

## Revelation 2:8-11 “Smyrna: The Church of Looming Death”

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As all here know, Smyrna is a city in Cobb Country located about 10 miles northwest of Atlanta and is considered an integral part of the Metro Atlanta area. It boasts of a revitalized and active downtown with charming neighborhoods. Indeed, *Money Magazine* as one of the top fifty cities in which to live in the US. The city was known by several names until 1872 when it was incorporated with the biblical name, Smyrna. Named after the ancient city which we find in our text today. When we examine the text, we learn that *since the basic call to follow Christ is a call to death, then you and I should prepare to live self-sacrificially.*

### *Context*

The *Revelation* should be read as a series of seven visions that span the entire time from the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of Christ until the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. Each of these seven cycles depicts the same spiritual war, each from a different perspective, camera angle, taking us deeper and deeper into the mysterious plan of God. We are in the first vision. A breathtaking, staggering vision of Christ among the seven golden lampstands, identified as the seven churches to which Christ commands John to write. These seven letters continue through chapter 3, where the first vision ends. These seven churches are historical congregations in the Roman province of Asia, modern Turkey. Issues addressed in the letters are not limited to the seven churches in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Rather the number 7 is symbolic, symbolizing completion, perfection. So the principles apply to the Church universal, throughout the ages.

### *The City and Church of Smyrna*

2<sup>nd</sup> of these seven. Verse 8, *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write. The city of Smyrna is the modern city of Izmir, Turkey, the only one of the seven cities that is not a ruin today. Smyrna is a coastal town, sitting on the Aegean Sea, 35 miles up the coast, north of Ephesus. She is the rival of Ephesus. A cosmopolitan, sophisticated city known for her high culture. The birthplace of the epic poet Homer—author of the Iliad, the Odyssey. Smyrna is famous for her sports stadium and its fanfare. The city also boasts of a library and public theater. Ancient coins describe Smyrna as the “First of Asia in beauty and size.” A picturesque city, at the foot of Mt. Pagus which rises 500 feet over the harbor. A famous road called the “Street of Gold” winds its way around Mt. Pagus, so from a distance it is designed to look like a golden necklace adorning the statue of a goddess. On top of Mt. Pagus is the acropolis. Two temples, temple of Zeus and the temple dedicated to pagan goddess, Cybele. The circle of colonnaded buildings on the mountaintop gives the skyline the appearance of a crown, known as the “crown of Smyrna.” Very important when contrasted with the crown of life that Jesus offers the Smyrnian Christians in verse 11.*

Last time, we saw the church in Ephesus severely criticized by Christ because she had *left her first love* and therefore Jesus threatened to come and remove its lampstand. But the Smyrnians don’t receive any criticism. Of the seven churches, there are only two which Christ

does not criticize. Smyrna and Philadelphia. No criticism for Smyrna, why? Because the church in Smyrna is a persecuted church. Verse 9, *I know your tribulation*. Excellent translation. The Greek word is θλίψις literally *tribulation*, as rendered by most English versions. The Smyrnians are living in tribulation. That is why the Apostle John writes, to identify with suffering Christians in tribulation. 1:9, *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation* (θλίψις). Most American evangelicals believe that the tribulation is a future event. The 7 years immediately preceding the Second Coming of Christ. Furthermore, it is taught that believers won't even see the tribulation. Christians will suddenly disappear from the world. So they won't be here during the tribulation. But no one told that to the Smyrnians. They didn't read the *Left Behind* books. They missed the movie.

Here they are suffering in the tribulation. What does that look like? Verse 9, *I know your tribulation and your poverty* The Smyrnian Christians are poor, not just because they come from the bottom rung of the social ladder. Their *poverty* is linked grammatically to their *tribulation* by the conjunction "and." *I know your tribulation and your poverty*. Their poverty is the result of tribulation. They are labeled, marked, blacklisted. Consequently, they have lost their jobs, unhirable, can't make a living. Their property has been seized, they can't do business in the marketplace. They are left impoverished. And from the looks of it, their tribulation is to intensify. Verse 10, *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison*. They are about to be imprisoned. They are living in the tribulation. Too bad American Christians aren't there to urge them not to worry about the tribulation, that they would never see it.

### *Source of Opposition and Persecution*

Why are the Smyrnians persecuted? Some would suggest, a Conspiracy Theory. And they would be right. Except its not a theory. There are conspirators in Smyrna conspiring to rid city of Christians. Scheming against believers in Smyrna. Plotting their ruin. Who are these enemies of the faith? Verse 9, *I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*. The Christians in Smyrna are opposed by those who say they are Jews but who really are not. Undoubtedly, these antagonists are ethnic Jews, who claim lineage from Abraham. Ancestry.com proves that they are descendants of Abraham. But they are not true Jews, Jesus asserts. Here again is the teaching of the New Testament about Jewishness: Physical descent from Abraham does not make one a true Jew. <sup>28</sup> *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly...* <sup>29</sup> *No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly* (Rom 2:28-29 NIV). Lineage from Abraham is not physical, but spiritual. *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise* (Gal. 3:29). It is faith in Christ that makes one an heir to the promises given to Abraham. Faith in Christ is what makes one a child of Abraham, the father of the faith. Lineage from Abraham is not genealogical, it is Christological.

For this claim, Jewish opposition arises against the Christians. The Christians claim Jewish privilege, their special status in God's sight as His chosen people. Elect before the foundation of the world. Redeemed by the Jewish Messiah. Intolerable for the Jews. The Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. He was a Nazarene, an obscure Galilean peasant, a Man of Sorrows. How could the Messiah be born to poor parents of peasant stock then crucified on a cross—the Old Testament symbol of God's curse, *for a hanged man is cursed by God* (Dt. 21:23)? A Crucified Christ totally contradicts their worldview. According to the assumptions, a

crucified Christ is a logical contradiction, like saying, “Fried ice.” So likewise the idea of a crucified Christ is absurd. The Christ is predicted by prophets to be the divine warrior-king who comes to conquer the world! The very Son of God. How can a low-class, obscure Nazarene be the Christ? For that the Jews hated Him and demanded for Pilate to crucify Him. The Jewish leaders had to rid the world of this dangerous idea. They conspired to eliminate Christianity, to stomp out the dangerous idea spreading like wildfire. So the Jews persecuted the early believers in Jerusalem. After Saul of Tarsus was converted, it was the Jews who hounded his footsteps throughout his missionary journeys. When Paul was in Pisidian Antioch, the Jews became jealous of the crowds that the Apostle was attracting. What happened? *But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region* (Act 13:50 NIV). Then it was the Jews who embittered the crowds against Paul in Iconium (Acts 14:2). It was the Jews who stoned Paul and left him for dead in Lystra (Acts 14:19). The Jews ran Paul out of Thessalonica (Acts 17:5). Berea (Acts 17:13). The Jews opposed Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:12). Finally, had the Apostle arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27). Now in Smyrna Jews are conspiring against Christians.

This news is not anti-Semitism. It is revealed by a Jew to a Jew. Christ—according to His human nature—is a Jew. John a Jew. As well as all the other apostles. This should not be taken as hate speech. Nor can this history be used to justify the terrible atrocities committed against Jews in Western Christendom. The great shame of the Christian nations of Europe is that so-called Christians twisted this truth on order to justify all types of evil against Jewish people in Europe: banishing them from the land, confining Jews to ghettos, all of which culminated in the Holocaust. On the other hand, past crimes against the Jews, post-Holocaust guilt cannot justify fanatical theology about the Jews as taught in the American church: dispensationalism. God works salvifically in two ways: one for Jews and one for Gentiles. Two distinct eternal destinies: Gentile Christians in heaven, Jews on earth, restored Davidic kingdom. To that effect, Christ will not return until certain events take place with respect to the modern, political state of Israel. So it is taught, “The Jews are God’s chosen people, God will bless the U.S. if we side with Israel. Always ally with Israel. Pray for the peace of Israel.” Besides influencing American foreign policy with respect to the Middle East—which we won’t get into—it gives the impression to other nations in the region that the Jews of Israel are more special than the other peoples. Is there any wonder why American Christians are so ineffective in evangelizing Palestinians, Persians? We must read the Old Testament in light of the New. Jesus says, *I know ... the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not*. The Jews who reject Christ are not true Jews. *Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel* (Rom. 9:6). The Israel of God is the elect Jews and Gentiles throughout the ages who are growing together into the one olive tree of God. True Israel is the church, the church is true Israel.

With that said, the Jewish leaders in Smyrna are opposing the Christians. How? *I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not*. Slander. Lies. Propaganda. The Jews spin stories to the Roman authorities accusing Christians of all kinds of evil. One, cannibalism. “Whenever they meet they celebrate a meal; they eat a body and drink its blood.” Two, incest. “Husbands and wives call each other *brother* and *sister*.” Worse, “the Christians refuse to acknowledge that Caesar is Lord. They say there is another king, Jesus.” So the Jews incite the Roman authorities against the Christians. The charge: Enemies of the state, enemies of Caesar. A threat to the Empire. A dangerous crime in Smyrna. The city is famous for her allegiance to Rome. Back in the day, the Roman Empire was struggling for global supremacy against the

Carthaginian Empire, Rome against Carthage. Smyrna choose to side with Rome. In 195 BC, Smyrna became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of the goddess of Rome. In 23 BC, Smyrna was chosen out of ten patriotic cities to be the location of a new temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius. Smyrna is the first city that promotes the worship of the Emperor. This is where Emperor worship begins. Smyrna's strong allegiance to Rome makes it very dangerous place to live as a Christian, where every citizen is required once a year to come and burn incense to Caesar and confess that Caesar is Lord. But the Christians refuse. For that they are bitterly persecuted by the Roman authorities, who in turn are incited by the Jewish opposition to Christ.

Yet behind the Jewish antagonists, there is yet a more diabolical enemy of Christianity. Verse 9, *I know...the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* Satan is the slanderer. The ancient adversary, the first foe of Christ. Satan wages war against Christ by slandering then attacking Christians. Here we are given a glimpse of the greater spiritual battle that takes place behind the curtains of human history. From a human perspective, it looks like the Romans are the enemies of Christians; or the Jews, but the real source of this hatred is Satan himself. Verse 10, *...Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison.* The attacks against the church, the slander against Christians, all the division in the congregation, the infighting, bickering, the jealousy, pettiness can all be traced back to the Devil. His goal is to drive members from the church. To put enough pressure on people so that they will deny any allegiance to Christ. In my experience, he is alive and well and doing just fine. As a congregation, we must take sight of the greater spiritual battle and not allow ourselves to be used by the devil to bring harm to the church.

### *Reward for Faithfulness*

So what are Smyrnians to do? How do they survive these Satanic attacks? What do you think Jesus would tell them? In the gospel according to American church, therapeutic moralism: "Let go and let God. He will change your situation." Is that what Jesus says? No. He says, I know your tribulation, and it gets worse. Verse 10, *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful, unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* As already mentioned, the Smyrnians shall be imprisoned. In the ancient world, prisons are not correctional facilities, where a criminal is sent to be reformed or rehabilitated. There is no such thing as a prison sentence; 5 years, 10 years. People are imprisoned for one reason: To await trial which often ends in execution. The case here, therefore Jesus urges *Be faithful, unto death.* Christ doesn't say, "Well, if you only pray hard enough, or believe more, then you'll be released. No. "Be faithful unto death." Smyrna is the church of looming death.

The Smyrnians are human like us. Perhaps on a lonely night sitting in the darkness of a damp dungeon, some begin to doubt, despair. The experience, for them, presents a crisis of faith. Maybe in a moment of wavering faith, they might just wonder if they have sacrificed for nothing. They have given up everything to follow Christ. Homes, money, family, dreams. What do they get in return? Suffering, scorn, prison, then death. They might wonder whether it was worth it. Some even ask the faith-crisis question, "If I had to do it over, would I? Would I do it again?"

But Jesus doesn't let them drown in despair. He promises reward for faithfulness. Verse 10, *...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* For the one who is faithful, He promises reward: "the crown of life." In contrast to city of Smyrna, the picturesque

city at the foot of Mt. Pagus crested with colonnaded temples, known as the “crown of Smyrna,” Jesus offers the *crown of life*. The crown doesn’t refer to royalty, but to victory. It is the victory garland given to the athlete who wins the race. The Smyrnians, famous for their sports stadium and games, wouldn’t find it difficult to envision the Christian life as a race, requiring discipline and endurance. The pace is fast, the course is tough. There is sweat, pain, agony. Yet at the end of the race stands the supreme Emperor, the King of kings and Lord of lords, in His hand is the crown of life. Eternal life. Given not to the one who starts the race, many start the race but don’t last. Many fall-away and quit Christ. The crown is given only to the one who finishes the race. If necessary, even proving one’s faith by one’s death. Though they experience the first death, they *will not be hurt by the second death* (v. 11), eternal death. For they shall receive the *crown of life*, eternal life.

Is this really applicable to us? Perhaps relevant to Christians in Iran, but to American Christians? Maybe not. Nevertheless, we must fundamentally understand this looming death for Smyrnan Christians is not an isolated experience—it is the basic call to follow Christ. This is Discipleship 101. Jesus said, *If any man should come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross*. What is a cross for the Smyrnians? Not jewelry. It is a means of brutal execution in the Roman Empire. When Jesus calls a person to take up a cross He calls one to one’s execution. As Bonhoeffer prophetically announced about his own martyrdom, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die” (Costs of Discipleship). The Christian life is a life of death. Dying to self, dying to sin, dying to the world; and maybe martyrdom itself. Which raises a sobering question. How can a person really know if one would actually lay down one’s life? I don’t put this as an intellectual exercise or mind game. How can we know? Well, ultimately, we can’t know until facing death. But one thing is for certain, if you do not *live* for Christ, you will never *die* for Christ. If you do not live self-sacrificially, self-denyingly, then we would never die for Christ.

### *Polycarp*

An arrest warrant was issued for the elderly pastor. At his trial, he would be ordered to renounce Christ. Were he to refuse, he would be executed in the stadium like those before him. So his congregation begged him to flee the city. He wanted to stay. But at their insistence, he finally gave in, and escaped. The police searched his house and found two servants whom they tortured, one of whom betrayed him and gave away the hiding place; the upper room of a farmhouse in the countryside. When the police arrived, he yielded, “The Lord’s will be done.” Then he asked permission to pray, which he did for two hours. As they traveled to the city, the officer urged him to deny his faith. “What harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord’ then sacrificing to [the emperor], to ensure your safety?” The pastor remained silent. On arrival, he was brought before the proconsul in the stadium. They announced his name to the crowd and the stadium went wild. “This is the teacher of Asia. He is the father of the Christians.” The proconsul urged him to recant because of his age. “Respect your old age...Swear by the genius of Caesar...Swear and I will set you free, reproach Christ.” He replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” The proconsul pressed harder, “Swear by the genius of Caesar...I have wild beasts, I will throw you to them if you do not recant.” “Call them,” he answered. Again the proconsul persisted, “I’ll have you burned, since you make light of the beasts, if you will not recant.” He said, “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour...and are ignorant of the fire

of...eternal punishment reserved for the godless. Why do you tarry? Bring it.” As they tied him to the stake, he prayed, “O Lord God Almighty...I thank you for counting me worthy ...of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of your martyrs.” The fire was lit, but could not consume him. The wind mysteriously picked up, blowing the flames away from him. Finally, the executioner was ordered to run him through with a dagger. He bled to death. It was 2:00 in the afternoon. February 22, AD 156 (“Martyrdom of Polycarp,” *ANF* 1:40-43). As a youth, the pastor had been a student of the Apostle John who wrote this letter to the church in Smyrna. The man’s name: Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Amen.