



**Smyrna**  
**So, You're Being Persecuted, No Worries, It's About to Get Worse**  
**Revelation 2:8-11**

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Revelation 2:8–11

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander by those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. The one who has an



ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.” (NASB 2020)

This is a picture of the church during the period of persecution under the Roman Empire from 100 AD up to the Edict(s) of Toleration and the Edict of Milan.

It is also a picture of the church today of North Korea, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Libya and Nigeria. Those are all nations that have extreme levels of persecution in them today per the World Watch List at [www.Opendoors.org](http://www.Opendoors.org). There are other nations with very high levels of persecution but for now, we are sticking with those that would look like Smyrna.

In the 2000 years of the Church’s history, it has been estimated that nearly two thirds of all the martyrs died in the 20th century. In the “Christian World Encyclopedia,” scholar David B. Barrett maintains that during the last 20 centuries there have been close to 40 million “martyrs,” 26,685,000 of them in the 20th century. Barrett uses the term “martyr” in a very broad sense. He writes: “This century has seen very numerous martyrs, especially because of Nazism, communism, and racial and tribal conflicts.”

There is more religious persecution in the 21st century than at any other in history. Brutal religious persecution is going on around the world today. Thousands of religious believers were martyred in the last few years. Many others have suffered imprisonment, torture, burning, enslavement and starvation. Christians are the most persecuted group in the world. (Water 2001, 848)

The next church Jesus writes to is in Smyrna. At the time the letter was written, Smyrna was most likely pastored, per church history, by a man named Polycarp. We will get back to Polycarp since his murder at the hands of the Romans has been so well documented for us.

The big thing we see in this short letter, the shortest one of the seven, is this, nothing bad is said about this church.

The way Jesus refers to Himself is something that would be encouraging to a church staring down persecution and martyrdom.

Jesus was victorious over death and because of that, they would also be part of that victory.

Smyrna still exists today in Turkey and is known by the name Izmir, the third largest town in modern Turkey. The area was subjected to a lot of earthquakes during the period of persecution, which is not all that surprising. God used and still uses natural disasters today to judge nations and states. Because of that, and because the city has been continuously lived in, most of the ruins of the old city of Smyrna lie underneath the present city of Izmir.

At the time this letter is written, the population of Smyrna was around 100,000. The town itself is located along the coast, 40 miles northeast of Ephesus.

The name Smyrna “was fitting and expressive to the ancient mind for a city which seemed to exemplify characteristics which myrrh symbolized.” (Hemer 2001, 58)

We need to recognize this association with myrrh since the spice, which is used in burial, must be crushed first before it is usable.

Aromatic resinous gum, usually from the bark of trees and shrubs of genus *Commiphora* (*Balsamodendron*), in biblical times obtained from Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. (Myers 1987, 738)



It was and is still used in luxury perfumes as well as heavily used in Jewish funerals. It is also part of the formula for anointing oil (Exodus 30:23) to be used in the Tabernacle and Temple. It still is used for that today as well.

When we consider the major issue in this church is the persecution they were under, the name becomes more important. "And the symbolism of myrrh may be pressed a little further. As it had been used in death and burial, in the expectation of an after-life, so Christ himself had died and lived again. The themes of suffering, death and resurrection pervade every verse of our letter." (Hemer 2001, 59)

A couple of promises we must remind ourselves of, ones we would like to forget.

Acts 14:21–22

"After they had proclaimed the good news in that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch. They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, "We must enter the kingdom of God through many persecutions."" (NET 2nd ed.)

2 Timothy 3:12

"Now in fact all who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (NET 2nd ed.)

Here in this nation today, persecution, like what was seen in the church during the Roman Empire, does not take place.

Don't get me wrong, persecution is alive and well in this nation, just not as violent and pervasively in your face as it was then. We are still seeing, though, elements of it as Jesus will point out in His letter since persecution began in Smyrna as discrimination and financial pressure before progressing further.

What did persecution look like under Rome though when we talk about? To understand that, lets go back to Pastor Polycarp, who served faithfully as the pastor in Smyrna until he was murdered by the Romans.

This man was a disciple of John and was saved at the age of 14 because of John's ministry. He lived to be 100 years of age serving the Lord for 86 years, most of that as the pastor of the church in Smyrna. Based on when he was martyred, February 23, 155 AD, at the time this letter was written to the church in Smyrna, Polycarp would have been in his 30's. The events of his martyrdom provide a clear view of the events John is writing to this church about and is descriptive of what the church endured in the Roman Empire until Constantine. We know this from the oldest written account of a Christian martyr outside of the NT.

As we examine some of the reasoning given by the state for persecution during the time covered by the prophecy in this letter, we will find some of the same hyperbole that we have begun to hear in the west today. The game plan is still the same. In those nations with extreme persecution today, they too use some of the same reasoning.

China, once a site of extreme persecution, and this persecution is still ongoing there, shows us how the church moves underground to survive. This also took place in the Roman Empire, the Ichthus or fish symbol came from this period. Christians who wished to worship would look for the fish and gather there.

Early Christians who gathered for secret meetings in the catacombs of Rome used the sign of a fish to signal fellow Christians that a meeting was near. They probably chose the Greek word for fish (ichthus) ἰχθύς as a code for the name of Christ: Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter (Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior). The first letters of these Greek words combine to make the word ichthus in Greek. (Packer, Tenney and White Jr. 1997, 226)



In China, stories were told regarding the persecution they underwent by the communists that “sometimes, devils often follow the footsteps of God to undo his work,” a local Christian whispered to me, referring to the period in the 1940s when the Communists forced their way in there and Mao Zedong’s atheist ideology clashed violently with the Christian faith.” (Yiwu 2011, 213)

The worst took place during the Cultural Revolution when public executions of pastors took place in China. “In order to protect their faith from being totally suppressed in that region, some brave Christians gathered for services inside mountain caves. As a result, Christianity survived, and a few years after Mao Zedong’s death, it came back again with a vengeance. Village after village became Christian territory.” (Yiwu 2011, 224)

In Rome, Jews were held exempt to the requirement to worship the states gods as well as the cult of Caesar worship even after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. But there was a point in time where the remaining Jews in the empire, quit saying that Christians were part of their community and as such, the exemption for Christians, disappeared. Smyrna had a large Jewish population who led the initial persecution that took place there. Thus, the label, “synagogue of Satan.”

This brings us up to the time of John’s exile. What did persecution look like at that time?

A.D. 95...“the same year Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor’s. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria.” (Dio 1914-1927, 349) Notice the punishments per Dio.

“By the late first century, emperor worship touched many aspects of Roman life, embracing the political, the economic, and the social. Civic events and legal transactions included pledges of allegiance to Caesar as “Lord” and “God” (i.e., dominus and deus in Latin, or κύριος (kyrios) and θεός (theos) in Greek—the biblical titles Christians used for God the Creator and his Son Jesus Christ). As they entered the theater, sporting competitions, gladiatorial games, or public festivals, citizens tossed a pinch of incense on a small altar as a sacrifice to the “divine Caesar.”...Such practices were not necessarily taken seriously as major religious events. Rather, they were expressions of patriotism, national unity, and gratitude for the benevolent rule of the Roman emperor.” (Davis 2000, 65-66)

Christians looked at this two ways. Culturally oriented “Christians” said this was a harmless expression of patriotism. But most believers argued that confessing Caesar as “Lord and god” was idolatry. The decisions they had to make are like ones we must make as well. At what point do the demands of the state, cease being reasonable.

During the recent pandemic, many churches were forced into having to decide, just like Christians were doing during the persecution from Rome, regarding Romans 13:1 and is it applicable to the current situation, or not. Oh, and one more thing, Satan is a liar and a deceiver and will lie to us about this exact thing.

Romans 13:1

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (ESV)

But when the state acts like a god and tells you you may not worship together.



Hebrews 10:24–25

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (ESV)

Those who refused to worship the Emperor were considered, by the state, to political subversives worthy of death. Those who refused to close their churches, in some states, were also considered to be subversives as well.

The persecution continued in Smyrna.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp sets out quite clearly both the issue at stake—Lord Christ versus Lord Caesar—and the state’s (as well as the general population’s) view of Christians as disloyal atheists who threatened the well-being of the empire. In the face of this antipathy, the steadfastness of Polycarp’s faith in Christ and the fearlessness with which he faced death became a model for many believers who found themselves in similar circumstances during the course of the next century and a half, until various edicts of toleration issued...between A.D. 311 and 313 (including the letter of Constantine and Licinius in 313 known as the Edict of Milan) brought an end to the conflict and victory to the church. (Holmes 1999, 222)

Remember, John was exiled by Domitian because of his issue regarding the temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar in Ephesus. Smyrna and Pergamum also had similar temples. Under Domitian, persecution, which had begun in earnest under Nero, continued.

In correspondence to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger informs us as to the penalties administered to believers as well as a belief, they had about true Christians, those who were genuine believers.

“In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed...Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge.” (Pliny the Younger 1931, 401-403)

If those are the choices the church in Smyrna was facing, yes, they are being persecuted. Their pastor, Polycarp, also was eventually martyred.

Our culture, in some states, has deemed it reasonable to force businesses, like cake makers or photographers, to take part in the social ills of our culture by telling them they must make cakes celebrating same sex marriages; or telling them they must take photographs of the same weddings. But here is the question for the believer, just because the culture says this is okay, is it? Should we as believers compromise our faith and celebrate those things which the Bible teaches are an abomination to God.

Some have even tried to force churches to not only condone same sex marriages but perform them as well.

I never dreamt that we would have to have the following embedded in our statement of faith here at Calvary.



We believe that God created man and that He created them biological male and biological female. As such, He created them different so as to complement and complete each other. God instituted monogamous marriage between a biological male and a biological female as the foundation of the family and the basic structure of human society. Marriage has been instituted by God. This church defines marriage as the exclusive covenantal union of a biological man and a biological woman in which such union is a lifetime commitment. A civil government's sanction of a union will be recognized as a legitimate marriage by the church only to the extent that it remains consistent with the definition of marriage found in these Articles. For this reason, homosexuality and all other "sexual preferences" or "orientations" are considered unnatural, sinful, and unacceptable to God. Accordingly, this ministry will not perform any marriage ceremonies between two individuals of the same sex. It will not condone or recognize such same-sex marriages, civil unions, or domestic partnerships even if the state passes laws that provide for recognition of such unions. We believe sexual activities such as, but not limited to, adultery, fornication, pre-marital sex, pedophilia, incest, polygamy, homosexuality, transgenderism, bisexuality, and bestiality are inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible and the Church. Further, lascivious behavior, cross-dressing, transgender behavior, and the creation, viewing and/or distribution of pornography and efforts to alter one's physical gender or gender related appearance are incompatible with a truly biblical witness. (Calvary Chapel Martin County 2023)

And we are already having to consider adding to this.

Is it reasonable to force churches to cease teaching the full counsel of God and cutting out chapters from Genesis, Leviticus, Exodus and most of Romans 1, simply because the Bible calls certain activities and relationships abominations? Is it reasonable to enable unbelievers to report on Christians and have them added to a watch list by local law enforcement as being haters and socially maladjusted, as recently passed in the state of Washington in SB5427, simply because we will not support the culture, insist on teaching God's word and take a stand against the culture and its celebrations of all things called an abomination by God?

These potential Eli moments sneak up on all of us. I had them happen at work, more than once. At a major business meeting, to break up the monotony of endless actuarial briefings, the meeting planner decided to do a 30-minute session on relaxation. No problem, until it became clear that what was being proposed was yoga. I sat down, as well as a couple of others, at the point we were told this would align our chakras. It was Hinduism vaguely disguised as relaxation.

Another time, it was group board breaking. But first, meditation. Transcendental style. I sat down on that one too.

Today, we see a culture turning whole heartedly toward everything that God says is an abomination. The following is now true in many locations.

Isaiah 5:20–23.

“You are doomed! You call evil good and call good evil. You turn darkness into light and light into darkness. You make what is bitter, sweet, and what is sweet you make bitter. You are doomed! You think you are wise, so very clever. You are doomed! Heroes of the wine bottle! Brave and fearless when it comes to mixing drinks! But for just a bribe you let the guilty go free, and you prevent the innocent from getting justice.” (GNB)

For the church in Smyrna, this decision-making process had become more defined for them. The church did not take the view of it's more progressive members that a pinch of incense was harmless. It was idolatry and was rejected.



The state would try and reason with believers as to the why their edicts and mandates must be obeyed, but the church in Smyrna said no.

As part of the process to impose compliance, notice the early phases of the persecution outlined by Jesus.

Revelation 2:9

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander by those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (NASB 2020)

Jesus outlines Satan’s playbook for us and it will sound familiar.

First, those who refuse to comply with the requirements of the state are denied work or discriminated against at work or fired from work. They are being constantly gaslighted by the community as well as the state and are referred to as societal pariahs who are out of touch with the modern age. They refuse to be true patriots of Rome and do so all in the name of some god the culture refused to recognize.

Jesus calls this tribulation, but it is how persecution begins. It is discrimination, it is being denied the opportunity to be promoted at work because of your faith. It is the inability to find a building to rent to do church in. Because it is a church.

It is hearing from the news media that because you stand for what the Bible teaches, you must be a hater and anti-intellectual. And above all, anti-science because you believe God created everything. It is being told point blank that “I don’t know if I can hire you for this job since you will put the Bible first and honesty first and will not lie for the company when you need to.”

Second, if that does not work at turning these religious bigots around, then the threats of job and property removal are performed. Jesus uses the term, poverty. No more job and the state confiscate all their property. On top of this enforced poverty is refusal to allow them to engage in the culture economically. This forces those being persecuted to move to using barter and forces them to rely on each other as they live in imposed poverty in Christian ghettos. Nazi Germany did this to the Jews during WWII before turning towards their so-called final solution of murder.

Today, it begins as intimidation, and then moves rapidly to actions which are intended to bankrupt with endless court actions.

How did it go for Polycarp after enduring various levels of persecution for over 80 years? “Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, “Have respect for your age,” and other such things as they are accustomed to say: “Swear by the Genius of Caesar; repent; say, ‘Away with the atheists!’ ” So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, “Away with the atheists!” But when the magistrate persisted and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ,” Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” But as he continued to insist, saying, “Swear by the Genius of Caesar,” he answered: “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the Genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian.” (Unknown 1999, 233-235)

For the church in Smyrna, the Lord has seen all of this. He knows. Yes, they have been and are being lied about and yes, they have become, due to their faith, made poor. But in reality, they have riches waiting for them that they cannot even conceive of. In their case, it was the local Jewish community that was busy



slandering them. For us today, there may not be an identifiable group other than they're obviously following the guidance being provided by Satan.

We are reminded of our true enemy. It isn't the person lying about you to the boss.

Ephesians 6:12

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (ESV)

Persecution is spiritual warfare being realized in the physical realm. What we learn here is that it is more important to be faithful to Jesus, than to be politically or economically powerful. Jesus takes what we would consider to be a tragic event taking place in the life of the church, and He considers it to be a strength.

These three things draw them together into unity and strength as a church. Are you ready for this, He considers their tribulation, poverty and the slander about them to all be strengths of this church that they are daily overcoming. We struggle with this “because the church today has forgotten the centrality of “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10) for the early church. Suffering for Christ was a privilege, not just a sorrow. It was certainly “painful” (Heb. 12:11) but was also considered a participation in Christ at a deeper level. Smyrna suffered greatly but as a result was even more favored by God.” (Osborne 2002, 129)

Revelation 2:10

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (NASB 2020)

And here is the really good prophetic news from Jesus, it is about to get much worse. Do not fear. But I thought God would never give me more than I could handle? Wrong. Nowhere in the Bible is there a promise of an easy life in this world for the Christian. But we did read a couple of things promised to us earlier. We are promised He will never leave us, ever.

The persecution they have been suffering is now going to include imprisonment. Notice the source, Satan. Also, for Rome, prison did not mean what we take it to mean today. “Imprisonment was not recognised by the law as a punishment for crime in the Greek or the Roman procedure. The State would not burden itself with the custody of criminals, except as a preliminary stage to their trial, or in the interval between trial and execution. Fine, exile, and death constituted the usual range of penalties; and in many cases, where a crime would in modern times be punished by imprisonment, it was visited with death in Roman law.’ (Ramsay 1904, 274)

Living in the Roman Empire when you are told to expect imprisonment, that means, expect martyrdom. That was about to become routine and during the church age described by this church, it was. Jesus says they will have tribulation for 10 days. There are different views of this. One is, they had a severe ten-day period of persecution. Possible. Another view is this is a reference to the 10 Emperors who would persecute the church. Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Antonius Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Septimus Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian. That too is possible. I suspect it is either an actual 10 days yet to come, or an indication that it is short when compared to eternity. It can be measured.

Jesus wants His people who are under this pressure of persecution, in all its forms, to do one thing, to remain faithful. Even if it means dying for the cause of Christ, be faithful. For those who remain faithful, a promise. The crown of life.





The crown promised here is the stephanos, the victor's crown, as opposed to the diadēma or diadem. The stephanos was not worn by royalty, at least not as a sign of that position, but rather was awarded to the athlete who had won an athletic event. In other words, it was a "winner's crown," and the Smyrnans are invited to see themselves, whatever their sufferings, not as losers but as winners. (Patterson 2012, 99)

Revelation 2:11

"The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death." (NASB 2020)

Overcomers here are promised they will not be hurt by the second death. What is that?

First of all, unless Jesus takes us home in the rapture, all of us will die. This was the punishment for disobedience in the Garden of Eden and we have inherited it from our ancestors. All of us are SIN positive.

That is the first death, a temporary separation of the body from the spirit.

Hebrews 9:27–28

"Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God. In the same manner Christ also was offered in sacrifice once to take away the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are waiting for him." (GNB)

Physical death, the first death, is something every person on the planet will experience, except Enoch, Elijah, and those of us who are alive when Jesus raptures the church. For those of us who are believers, we will be resurrected and spend eternity with our Lord very much alive in glorified resurrection bodies.

We have been born again; our Spirit is very much alive.

The second death is the permanent and final separation of the person from God. It is an irrevocable continuation of spiritual death, spoken of as "the second death, the lake of fire" (Rev 20:14) and "the lake of fire and brimstone" (Rev 21:8). There is no remedy for the second death. (McCune 2010, 305)

More to come on this topic.

Born twice, die once. Born once, die twice.

Where do you stand on this?

A million years from now, you will remember this offer and will rejoice because you either had already said yes, or you say yes today. Or you will remember it as one more time you said no and wish you could take back that decision.

Say yes. Jesus came so we might have life.

Romans 3:21–24

"But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins." (NLT)



Romans 10:9–13

“If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”” (NLT)

#### **ABC’s of Salvation**

- A. Acknowledge that you are a sinner, tell Him that.
- B. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and that He rose from the dead.
- C. Confess that Jesus is Lord. Tell someone about what you have done.

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