

SMYRNA, A THEOLOGY OF OVERCOMING SUFFERING

Revelation 2:8-11

I. BACKGROUND

A. When The Cities in Turkey became Roman.

1. The cities in Revelation are in Modern Turkey known as Asia Minor or Anatolia.
2. This was the land of the “Hittites” in the Old Testament.
3. When Rome rose to power, many of these cities offered to become Roman rather than fight.
4. Key cities established temples for Emperor worship to show loyalty. Smyrna was one of them.
5. Smyrna added a temple to the goddess Roma, who Romans did not worship outside of Rome. This was an extreme way of saying “We are as loyal as Rome itself to you.”

B. The Outline of the Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3.

1. Jesus is described in metaphors and imagery relevant to the church; *“the words of him who...”*
2. The churches are commended by Jesus; *“I know that you...”*
3. Jesus transitions to list the churches sins; *“but this I have against you”*
4. Then give promises for those who change; *“To the one who overcomes I will”*
5. **Smyrna’s** is given no correction. (Philadelphia is the only other exempt from correction).

II. *“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

- A. Angel-ἄγγελος A human messenger. Angels are heavenly messengers sent by God.
- B. Smyrna Σμύρνα contains an ancient association to the word Myrrh in thought and language.¹

III. *These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.*

- A. Jesus is the first and final authority who not only died, but died and came to life again.
- B. This is who speaks to you today. Jesus has an authority that goes beyond fear and grave.
- C. Smyrna’s church persecution was intense and Jesus let the remedy be that he is immense. Bigger!
- D. Reframe your crisis in Christ!

IV. *I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!*

- A. Smyrna was one of the richest cities in Turkey (Asia Minor/Anatolia) but its Christian the poorest.
- B. Believers who did not conform to the worship of the emperor or participate in idol festivals were thought to be social snobs and “atheists” for not worshipping the emperor or other gods. This month in this place we learned of Muslims becoming Christians and having their homes burnt. A woman who kicked out her husband and kept his children from him for his faith, not his infidelity but his faith.
- C. Jesus points out their suffering and poverty and tries to help them see their reward
- D. The Laodicean church we will look at in a few weeks had the opposite view. They boasted *“I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked”* (Revelation 3:17).

V. *I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

- A. Satan literally means “accuser”. The best way to read this is a group of Jewish people slandering the Church to the government authorities resulting in persecution and suffering.
- B. Jewish bitterness towards Christians in Smyrna is recorded in early Christian writings of Polycarp (69-155 AD) and Pionius (? - 250 AD).² Both were martyred in different decades.

VI. *Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.*

- A. Parting of the ways. (Two Revolts (70 & 125 AD), Temple Tax and Jesus Christ).
- B. *Can’t find an honest scholar who will say it’s more than literally 10 days or “I just don’t know”.*
- C. διάβολος “Devil” here means Devil. Diablos like Spanish.
- D. **John 16:2** They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.”

¹ Modern scholars have trouble with this word’s etymology (History of change evolution, use and growth of words in a language). Some scholars argue Myrrh, the fragrant tear like sap used in burial is at the center of this word. It seems to be a barrowed word from Semitic (Near Eastern) languages. Akkadian- *murru*; Ugaritic *snn mr*; Arabic *murr* Hebrew מִרְרָה. While there is not much modern research done to strengthen the connection of this cities name to the fragrant spice used in burial, the Near Eastern Languages show sound similarities. Additionally, the ancient people of the region made their own analogies of the city to the spice Myrrh and burial. For example, the Greek philosopher Plutarch (46-119 AD) in his work *Sertorius 1.3* says there are two places with names identical to those of fragrant plants, Ios, (Violet) and Smyrna. An ancient book on the etymology of Greek words from Constantinople (Istanbul Turkey). It dates to around to 1150 AD connecting the words Myrrh μύρ, μύρω, μύρον with Smyrna Σμύρνα.¹ This would be 1000 years closer to the use of the word in a book written 50 miles from the city Smyrna itself.

² George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1428.

E. **Pliny the Younger, Letter X.96.** "They were in the habit of meeting before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind."³

F. **The Theology of Suffering:**

1. **Acts 9:16** "I will show him (Paul) how much he must suffer for my name."
2. **2 Timothy 3:12** In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted;
3. **Matthew 10:21-22** "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.
4. **Philemon 2:5-8** In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; became a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

G. **The Myrrh of Smyrna and our world today.**

H. **Living Martyrs:** Wally Mangandahl, Daniel Messiah, Joel Corbin, Joel and Adrienne Charest.

VII. ***Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.***

A. **Polycarp 69-155 AD** a disciple of the Apostle John. He was martyred in Smyrna with believers from the church in Philadelphia. They burned him alive and when the flames did not kill him, Polycarp was stabbed to death. They gave him the opportunity to worship the emperor and deny Christ... "Have respect for your age... Swear by the fortune of Caesar, repent, say 'Away with the atheists!'" But Polycarp, with a serious face, looked at the whole crowd, those in the stadium, and shook his hand at them, both groaned and looked up to the heaven, and said, "Away with the atheists!" The proconsul persisted, "Take the oath and I will release you. Revile Christ." Polycarp responded, "Eighty-six years I have served him (Jesus) and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king and savior? You threaten me with fire that burns for a moment and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."⁴

B. **Victor's Crown:**

1. τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς **The crown of life.** The crowns Christ gives are not like the victor crowns of the ancient Olympics. These do not wither away. They brighten and stay forever.
2. **1 Corinthians 9:25** Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

C. Paul and Peter told their readers in Turkey (Anatolia) they would receive a crown at the Lord's coming

1. **2 Timothy 4:8** Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.
2. **1 Peter 5:4** "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

VIII. ***Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.***

A. **Second Death:**

1. **Matthew 10:28** Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.
2. **Revelation. 10:21** Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.
3. **Revelation 20:10** ...They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

B. **Νικῶ** Victorious, The goddess Nike, (Roman, Victoria) crowned athletes & kings.

IX. **CONCLUSION**

A. **Moriah Irace:** Pastor Tony Palow, "Sometimes the only way out is through."

³ <https://www.attalus.org/old/pliny10b.html#96>

⁴ Rick Brannan, tran., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

THE IMPERIAL CULT WORSHIP IN ASIA AND SMYRNA

B. The Imperial Cult: Emperor Worship at Ephesus.

1. Eastern cities dedicated to Emperor worship were called “Kaisareion” Καϊσάρεια
2. When Julius Caesar died, Haley’s comet was visible. Augustus Caesar said *“Look, it is the soul of Julius ascending to become a god.”* From that time forward, Romans viewed the dead Caesars as gods and the living Caesars as the “son of a god”.
3. **Suetonius Life of Julius Caesar 81-89:** *“He died in the fifty-sixth year of his age, and was numbered among the gods, not only by a formal decree, but also in the conviction of the common people. For at the first of the games which his heir Augustus gave in honor of his apotheosis, a comet shone for seven successive days, rising about the eleventh hour, and was believed to be the soul of Caesar, who had been taken to heaven; and this is why a star is set upon the crown of his head in his statue.”*⁵
4. This is why Jesus’ title *“the son of God”* was volatile to Romans and the worship of a dead Caesar offensive to Christians.
5. Romans referred to Christians as “atheists” for their lack of participation in imperial worship. This marked them as “anti-social” and often became the target of cynicism.
6. Romans did not worship emperors that were living, but many, east of Rome did and this was permitted by the Roman Emperors.
7. Augustus had allowed Ephesus to build two temples in his honor, and Domitian had named Ephesus “guardian” of the imperial cult, making it the foremost center of the imperial cult in Roman Asia⁶
8. Smyrna and Pergamum also were centers for Imperial Emperor worship.
9. There is an inscription in Ephesus where Domitian’s name is stricken from a public record, vandalism.
10. The portrait of an evil world ruler demanding worship (**Rev. 13:12–15**) would certainly be relevant to Christians in Ephesus, where statues of the emperors were present for worship everywhere.⁷

⁵ <https://www.walksinsiderome.com/blog/becoming-a-god-the-deification-of-julius-caesar/>

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 106.

⁷ Craig S. Keener, 106.