

## 03. Seven Letters to the Churches Smyrna ch2:8-11

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### Revelation ch 2:8-11

#### The Letter to Smyrna

The Revelation means the Unveiling - The unveiling of the person of Jesus Christ from the birth of the Church to the end of the Tribulation.

This book is the consummation of all things. The history of the church age through to the Jewish restoration during the Tribulation and on to the great appearing of the Lord Jesus to reign on earth, through to the Millennium and into the New Heaven and New Earth.

**Rev 1:1-2** ...to show to His servants the things which must shortly come to pass; (take place) the word shortly is better translated as 'suddenly' (Greek *Taxeí*) which means very rapidly once they start. When it happens it will be sudden.

This ties in with the birth pains analogy which Jesus gives in **Matt 24:8** **1 Thess 5:3** once they start will get quicker and quicker and closer together.

### Revelation 2:8-11

Letter to Smyrna

Meaning "Suffering" or "Death"

#### The Persecuted Church

**8** *"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,*

The name "Smyrna" comes from the Greek word "Smurna" from the Hebrew root that is translated "myrrh." Thus... death...

#### Myrrh

Myrrh is a bitter gum and costly perfume which exudes from a certain tree or shrub in Arabia and Ethiopia, or is obtained by incisions made in the bark: as an antiseptic it was used for embalming. It was also an ingredient in perfume (**Ps 45:8**), prominent in Song of Solomon, etc. It was also an ingredient in holy anointing oil for priests (**Ex 30:23**) and the purification of women (**Esther 2:12**). It was used in embalming (**John 19:39**) and was a gift of the Magi at Christ's birth (**Matt 2:11**):

Gold = royalty;

Frankincense = deity, priesthood;

Myrrh = suffering, death.

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In Jesus' Second Coming gold and frankincense are offered, but NO myrrh (**Isa 60:6**) since his death is now behind him—but it was offered to Christ at cross (**Mark 15:23**). The body of Jesus was embalmed by Joseph & Nicodemus (**John 19:39-40**). **Myrrh yields fragrance by being crushed**. This becomes very descriptive of this church. Note the "death" theme throughout this letter.

### Background History: Smyrna

- Smyrna possesses an excellent double harbour. The outer harbour was deep water mooring ground and the inner had a narrow entrance that could be blocked with a chain which made it extra secure.
- Today Smyrna is called Izmir, and it is the third largest city in Turkey (pop.300,000; NT: probably about 100,000?). It exports tobacco, grapes, figs, cotton, olives, and olive oil.
- About 900 B.C., according to Herodotus, the area fell into the hands of the Ionians and there commenced the most glorious phase of Smyrna's history. During this period the poet Homer was born, lived and died in Smyrna. Three centuries of greatness ended, however, with the attack of the Lydians.

In the 4th century, Alexander the Great, in response to a dream, ordered Lysimachus, one of his four generals, to build a strong, well-planned city, the most beautiful in Ionia, which became known as "the Flower of Ionia."

- From 27 B.C. to 324 A.D. she enjoyed great material prosperity. Strabo described it as the most beautiful city in the world. It was about 48 miles north of Ephesus.
- In the reign of Tiberius, it was almost blotted out by an earthquake. Between 178 and 180 A.D. it suffered a succession of seismic

disturbances which again reduced the vulnerable city to ruins. Marcus Aurelius once more restored it. In 378 another earthquake demolished the city, but the intrepid Smyrneans again rebuilt. Even today, bustling Izmir has been termed the "Paris of the Levant."

### Pagan Worship

Smyrna was richly embellished with temples and splendid buildings, beautiful in perfection and symmetry. Resulted in the title "the crown of Smyrna."

At the foot of the mountain stood the temple of Zeus, the father of the gods, reputed to be the lord of the sky, rain, clouds, and thunder. Along the Golden Street stood the shrines of Apollo the sun-god, Aphrodite

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the goddess of love and beauty, Aesculapius the god of medicine.

The goddess of Smyrna was Cybele (later, the Greek 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 became recognized in the great cities as the goddess of the settled life and of towns, hence her crown of walled cities. She appears on Smyrnan coins depicted as enthroned and wearing a crown of battlements and towers. [Goddess of fortresses, ("god of forces") Daniel 11:38?]

So, the Christians at the time of John's letter were living in a place steeped in Paganism. In addition to the usual deities, **Smyrna readily accepted Caesar worship.**

In **196 B.C.** the Smyrneans erected a temple to Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome, and they subsequently built one to Tiberius.

- The worship of the Emperor was compulsory. Each year a Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on the altar and to acknowledge publicly that Caesar was supreme lord. (They would have to say 'Caesar is Lord' ) In return, a formal certificate was given to say that he had done so. If they refused they couldn't buy or sell, providing economic sanctions against those who refused to worship the Emperor.

Originally the action was intended simply as proof of political loyalty, since the individual was permitted to worship whatever god or goddess he chose once he had offered to Caesar. This was a means of unifying and integrating the many and varied elements in the vast empire of Rome. Ecumenism?

- 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. Weak Christians sometimes compromised and did it to save themselves and their families. (but God knew what they'd done) Christians without root **Mark 4:17** do not last long. The Christians who refused to acknowledge Caesar in this way ended up dying a martyr's death. They were often burned at the stake and chose that to denying Christ. They willingly went the way of the cross.

The system clashed with the Christians beliefs that Jesus is Lord. Loyalty to the state and to Caesar was demonstrated through the practises of state religion with numerous feasts and festival days. Proving loyalty by presenting a pinch of incense to Caesar became a huge problem. Also the practise of State Religion meant joining in with the many pagan festivals and those who were sincere refused to join in with anything to do with 'other gods' and again were punished as a result. So, there was much persecution of Christians at this time.

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During the Seven year tribulation, everyone, including Christians, will face the same choice. In the tribulation each person will be required to receive the mark on their forehead or right hand to prove that they are willing to submit to the Antichrist politically, economically, and religiously. Those without the mark will be unable to buy or sell, facing economic sanctions. Scripture tells us that those who refuse for the sake of Jesus Christ will also be murdered maliciously.

In 169 (155?) A.D., the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, refused to recant.

"Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong.

How can I now speak evil of my King who has saved me?" The old man

was burned at the stake on the sabbath day, an object of Jewish hatred as well as from the Roman persecution.

### Title of Christ

**8. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things says the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;**

These are the elements of the identity of Jesus Christ to this church. During this period of time the church was facing martyrdom every day and all through this letter you can see the concept of death.

The persecution of Christians occurred intermittently over a period of 2 centuries from 64AD under Nero. In 250AD a massive Empire wide, wave of persecution took place during the edict of Decius which was in force for 18 months when many Christians were killed while others apostatised to escape execution.

However we should not forget that the early persecution of Christians was brought about by the Jews not the Romans. Paul being an early example.

Last week we made a note of the expression the First and the Last which occurs seven times in the Bible.

#### "First and the Last"

- Isaiah 41:4
- Isaiah 44:6
- Isaiah 48:12
- Revelation 1:11

And in two of these scriptures Jesus not only says He is the First and the Last but that He was dead and is alive. (The JW's don't like that)

- **Revelation 1:17-18** was dead and am alive
- **Revelation 2:8** was dead and am alive
- Revelation 22:13

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### Commendation

**9]** *"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.*

Jesus **knows** what we have accomplished for Him. He **knows** our works. He **knows** what really motivated it.

### Tribulation

• **Tribulation** = *thlipsis*.

1) a pressing, pressing together, pressure.

2) metaphor for oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress, straits.

• **Not** the specific "Great Tribulation"; but we all shall have tribulation, trouble, persecution (**John 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12, etc.**).

• "Poverty but rich": (Jesus inserts an encouragement - you are better off than you think you are) in vivid contrast to Laodicea, rich but poor (**Rev 3:17; 2 Cor 8:9**).

• Two words for poverty in the Greek: *penia*, the state of having nothing superfluous; and *ptochēia* (here), the state of one who has nothing at all; implies hardship you've got nothing.

• "I know your suffering": **John 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12**. *It could have been relieved by simply a pinch of incense offered to Caesar...*

(some might say they were being a secret Christian to avoid this - but you can't be a secret Christian when we are told to put our light where it can be seen.

We saw this in the Book of Hebrews where the persecution caused some to say we'll go along with going back to Judaism and then get saved at the last minute !! and the writer said this was absolutely not an option.

Jesus Himself said if you deny Me before men then He will deny us before His Father in Heaven **Matt 10:33**

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*9...and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

Don't forget that this is what Jesus calls these people, not John. Jesus says there are certain people in the church at Smyrna who are of the synagogue of Satan.

John knows a lot about the blasphemy of the Jews and writes about it in John ch 8 where Jesus has an intense debate with the Pharisees.

### Jews "Who Are Not"

- **Blasphemy:** "Synagogue of Satan." John knows about blasphemy of Jews (**John 8:44**).
- **Legalism:** leaven of Galatians
  - Demand of Gentile circumcision **Acts 15:1,10**
  - Peter is rebuked by Paul **Gal 2:11f; 3:1-3**
  - Peter agrees **2 Pet 3:15-16**
- **Early persecution** was brought on by the Jews not the Romans
  - in Antioch **Acts 13:50**
  - in Iconium **Acts 14:2,5**
  - in Lystra **Acts 14:19**
  - in Thessalonica **Acts 17:5**

Tragic heresy of the Church today: the view that Israel has been "replaced."

Very early in Church history the Church became antisemitic.

Tragic for the Jews (who suffered atrocities under the banner of "Christ"), but also for the Church because we lost our Jewish "roots."

Christian knowledge of the Old Testament is tragically lacking. [Do you feel "Jewish"? **Rom 2:28-29; Deut 10:16; 30:6.**]

Blasphemy of the non-Jews: The Gentile Church that "replaces" Israel? Appropriating Israel's promises to themselves?

**Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna** (John appointed Polycarp to bishop of Smyrna about 95AD)

- In 166 A.D., the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, refused to recant
- "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong. How can I now blaspheme my King who has loved me so?"
- The old man was burned at the stake on the sabbath day, an object of Jewish hatred as well as from the Roman persecution

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### "Tares" Sown in Early Church (false doctrines)

- Legalism: denial of Christ's completed work.
- Gnosticism: denial of Christ's humanity.
- Caesar worship: denial of Christ's Lordship.

### Exhortation

[Note: No "Criticism" in this letter. The Lord has no word of complaint.

They were satisfying His heart (2 Cor 8:9).]

**10. 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.

Fear is the opposite of faith. When you read the list of those to be thrown in the lake of fire in **Rev 21:8** the first one is the cowardly or fearful. !!

Fear none of these things which you are about to suffer....This is an exhortation remember.

The 10 days is held by some scholars to be a Hebrew idiom for a short period of time. We find it used that way in **Genesis 24:55; Job 19:3; Dan 1:12** more as a figure of speech.

Although that may be what that means there is also another way of looking at it. Especially as we are viewing these letters not only to the local churches of the day but of the churches over time. It's interesting that if you study the persecutions by Rome, history shows us that there were 10 Rulers who oversaw the persecution at that time. The dates they ruled are below.

### "10 Days"

54-68 Nero (Paul beheaded; Peter crucified upside-down)

95-96 Domitian (John exiled)

104-117 Trajan (Ignatius burned at the stake)

161-180 Marcus Aurelius (Polycarp martyred) the period that the film the Gladiators was based on.

200-211 Septimus Severus (killed Irenaeus)

235-237 Maximinus (killed Ursula and Hippolytus)

249-251 Decius

257-260 Valerian

270-275 Aurelian

303-313 Diocletian (Worst of all)

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**Total of 10 Emperors** under which there was specific and directed persecution of the Christians. Covering a total of **250 years!**

**There** are scholars who see this as 10 periods of time when persecution was at its worst.

### Roman Persecution

- Famine and pestilence falls on Rome. Diseases brought back from the Parthian wars devastated much of Rome and inundation from the Tiber put much of the grain storehouses under water.
- The Christians were a convenient scapegoat. These disasters were brought on by this new religion, so Christianity became a crime...
- **5 million believers died for Christ** during this period...Fox's *Book of Martyrs*. (the 20<sup>th</sup> century murdered more Christians than all the other centuries put together. Stalin himself was responsible for the murder of 30-40 million of his own people of which over half were Christians. That's not counting the Jewish murders and the Holocaust)

"Crown": The term is *stephanos*, not *diadem*. In Smyrna, the priests of the various deities in Smyrna were termed *stephanophori*, in reference to the laurel or golden crowns which they used to wear in public processions. They were awarded this honour at the end of their year of office.

### Crowns Promised

"Crown": Reward for works (not salvation) **James 1:12**. Their reward is with Him: at the "Bema" seat.

- Crown of Life (**James 1:12; Rev 2:10**) for those who have suffered for His sake.
- Crown of Righteousness (**2 Tim 4:8**) for those who loved His appearing.
- Crown of Glory (**1 Pet 5:4**) for those who fed the flock.
- Crown Incorruptible (**1 Cor 9:25**) for those who press on steadfastly.
- Crown of Rejoicing (**1 Thess 2:19**) for those who win souls.



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### Promise to the Overcomer

**11** *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."* ' "

Notice that the "Promise to the Overcomer" comes after the "Hear that hath an ear" phrase.

"Second death": **Rev 20:6**; **Jude 12**, "twice dead." Born once, die twice. Born twice, die once! (unless raptured)

### Admonitory Level (to all churches)

- Don't confuse persecution with the specific "Great Tribulation"..
  - Most of the Body, in most of the world, for most of the past 1900 Years have endured persecution. Is it coming to the West?
  - Ultimately the true body of Christ may have to go Underground.
  - **"Non-Jews"**? Replacement theology? Are the non-Jews those who claim that Israel has forfeited the promises and that the church now claims them. God is done with Israel. This was brought about, nearly 2,000 years ago in 155AD when Justin Martyr and his Jewish opponent Trypho had a debate. Justin Martyr was quoted as saying, "we who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ are the true Israelitic race."

In a mere 50 years after the last Book of the New Testament was written, Gentile Christians had already come to believe that their church had replaced the Jewish people in God's programme and that the only thing the Jewish nation could look forward to was condemnation.

Unfortunately, the roots of Replacement Theology, also known as supersessionism, run deep in Christian history. (See article on The Roots of Replacement Theology)

You only have to read the book of **Romans** to realise that Paul hammers away in **chapters 9,10,11** that God is not finished with Israel. Anyone who says He has is a liar and a heretic. It's blasphemy. It makes God a liar. God's promises to Israel, the Covenants we looked at recently in Book of Hebrews, show us that they are everlasting, literal covenants. They are for literal Israel.

The origin and destiny for the Church and Israel are different. God's plan is different for each. He deals with them separately.

Replacement Theology is the root cause of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

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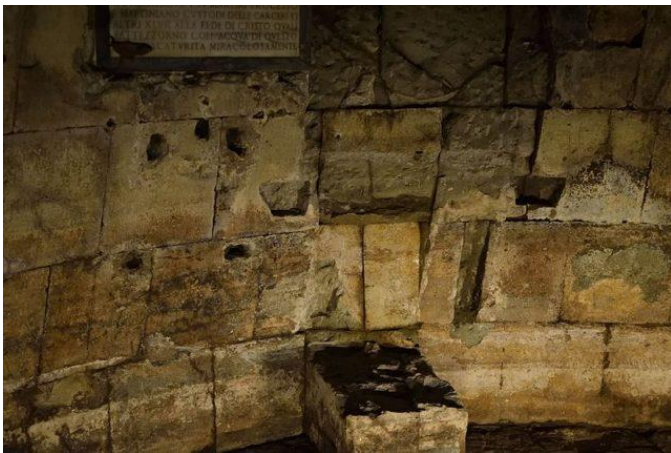
Each of the letters = for *all* churches...More Christians have been killed in the 20th Century than all the other centuries added together!

#### Personal Level (Homiletics)

*Yes, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*

#### 2 Timothy 3:12

Paul is in Mamertine Prison, knowing his execution is near, and is *encouraging Timothy*... We are promised persecution.



**Matt 5:10-12**

**2 Tim 3:12**

**John 15:20**

**Rev 2:10**

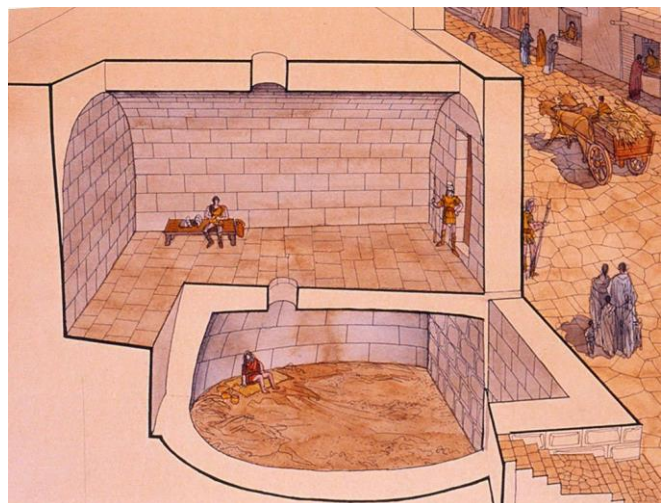
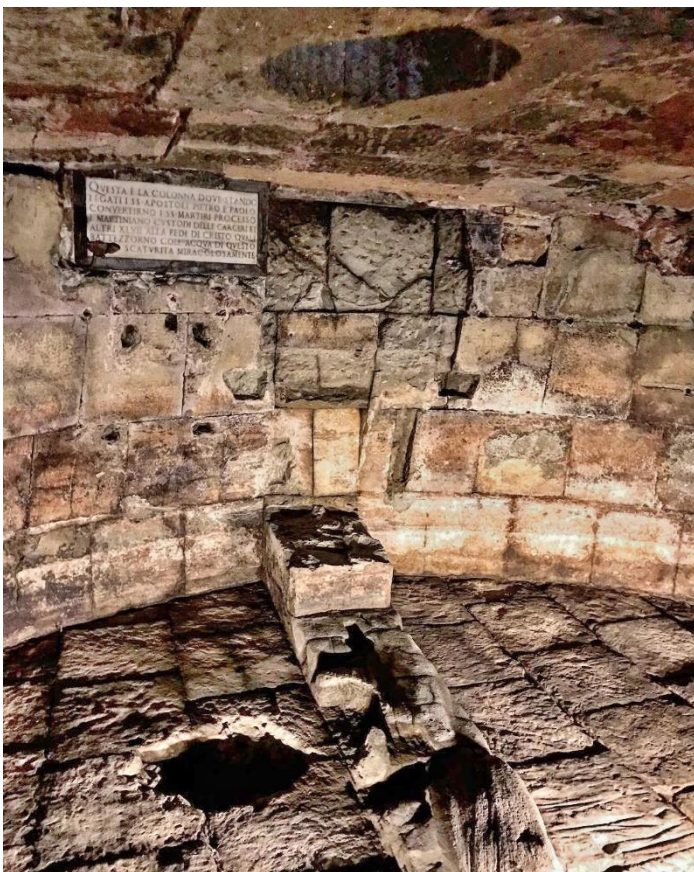
**Romans 8:35**

**Rom 12:14**

**John 5:16**

**2 Cor 12:10; Acts 13:50; Rom 8:35-37;**

**1Thess 3:3-4; Heb 11:36-38**



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### Why Do Christians Have Trials?

1. To glorify God **Dan 3:16-18, 24-25**
2. To Discipline for known sin **Heb 12:5-11; James 4:17 Rom 14:23; 1 John 1:9**
3. To prevent us from falling into sin **1 Pet 4:1-2**
4. To keep us from Pride **2 Cor 12:7-10**  
Paul kept from pride by his "thorn in the flesh." **Gal 4:15; 6:11**
5. To build faith **1 Pet 1:6-7**
6. To cause growth **Rom 5:3-5**
7. To teach obedience and discipline **Acts 9:15-16; Phil 4:11-13**
8. To equip us to comfort others **2 Cor 1:3-4**
9. To prove the reality of Christ in us **2 Cor 4:7-11**
10. For testimony to the angels **Job 1:8; Eph 3:8-11; 1 Pet 1:12**

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

**James 1:2-4**

**1 Peter 4:1-2** *Therefore since Christ suffered for us in the flesh arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.....*  
**1 Peter 1:6-7** *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup> These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

Covid 19 is sent for a reason.

God uses many things to get our attention especially when people or a nation are falling away. How many verses are there in the Bible that tell us that Satan brings about/causes disasters and calamities and pestilences? There aren't any. God is in control of everything and Satan's power is limited only to what God allows him to do.

**Job ch 1:7** God gives Satan permission but it is restricted.

### Prophetic Profile

Smyrna represents the **Persecuted Church**.