

## Revelation 2:8-11

### To the Church at Smyrna

<p>[8] "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:</p>	<p><b>1. The Church:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smyrna</li> </ul>	<p>[Reminder: The word "church," as used here, may include people who <i>claim</i> to be Christian, but who really aren't. (This doesn't seem to be much of a problem for the church at Smyrna.)]</p>
<p>These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.</p>	<p><b>2. About Christ</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eternally existing and pre-eminent over all</li> <li>Was temporarily dead, but gained permanent victory over death</li> </ul>	<p>Though eternal and self-existing, Jesus <i>willingly</i> suffered and died for us.</p> <p>Because Jesus had victory over death, those who belong to him will eventually share in that victory.</p>
<p>[9] I know your afflictions and your poverty --yet you are rich!</p> <p>I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.</p>	<p><b>3. Their Strength</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weak in the world's eyes; strong in God's eyes</li> <li>Opposed by people who claim to be serving God, but who actually serve Satan</li> </ul>	<p>In both of these things, the perspective of their opponents was the <i>opposite</i> of what was actually true.</p>

Synagogue - The early church normally met in synagogues or houses. Since all Jews who believed the Bible would accept what the Old Testament said about Jesus (compare to Luke 24:27), they would now be called "Christians." The unbelieving Jews - probably a majority - would persecute the *genuine* followers of God's Word.

	<p><b>4. Their Weakness</b></p> <p>[none]</p>	<p>God uses Satan's attacks to strengthen and purify his people - compare to 1 Peter 1:6-7. Their trials were keeping them pure!</p>
<p>[10] Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.</p> <p>I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.</p> <p>Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.</p>	<p><b>5. Their Duty</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't be afraid <i>Things will get worse...</i> - but it is just temporary</li> <li>Be faithful <i>Things will get better...</i> - and it will be permanent</li> </ul>	<p>[Or <i>stop</i> being afraid.]</p> <p>Though <i>people</i> would be involved in persecuting them, Jesus points to the <i>ultimate</i> source of that persecution, the Devil.</p> <p>Compare to Matthew 25:14-30. Being <i>faithful</i> and being <i>fearful</i> are incompatible opposites, with opposite end-results.</p>

A willingness to be faithful (to the point of death, if necessary) -

- A common theme throughout the book of Revelation.
- An obligation for all of Jesus' followers, even those who don't have to go to the "extreme" of death.

<p>[11] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</p> <p>He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.</p>	<p><b>6. A Promise to All</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This is for <i>all</i> who qualify, for all who remain faithful, not shrinking back in fear.</li><li>• Even though they may experience the <i>first</i> death, they will not have to fear the <i>second</i> death.</li></ul>	<p>God does not promise that we will "have a nice day," every day of this present life. But he <i>does</i> give wonderful promises to those who are willing to be faithful, rather than fearful.</p>
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An interesting fact...

Those who choose to be fearful now... will have the opportunity to fear forever.

Those who are faithful (not fearful) now... will have the opportunity to be faithful (not fearful) forever.

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## The Example of One Who Chose Faithfulness over Fear

These are the words of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, when he was offered the opportunity to deny Christ, in order to avoid being burnt alive at the stake (around A.D. 168):

“Eighty and six years have I served him,  
and he never once wronged me;  
how then shall I blaspheme my King,  
Who hath saved me?”

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## Of all the churches described in Revelation 2 and 3...

- Only two of the churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) did not have serious weaknesses that required Jesus' rebuke. In both cases, the church was weak *from the world's perspective*. But because of their faithfulness to God and his Word, and their willingness to trust God and to persevere during trials, they were actually strong!
- In contrast, two other churches (Sardis and Laodicea) had *no* strengths that Jesus could praise - only weaknesses. Yet from the world's perspective, these churches had an appearance of strength!
- This shows us that external appearances are not always a good indicator of the true condition!

## Revelation 2:8-11 Supplementary Study Information

### About the Name "Smyrna"

The name "Smyrna" means "myrrh" - a fragrant perfume. In the Bible, myrrh was used:

- as one of the ingredients in the sacred anointing oil used by the priests (Exodus 30:23);
- as a perfume (Esther 2:12; Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17);
- as one of the ingredients used in embalming (John 19:39);
- and as a drug to help deaden pain (Mark 15:23).

It was one of the gifts brought by the wise men who came to worship the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:11).

It was quite fitting for the name "Smyrna" to be associated with these Christians. They were, in a sense, giving themselves as a "fragrant offering" to the one who died for them, and who rose to life eternal. They were following his example (Ephesians 5:2).

### A Few Background Comments

Smyrna was the second-most wealthy city in the area, second only to Ephesus. Like Ephesus, it was a seaport. It was a religious center for emperor worship, and also had a large number of Jews who were hostile to Christianity. The Christians in this city suffered much persecution, sometimes even losing their lives (such as Polycarp, a prominent church leader, around A.D. 168). Yet the church remained pure, and needed no rebuke from Jesus. Today, there is still a Christian influence in Smyrna (now called Izmir) - in contrast to many of the other churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3.

### Verse 8

#### FIRST AND LAST

Eternally existing and pre-eminent over all. Who is this? God (Jehovah) - Isaiah 44:6; 48:12; Jesus - Revelation 1:17; 22:13.

#### DIED / CAME TO LIFE AGAIN

See also Revelation 1:18. Even though he is eternally existing, Jesus willingly suffered and died for us (= a focus on the cross). And because he had victory over that suffering and death, he now remains alive forever (= a focus on the resurrection). In a sense, Jesus was a companion to these Christians, because he experienced what they were going through - and more.

Because of Jesus' victory (which he had in our behalf), the Christians at Smyrna (and all other Christians) could look forward to also having victory over suffering and death.

### Verse 9

#### I KNOW

Jesus fully knows and understands. This can be a source of encouragement to the person going through trials (as here), or a warning to those who are guilty of sin, and who might think they can hide something from him.

Jesus' knowledge of our trials is not merely "academic knowledge," but an expression of care and understanding.

[The KJV reads, "I know *your works*," which parallels the opening statements found in most of the other letters to the churches. (Whether or not we include the phrase "your works," the over-all message remains the same.)]

## AFFLICTIONS

Troubles caused by their enemies, most likely brought on by the Jews (mentioned below). (This word also occurs in verse 10. It can also be translated as "tribulation" or "persecution.")

The apostle John also shared in suffering for Jesus - see Revelation 1:9.

## POVERTY / RICH

Some of them may have started out as poor (compare to 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 and James 2:5), but their condition was now much worse - and probably the result of the persecution they were receiving from their enemies.

God saw beyond their physical circumstances (which were temporary) to their actual spiritual condition (which would have eternal consequences). They had what he valued most. [Their condition was the *opposite* of the church of Laodicea (compare to Revelation 3:17).]

They loved Jesus so much, that they were willing to suffer for him. Perhaps they had the attitude that the Hebrew Christians had, described in Hebrews 10:34.

Some of the things they could have been "rich" in are:

- 1) faith, or trust, in God (James 2:5)
- 2) good deeds, as an expression of love (1 Timothy 6:18)
- 3) living with a God-centered attitude that influenced everything they did (perhaps the focus of Luke 12:21).

Other verses which mention this contrast (poor vs. rich): 2 Cor. 6:10; 8:9; James 2:5.

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## ABOUT PERSECUTION

Jesus warned us that, if we belong to him and reflect his life in our own lives, people will treat us the same way they would treat him - John 15:20.

## SLANDER

Abusive, false statements; called "blasphemy" in many translations. Their enemies would speak against them, the "Christ-ians," the same way they would speak against *Christ*.

## JEWS / NOT!

Even though the pagans who were involved in emperor worship may have helped in the persecution, the Jews were the main instigators. Because the Jews were so convinced that they themselves were right, they tended to persecute the Christians more than the pagans did! (Compare to what Jesus warned his disciples, in John 16:2.) Having rejected Jesus, they were actually accomplishing the *opposite* of what they thought: They were serving Satan, rather than God. They were doing the devil's work - compare to John 8:44.

It is *not* that the Jews followed the *Old* Testament and the Christians followed the *New* Testament. The Old Testament testifies about Jesus. Jews who accept the *Old* Testament will accept Jesus (and the New Testament); Jews who *don't* accept the Old Testament will not accept Jesus (or the New Testament). Look at the contrast between the Jews at Thessalonica and those at Berea, in Acts 17:1-13. (The "Scriptures" mentioned in Acts 17:11 are the *Old* Testament!)

The unsaved Jews (those who rejected the truth that is proclaimed *both* in the Old and New Testaments) considered themselves to be "the chosen people" simply because of physical ancestry and their participation in various religious ceremonies. However, even in the *Old* Testament, we read that a *change of heart* is also necessary. (See Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, which makes reference to the ritual of circumcision. This truth is also reiterated in Romans 2:25-29.) Jews who reject the Old Testament (and therefore reject Jesus) are *not* Jews in God's sight. The true Judaism of the Old Testament is the same as the Christianity of the New Testament. Any other form of "Judaism" is a false religion, just like any form of "Christianity" that is not found in the Bible.

## SYNAGOGUE

The modern concept of "church" (= buildings, institutions, religious organizations, etc.) is closer to the New Testament concept of "synagogue," than it is to the New Testament concept of "church" (= all the people of a locality, who belong to Jesus; the body of Christ, etc.). In the first century, the church (= the people who belonged to Jesus) often met in synagogues to worship and pray, until the others who rejected Jesus forced them out. (See Acts 18:1-8 for an example of this.)

## SATAN

Satan (which means "adversary") is the spiritual force behind these persecutors. The Jews who had rejected Jesus (and thus rejected God) were following the example of their "father, the Devil" (compare to John 8:44). And so, they were adversaries of the true followers of God (which included both Jews and non-Jews).

## Verse 10

### AFRAID

They may have already had some fears. In this case, we could read it, "*Stop* being afraid." [Further comments can be found under the section, "TO TEST YOU" (below).]

This command ("do not be afraid") does not refer to the "positive" type of fear, which we *ought* to have: a fear of God, a fear of doing stupid things (such as stepping out in front of an oncoming train), etc. Rather, it focuses on the sinful type of fear - such as the fear of doing what is right, when someone else doesn't appreciate it. Matthew 10:28 gives us examples of "positive" and "negative" fear.

### ABOUT TO SUFFER

For them, things were going to get worse... but there was a hope that they could look forward to - see the verses that follow. [The application to us: These verses don't necessarily mean that things will get worse for *us*. (They might or might not.) But the instructions these verses contain show us how we should respond, *any time* we find ourselves experiencing trials or difficult situations.]

The book of 1 Peter was written to encourage people who were going through trials. In that book, Peter reminds us that Jesus also suffered, and that he left us with an example to follow, so that we would know how to respond. Peter also reminds us about the promise, that we who are willing to share in Jesus' suffering (rather than shrinking away from it - Hebrews 10:39 and Revelation 12:11) will also be able to share in his glory (Romans 8:17 and 1 Peter 5:1).

- Some of the verses in 1 Peter which mention suffering are: 1 Peter 2:19-21, 23; 3:14, 17; 4:1, 15, 19; and 5:10.

### DEVIL

Used interchangeably with "Satan." ("Devil" means "accuser," in the N.T. Greek. "Satan" means "adversary" or "accuser," in the O.T. Hebrew. Both words are used in the New Testament.)

### PUT IN PRISON / TO TEST YOU

The Devil was going to "put" (N.T. Greek - "cast" or "throw") some of them into prison. He would *try* to destroy them... but if they did these things that Jesus commanded them to do, the devil would not succeed.

The Devil often uses people (in this case, the unbelieving Jews), to accomplish his purposes. However, when we are being persecuted, we must remember that the conflict goes much *deeper* than the people involved. Our real enemy is not the *people*, but the devil and other spiritual forces that work with him, who have empowered the people (Ephesians 6:12) and have blinded them (2 Corinthians 4:4).

"Test" and "tempt" are from the same N.T. Greek word. Satan is the tempter (Matthew 4:3 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5), and wants to make us stumble. God takes these same trials - situations which tempt us to make wrong decisions - and uses them to accomplish good in our lives (1 Peter 1:6-7 and Romans 8:28). For those who belong to God, the Devil's desires will be thwarted, and there will be no permanent harm done. No wonder we have no need to fear!

- Scripture also tells us that we can have an attitude of joy in the midst of trials, because of what God is accomplishing through them - Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2-3. (The trials themselves aren't what give us the joy!)

## SUFFER PERSECUTION

A general concept that focuses on "pressure," whether literal or figurative. It is often translated as "affliction" or "tribulation." (Also used in verse 9.)

## 10 DAYS

A comparatively short time - though it would last a while. (It would not merely be "a day.") Though persecution seems quite long, while we are experiencing it, Scripture gives us a more accurate perspective: It lasts only for a while (1 Peter 1:6 and 5:10). Once we have gotten through it, and it is over, we will realize how true this is. In fact, this will be our perspective for all eternity!

Something to remember: It is sure a lot better to go through trials, caused by the Devil, *for just a while*, than it is to be cast into the lake of fire, by God, the righteous judge, *forever!*

[Additional comment: Those who believe that these seven churches are representative of seven different "ages" in church history would suggest that this "10 days" also refers to 10 periods of persecution, in the early centuries of the church's existence.]

## FAITHFUL

You cannot be "faithful" and "fearful" at the same time. You will either focus on God's wisdom and power (and be faithful), or focus on your circumstances (and be fearful).

Because of their emperor worship, the city of Smyrna had a reputation of being faithful to Rome. These Christians were also called to be faithful - but to Jesus Christ, instead. Historically, it seems that the church of Smyrna not only followed Jesus' exhortation to be faithful, but remained faithful long after many of the other churches had lost their testimony.

## POINT OF DEATH

Most trials do not reach "the point of death." But whether or not they do, we are to have a faithfulness that knows no limits, a faithfulness that has a "come what may" attitude. ("I'm going to remain faithful to Jesus, 'come what may.' ")

One of the early martyrs of the church was a bishop from Smyrna, named Polycarp. He was offered the "opportunity" to deny Christ and remain alive, but chose to remain faithful to the point of death - literally. He was burned at the stake (in approximately A.D. 168), because he valued the *eternal* blessings of God more than the *temporary* blessings of Rome.

Jesus, the one who is speaking these words, left them an example, by his own death and his victory over death. These Christians would, if necessary, be following his example. Because of their union with him, they, too, would be guaranteed victory. (See below.)

## CROWN OF LIFE

A reward for faithfulness. Eternal life, contrasted with temporary persecution. Eternal life given to them by God, the source of life. For those who belong to God, death gains a new significance! It is not the end of everything good, nor the beginning of something horrible.

For those who remained *faithful* to God, their present suffering would have no lasting *negative* effect on them. (In contrast: For those who chose to *deny* Christ, in order to avoid suffering, their present *lack of* suffering would have no lasting *positive* effect on them.)

Some interesting connections to the word "crown": 1) Part of the city of Smyrna was built on a large hill. The outline of the buildings on this hill resembled a crown. 2) Some of their coins had a picture of a "goddess" who wore a crown.

## **Verse 11**

### **EAR / HEAR**

Individual application; each person must respond. This promise is applicable not only to the Christians at Smyrna, but to all Christians everywhere - to any genuine follower of God.

### **NOT HURT**

By *no* means, and under *no* condition would they experience *any* hurt related to the second death. And this applies to *all* who overcome! (We may get hurt *once* - in this present life - but we won't have to worry about being hurt *twice*.)

[The N.T. Greek has a double negative, for emphasis. Double negatives are acceptable in N.T. Greek. They don't "cancel" each other out, as they might, in the English language!]

### **SECOND DEATH**

The "overcomers" won't have to experience the second death, because Jesus suffered in their place. In contrast, their persecutors, who have rejected Jesus, have abandoned their only opportunity to escape the second death.

In the Scriptures, "death" does not mean that the person ceases to exist or to have consciousness. Rather, the word has the idea of "separation": separation of the spirit and soul from the body (physical death), or separation of the entire person from the presence of God (spiritual death).

About the "second death":

1. Identified as the "lake of fire" or the "fiery lake of burning sulfur" - Revelation 20:14; 21:8.
2. The "overcomers" will not be hurt by it - Revelation 2:11.
3. It has no power over those who are in the first resurrection - Revelation 20:6.
4. A list that illustrates the types of people who will experience it - Revelation 21:8.

Those who *do* overcome, who do not fear death *now* (and because of this, are faithful to God): They will not have to fear death *later*. They may experience *temporary* suffering now, but it will be eclipsed by the *eternal* blessings they will receive later.

Those who *don't* overcome, who become (or continue to be) fearful of circumstances they may face in this present life: They will have a lot more to fear, in eternity.