so
- This act of worship presented a vital test for the Christian and many who refused perished at the stake or by wild beasts in the arena

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna

- Trained by John who probably appointed him Bishop
- Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> C Bishop in Gaul, a writer and historian) claims to have been a pupil of Polycarp and regarded the memory of Polycarp as a link to the apostolic past
- In 166AD (some sources say 155AD) Polycarp was denounced to the government (probably by the Jews), arrested and tried on the charge of being a Christian. It is likely he was charged after refusing to burn incense to Caesar. When the proconsul urged him to save his life by cursing Christ, he replied: "*Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? Bring forth what thou wilt.*" Polycarp, then very old, was burned at the stake on the Sabbath day, an object of Jewish hatred as well as Roman persecution.
- Accounts from the time record that Jews from the local synagogue were amongst the most eager in throwing faggots onto the fire
- Polycarp's prayer when burned at the stake is recorded and the fire was then lit and shortly thereafter a soldier stabbed Polycarp to death by order of the magistrate (the flames would not do more than scorch his body).

*See Supplementary Note 12 'Polycarp's Prayer'*

## Smyrna – Later History

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, the victors offered the western regions of Turkey to Greece with the Treaty of Sèvres. In May 1919 the Greek Army occupied İzmir, but the Greek expedition towards central Anatolia turned into a disaster.

In September 1922, Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk), the victorious revolutionary leader of Turkey, led his troops into Smyrna (now Izmir) a predominantly Christian city, as a flotilla of 27 Allied warships -including 3 American destroyers- looked on. The Turks proceeded to indulge in an orgy of pillage, rape and slaughter that the western powers, anxious to protect their oil and trade interests in Turkey, condoned by their silence and refusal to intervene. Turkish forces then set fire to the legendary city and totally destroyed it. As many as 100,000 Armenian and Greek Christians were slaughtered throughout the city. There followed a massive cover-up by tacit agreement of the Western Allies. By 1923 Smyrna's demise was all but expunged from historical memory.

## **The Letter to Smyrna – Revelation 2: 8-11**

### **V 8            The Address and Sender**

The shortest of all the seven letters – only four verses

The Name of the Church – Smyrna in Greek is ‘*Smurnaios*’ which has a Hebrew root ‘*Mur*’ which means ‘Death’...a word which also means Myrrh

#### ***Why is Myrrh Significant in relation to Smyrna?***

Myrrh is a bitter gum and costly perfume which exudes from a certain trees or shrubs in Arabia and Ethiopia (*Commiphora myrrha*) - it is used as an ingredient in:

- Perfume (*Psalms 45: 8*)
- Holy anointing oil for priests (*Exodus 30: 23*)
- The purification of women (*Esther 2: 12*)

Myrrh’s primary use was as an oil for embalming (*John 19: 39-40*), and it was also used in suffering as a pain reliever.... Joseph and Nicodemus embalmed the body of Jesus

Myrrh was one of the gifts brought by the Magi at Christ’s birth (*Matthew 2: 11*):

- Gold – speaks of Christ’s royalty
- Frankincense – speaks of Christ’s deity and priesthood
- Myrrh – speaks of Christ’s suffering and death

In the Millennium gold and frankincense are offered, but no myrrh (*Isaiah 60: 6*)

Myrrh gives off its characteristic scent by being crushed

All this is very descriptive of the church at Smyrna

#### ***To Whom is the Letter Addressed?***

‘To the Angel of the Church of Smyrna’ - clearly the ultimate recipient is the Smyrna church itself.

### ***Who is the Letter From?***

It is from 'the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life'.

It is from Jesus Christ, from Yeshua.

#### Titles of Christ

'The first and the last' and 'who was dead, and came to life' – His titles are from Chapter 1, verses 17 and 18.

*'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. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.'*

***Revelation 1:17-***

***18***

### ***What does the Title 'The first and the last' tell us?***

It emphasises Yeshua, Jesus, as the beginner and completion - of faith, life and hope.

The phrase 'First and the Last' occurs 7 times in the Bible – 3 times in Isaiah and four in Revelation. In two of these references (Rev. 1: 17 and here in 2: 8) it also says he 'was dead, and is alive'.

It is a title of Jehovah...it is Yeshua...see *Isaiah 41: 4, 44: 6; 48: 12*

### ***What does the Title 'who was dead, and came to life' tell us?***

It emphasises Yeshua, Jesus. as the one who rose from the dead – He is the 'resurrection and the life' (*John 11: 25-26*) - and because He lives, we to shall live (*John 14: 19*).

*'Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"'*

***John 11: 25-26***

*"A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also."*

***John 14: 19***

*Revelation 1: 17-18* are good verses (for JW's) – Jehovah God – it is the same one who died and is alive forevermore, these verses link with *Revelation 1: 11, 17-18 & 2: 8 & 22: 13*

### ***What is the Meaning of the Titles of Christ for the Church?***

Yeshua applies the OT name for Yahweh (Jehovah) to Himself, clearly identifying Himself as one of the Triune Godhead.

Idols (much idol and Caesar worship in Smyrna) will come and go – He was before them, and He will remain after them.

Because Yeshua died and is risen to life He alone can raise the dead to life. No resurrection or eternal life exists outside of the Son of God; neither time nor death are a barrier to the One who has the power of resurrection and life

Relevance to Smyrna: the Christians in Smyrna faced martyrdom every day.

## V 9 Commendations from Yeshua

‘I know thy works’ – same phrase as in the letter to Ephesus; Jesus knows what is (really) going on in the church – he is fully aware (applies personally too)

### *How many things are commended?*

Four things are Mentioned

Their works, their tribulation, their poverty, and their vilification by ‘Jews’

### *What does this tell us about Yeshua and His church?*

‘I know thy works’ – same phrase as in the letter to Ephesus; Jesus knows what is (really) going on in the church – he is fully aware (applies personally too)

### *What Lessons are there for Us in these Commendations?*

1. Their Works (as in Ephesus) – the Example of Yeshua (*John 10: 25*) – bearing witness to the Father

*‘Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me.’*

***John 10: 25***

2. Their Tribulation – the Greek word used is ‘*thlipsis*’ meaning a pressing, pressing together, or pressure. It is a metaphor for oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress or trouble.

What is referred to here is not the specific ‘Great Tribulation’ (Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week) – rather the tribulation, trouble, persecution which we shall all have (*John 16: 33; 2 Timothy 3: 12*)

*“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: 33***

Yeshua warned the Early Church (*Luke 21: 20-22*) - see Separate Notes on  
***See Supplementary Note 13 ‘The Flight to Pella’***

For the church in Smyrna there was great persecution – see *Smyrna – Introductory Notes*:

- The ‘pinch of incense’ in Caesar worship – Christians who refused perished at the stake or by wild beasts in the arena
- The death of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

3. Their Poverty - but Yeshua says they are rich (spiritual wealth)

There are two words in Greek for poverty:

- *penia*, the state of having nothing superfluous
- *ptocheia*, used here, the state of one who has nothing at all, it implies beggary

Jesus says He knows their suffering – He has both empathy and experience (see 2 *Corinthians 8: 9*)

Their poverty could have been relieved by simply a pinch of incense offered to Caesar

There is a contrast here with the church at Laodicea (*Revelation 3: 17*)

4. Blasphemy of ‘those who say they are Jews and are not’ – vilification

***What does Yeshua mean by this unusual phrase?***

Yeshua call the Jewish ones who are vilifying the church as ‘saying they are Jews but are not’ – an unusual phrase.

Although they were Jews physically, they were not true Jews but spiritual pagans (see *Romans 2: 28-29*), who allied with other pagans in putting Christians to death as they attempted to stamp out the Christian faith.

Yeshua says they are of the ‘Synagogue of Satan’ – John knows about the blasphemy of the Jews for he recorded it (*John 8: 44*). With the rejection of its Messiah, Judaism became as much a tool of Satan as emperor worship.

Some scholars view this as an allusion to Legalism – leaven of Galatians:

- Demand for Gentile circumcision (*Acts 15: 1, 10*)
- Peter rebuked by Paul (*Galatians 2: 11; 3: 1-3*)
- Peter’s agreement (*2 Peter 3: 15-16*)

The early persecution of Christians was brought about by the Jews not the Romans:

- In Antioch (*Acts 13: 15*)
- In Iconium (*Acts 14: 2, 5*)
- In Lystra (*Acts 14: 19*)
- In Thessalonica (*Acts 17: 5*)

Polycarp was executed in 166AD for refusing to recant his Christian faith – and it was the Jews who were instrumental in his trial, although it was the Romans who executed him

There were 3 principal ‘Tares’ sown in the early church:

- Legalism - denial of Christ’s completed work
- Gnosticism – denial of Christ’s humanity
- Caesar Worship – denial of Christ’s lordship

***Are there ‘false Jews’ today – in Judaism or in the Church?***

The modern day embodiment of ‘Jews who are not Jews’ in Judaism may be those who are in orthodox or Hassidic Judaism – those who claim to be God’s chosen people but who have rejected the Fathers Son, Yeshua HaMashiach.

The modern day embodiment of ‘Jews who are not Jews’ in the Church may be those who hold a ‘replacement theology’ view – those who claim the promises to Israel are now to be fulfilled in the church (i.e. ‘new’ Jews).

**V 10 Exhortations from Yeshua**

***What is Missing (compare to the letter to Ephesus)?***

There are NO Concerns expressed

### ***What Encouragement, Prophecy and Exhortation does Yeshua give this Church?***

Encouragement – Fear none of the things you will suffer (see Yeshua’s titles in v.8)  
Fearfulness is the opposite of faith – the fearful are cast into the lake of fire (*Rev. 21: 8*)

Prophecy – Yeshua prophecies they will experience prison, trials, even death

Exhortation – Be Faithful unto Death

Faithfulness, rather than fear, will earn a ‘crown of life

The word for crown here in Greek is ‘*stephanos*’ which is the crown given to a victor

### ***What Might we Understand by ‘Ten Days’?***

Tribulation for ten days...scholars have different interpretations:

Some say it is a Hebrew idiom for a short period of time – there are several such references to ‘10 days’ in scripture (*Genesis 24: 55; Job 19: 2-3; Daniel 1: 12-14*)

Another understanding is that the ‘10 days’ relate to the ten specific persecutions directed against Christians by the Romans:

- AD 54-68 Nero – beheaded Paul and crucified Peter
- AD 95-96 Domitian – imprisoned John on Patmos
- AD 104-117 Trajan – burned Ignatius at the stake
- AD 161-180 Marcus Aurelius – the time of ‘Gladiator’, Polycarp martyred
- AD 200-211 Septimus Severus – Irenaeus killed
- AD 235-237 Maximinus – Ursus and Hippolytus killed
- AD 249-251 Decius – Isidore beheaded
- AD 257-260 Valerian – Lawrence martyred on a gridiron
- AD 270-275 Aurelian – Columba of Sens martyred, Patroclus beheaded
- AD 303-313 Diocletian – the worst of all, Pancras beheaded

#### **Roman Persecution**

- Famine and Pestilence fell on Rome
  - Diseases were brought back from the Parthian wars which devastated much of Rome
  - Inundation from the River Tiber put many of the grain storehouses underwater
- Christians were a Convenient Scapegoat
  - It was claimed that these diseases were brought on by this new religion
  - Christianity became a crime
- 5 million believers died for Christ during this period (Fox’s Book of Martyrs)

Note: the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw more Christians murdered than all the other centuries put together

It is the devil who is behind all of the tribulation

### ***How Many Crowns are Promised in Scripture?***

Crowns Promised in Scripture – there are 5 referred to specifically in scripture:

- Crown of life *James 1: 12; Revelation 2: 10*  
for those who have suffered for His sake
- Crown of Righteousness *2 Timothy 4: 8*  
for those who loved His appearing
- Crown of Glory *1 Peter 5: 4*  
for those who fed the flock
- Crown Incorruptible *1 Corinthians 9: 25*  
for those who press on steadfastly
- Crown of Rejoicing *1 Thessalonians 2: 19*  
for those who win souls

## V 11            **The Promise to the Overcomer**

The Promise is an appendage, a postscript, to the letter after the common closing phrase (as with Ephesus)

The promise is not to be ‘hurt by the second death’

This is the second death referred to in *Revelation 20: 14-15* and in *Jude 1: 12-13*

*‘Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.’*

***Revelation 20: 14-15***

\* Lesson: If you are born twice, you die once...if you are born once, you die twice!

### **Applications of this Letter**

#### Local Application

***What was the Application to Smyrna...and what has happened?***

Jesus knows what you’re going through

Do not fear, but instead be faithful, even unto death – hold on...endure persecution

The Church in Smyrna suffered intense persecution – today no church exists there

#### Admonitory Application (to all churches)

***What is the Application to Churches Generally (including today)?***

Endure persecution faithfully not fearfully - most of the body of Christ in most centuries has suffered persecution

Persecution is likely to come in the western counties too – increasingly Christians are being marginalised and the historic Christian base of western culture liberalised and made multi-cultural.

Ultimately the true, believing church may be driven underground and survive in house fellowships (as in many countries today)

Don’t confuse persecution with the Great Tribulation (see *Matthew 24 & Luke 21*)

#### Personal Application



### ***What is the Application of this letter Personally?***

Be faithful and do not fear persecution – all that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3: 12)

#### **Why do Christians have trials?**

1. To glorify God (*Romans 5: 3-5*)
2. To discipline for known sin (*Hebrews 12: 5-11; James 4: 17; Romans 14: 23; 1 John 1: 9*)
3. To prevent us from falling into sin (*1 Peter 4: 1-2*)
4. To keep us from pride (*2 Corinthians 12: 7-10*) – Paul was kept from pride by his ‘thorn in the flesh’ (his eyes? *Galatians 4: 15; 6: 11*)
5. To build faith (*1 Peter 1: 6-7*)
6. To cause growth (*Romans 5: 3-5*)
7. To teach obedience and discipline (*Acts 9: 15-16; Philippians 4: 11-13*)
8. To equip us to comfort others (*2 Corinthians 1: 3-4*)
9. To prove the reality of Christ in us (*2 Corinthians 4: 7-11*)
10. For testimony to the angels (*Job 1: 8; Ephesians 3: 8-11; 1 Peter 1: 12*)

Count it all joy!

*‘My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.’*

**James 1: 2-4**

Loyalty of Ambassadorship – not putting a pinch of incense in the fire to Caesar

We have an enemy, Satan, who seeks our destruction – and if he can use persecution to destroy our faith, he will do

### **Prophetic Application**

Smyrna appears to be a profile of the Persecuted Church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century

The postscript of the promise to the overcomer is indicative that this is a church not specifically in existence any longer...superseded by other ‘church ages’: i.e. it is not there at the end of the ‘church age’.

By the time of Constantine the persecution of the early church came to an end, as Christianity became the state religion...although we know that Christians in many counties today are enduring great persecution.

### **Matthew 13**

There are seven ‘Parables of the Kingdom’ in *Matthew chapter 13*

The Smyrna Church is reflected – by its commendations, particularly its tribulations – in the parable of the Wheat and the Tares – the Persecuted Church standing against false doctrines introduced into the church and promised not to be hurt by the second death

## Paul's Epistles

The epistle that relates most directly to the church at Smyrna is Philippians written by Paul from prison and speaking about witness in the face of death (*Philippians 1: 19-30*)

## Yeshua's 2nd Coming

There is no explicit reference to it in this letter

## Smyrna Pictures

