

## Smyrna: The Lacerated Church

**Text:** Revelation 2:8-11

### Introduction:

1. Christ's letter to the church at Smyrna is the briefest out of the seven. This is partly on account of the fact He has NO word of rebuke for this church.
2. The word 'Smyrna' means 'myrrh' and is a fitting name considering the suffering of this church.
3. Some background facts to the city at Smyrna. Consider Smyrna...
  - **Geographically** – Smyrna lies around 35-40 miles (56 to 64 kms) north of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. Its landlocked harbor made it a popular port for ships as they could find shelter from storms and attack. Smyrna "was called 'the glory of Asia' because of its planned development, its beautiful temples and ideal harbor." (Unger) McClintock and Strong state, "The streets were handsome, well paved, and drawn at right angles, and the city contained several squares, porticos, a public library, and numerous temples and other public buildings." "Today it is the third largest city in Turkey (pop. of 2 million) and a major international trade center." (D. Lyle).
  - **Politically** – Smyrna had strong ties with Rome and was therefore an enthusiastic center for emperor worship. "Under Domitian (A.D. 81-96) emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen. Failure to comply meant death. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar, after which he was issued a certificate." (Thomas)
  - **Religiously** – Smyrna was a hotbed of pagan idolatry. Temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, and Zeus were built there. There was a temple dedicated to Roman Emperor worship from the time of Tiberius.
4. The founding of the church of Smyrna is not detailed in Scripture but it was likely the product of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Acts 19:10 *"And this continued by the space of two years; so that **all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.**"*
5. We will study Christ's letter to Smyrna under 4 headings

### I. The Revelation of Christ (Vs. 8)

How is Christ revealed to this church? He is revealed in His...

#### A. Eternality (Vs. 8a)

1. As we saw in Chapter 1:11, this title is a clear reference to the Deity of Christ as this is a description of Jehovah in the Old Testament.
  - a. Isaiah 41:4 *"Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? **I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.**"*

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- b. Isaiah 44:6 *“Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.”*
  - c. Isaiah 48:12 *“Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.”*
2. This title is a reference to Christ’s eternal nature. “He is the eternal God who has always existed in the past and who always exist in the future” (Walvoord). He is not bound by time and the events that take place within time.
- a. “Neither time nor things within time pose any limitation for Him.” (Thomas)
  - b. “As ‘the first’ He is before all in time, and above all as supreme. As ‘the last’ He is after all, closing all up, for to Him all tend. He is eternal in His Being.” (Walter Scott)
  - c. This truth would be of great comfort to this suffering church.

### B. Victory (Vs. 8b)

1. “which was dead” = Christ, as God incarnate, had been through the agonies of death on the cross. He could intimately identify with the sufferings of the believers in Smyrna.
2. “and is alive” = points to the victory of the resurrection. Christ’s victory over death is the guarantee of the believers’ ultimate victory over death also.

## II. The Commendation of Christ (Vs. 9)

It is notable that Christ had no rebuke for this church. Christ understood...

### A. The Pain they were Enduring (Vs. 9a)

1. ‘tribulation’ = lit. means to crowd or press in upon, to be under pressure. The word is also translated ‘affliction’, ‘anguish’, ‘persecution’, ‘trouble’ and ‘burdened’. “Literally, it means to crush an object in a vice grip by tightening the screws. It was used of one who was mashed to death by an enormous boulder. The life of this little flock at Smyrna was being painfully squeezed out of them by the ironclad vice grip of the Roman government.” (Lyle)
2. Jesus said, *“...In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33)
3. “I know” = what words of comfort to this suffering church. Christ had perfect and complete knowledge of their sufferings and as perfect man, he was touched with the feelings of their infirmities (Heb. 4:15).

### B. The Poverty they were Experiencing (Vs. 9b)

1. ‘poverty’ = The word ‘poverty’ is the word for “abject poverty” (Walvoord). This gives a specific detail of their ‘tribulation’.

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2. No doubt this was on account of their Christian faith. It meant they were deprived of material things by the society in which they lived. Perhaps they were driven from their homes and denied access to employment opportunities.
3. “but thou art rich” = Christ’s Divine estimation of this church. They were poor materially but rich spiritually. What a contrast to the church of Laodicea that was rich materially but poor spiritually in the eyes of Christ (Rev. 3:17). How much better to be “rich in faith” (James 2:5), “rich in good works” (1 Tim. 6:18) with “treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19)?!
4. Consider the spiritual wealth of the believer!
  - a. Eph. 1:3 *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with **all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:**”*
  - b. Rom. 8:17 *“**And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.**”*
5. Note: The church at Smyrna would not fit into the modern “prosperity gospel” that is promoted by the Charismatic movement!

### C. The Persecution they were Encountering (Vs. 9c)

1. The slander of the persecution
  - a. ‘blasphemy’ = often refers to blasphemy against God but can also refer to slander and railing against men. In the immediate context, the later appears to be the meaning. The church at Smyrna were subjected to malicious, false reports by their enemies which fanned the flames of persecution against them.
  - b. There were at least six types of slander leveled against the Christians in the first century – cannibalism, lust and immorality, breaking up of homes, atheism, political disloyalty and incendiarism (arson). “Probably the one capitalized upon most in Rome-oriented Smyrna was that of political disloyalty.” (Thomas)
2. The source of the persecution
  - a. “them which say they are Jews” = likely a reference to the Judaizers. “Joining hands with the Romans to oppose Christianity was a very large Jewish community in Smyrna. The Jews repeatedly informed against Christians or incited the local governor to attack them.” (Thomas) They were Jews naturally as descendent of Abraham but they were not Jews inwardly as they had not submitted to Christ as their Messiah (See Rom. 2:28-29). The Jews in Smyrna took an active part in the martyrdom of Polycarp about 50 years later, breaking their own laws by collecting wood and fagots for the fire in which he was burned on the Sabbath Day. (Ryrie)

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- b. “synagogue of Satan” = Christ unmask the evil one behind these slanders against the Christians. The devil was using them as an instrument to carry out his evil plans.
  - i. Matthew Henry: “Those assemblies which are set up in opposition to the truths of the gospel, and which promote and propagate damnable errors, those who are set up in opposition to the purity and spirituality of gospel worship, and which promote and propagate the vain inventions of men and rites and ceremonies which never entered into the thoughts of God, and those which are set up to revile and persecute the true worship and worshippers of God, these are all synagogues of Satan: he presides over them, he works in them, his interests are served by them, and he receives a horrid homage and honor from them.”
  - ii. Note: Satan is the archenemy of the churches of God. He is mentioned in connection with the seven churches 4 times (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9) and he is mentioned at least 89 times in the N.T. (Cloud).

### III. The Exhortation of Christ (Vs. 10)

Christ gives a word of encouragement to this suffering church. Christ gives...

#### A. A Principle for their Sufferings (Vs. 10a)

- 1. “Fear none of those things” = Fear is the natural reaction to suffering in the Christian life. However, Christ would have us respond to suffering with faith, not fear. Remember, fear begets fear but faith begets faith!
- 2. Psalm 31:15 *“My times are in thy hand...”*
- 3. 2 Timothy 1:7 *“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”*
- 4. Sixty-two times we have the command “fear not” in the Bible and twenty-eight times the command “be not afraid.”

#### B. A Prediction of their Sufferings (Vs. 10b)

*Christ foretold...*

- 1. The Provoker of their sufferings – “the devil”
  - a. The role of Satan in stirring up persecution against the believers is again highlighted. This was a Satanic wave of persecution against this little church.
  - b. This sort of vicious persecution not limited to the first century. It exists today in Smyrna like churches in persecuted lands.
  - c. Illustration: Pakistan’s Brick Kiln Martyrs

It was November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the time was 6am in the morning and Shahzad and Shama, poor Christians who worked for a brick kiln near Kot Radha Kishan, Pakistan clung to each other inside their one-room home while the mob of angry Muslims outside shouted insults and threats: “They have burned the Holy Koran! We will teach them a lesson!” Shama cried as her husband, Shahzad, tightened his arms around her and began to pray. More than 500 Muslims had gathered outside the young couple’s home near the brick kiln where they worked as bonded labourers. Shama’s husband

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couldn't believe the events of the last few months had come to this. Through a series of events, Shahzad and Shama had decided they could no longer live or work at the kiln. "Tell us how much money we owe you," they told the owner. "We will return it and leave your brick kiln." The owner and clerk didn't want the Christian couple to go free so they devised an evil scheme. They knew that accusing them of desecrating a Koran would get them beaten, jailed or even worse under Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

At 5:30am that morning, the clerk and a few Muslim men from the kiln went to the leader of the local mosque and reported to him that the Christian couple had burned a Koran. The mosque leader then announced the offence to the village over a loudspeaker, and a mob immediately began to surround Shahzad and Shama's home.

The terrified couple locked their door as the crowd shouted for their death and banged viciously against their door. Some members of the mob climbed up and tore a hole in the thatch roof so they could drop down into the room and unlock the door. They dragged the couple out of the house and the mob began to beat them. Then they took them to the office of the brick kiln clerk, where the owner and clerk beat them again. Shahzad and Shama pleaded for their lives, but the beating continued even though Shama was pregnant with their fourth child.

After beating the couple so badly that their legs were broken, the enraged Muslims tied them behind a tractor and dragged them around the kiln yard for more than 30 minutes. The crowd jeered, and Shahzad's family members watched in horror. All the while, messages of hate droned from the mosque loudspeaker as the leader announced that the Christian couple must be taught a lesson. When the tractor driver saw that Shahzad and Shama were unconscious, he drove toward the brick kiln ovens. The angry mob stuffed their bodies into the vent holes above the oven. Later, autopsy reports would show that both of them had burned to death, having been alive when stuffed into the vents. The attack lasted four hours.

Although local police were present during the attack, they did nothing to stop it. However, they did later arrest 76 people in connection with the murders and they registered a case against more than 400 people involved. All of those arrested were denied bail and are being held until trial, including the brick kiln owner and clerk. (Voice of the Martyrs report, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015)<sup>1</sup>

2. The Purpose of their sufferings – "ye may be tried"
  1. The Diabolical agent of the trial – 29 times this same Greek word is translated 'tempt'. Satan clearly had an evil intention in this trial. His aim was to destroy the believers and discredit the Gospel.
  2. The Divine aim of the trial – though this trying is attributed to the work of the devil, we must remember the overarching principle of the Sovereignty of God. The example of Job clearly teaches that Satan cannot touch the life of a Christian except God allow it.
  3. Principle: To whose purposes will you yield in your trial? Satan's or Christ's?
3. The Period of their sufferings – "tribulation ten days"
  - a. No reason to interpret these days as anything other than 10 literal days of testing (e.g. Daniel 1:12-21). An intense period of persecution was to be unleashed against this church.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vom.com.au/pakistans-brick-kiln-martyrs/>

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- b. The comforting truth is that this time of testing had a time limit on it from God.

### C. A Promise for their Sufferings (Vs. 10c)

1. “be thou faithful unto death” = their responsibility from God to stay true to Christ no matter the extent to which their persecution might go, even a martyr’s death.
2. “I will give thee a crown of life” = there was a heavenly reward on the other side of their sufferings. This has been called “the martyrs crown” but it is a crown that can be won by all those who are faithful to the Lord through trials – *“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive **the crown of life**, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”* (James 1:12) Whether martyred for the faith or not, Christ’s exhortation to each believer is to be faithful to Him, no matter the cost.

## IV. The Invitation of Christ (Vs. 11)

### A. The Plea (Vs. 11a)

1. To the individual – “he that hath an ear”
2. To the church – “what the Spirit saith unto the churches” What is the main message of Christ through this letter?
  - a. Fear not.
  - b. Be faithful.

### B. The Promise (Vs. 11b)

1. The overcomer – a description of every genuine believer. 1 John 5:4-5 *“For whatsoever is **born of God** overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but **he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?**”*
2. The outcome – “shall not be hurt of the second death”
  - a. “shall not” = double negative. “The strongest negative assertion about the future of which the Greek language is capable.” (Thomas)
  - b. The second death is described in Rev. 20:11-15 *“And I saw a great white throne...”* (See also Luke 16:22-26)
  - c. As D.L. Moody put it, you either get born once and die twice, or you get born twice and die once.
  - d. Challenge: Are you saved? If not, the second death awaits you.

## Conclusion:

1. What trial are you facing at present as a believer and how are you responding? Fearful and faithless or faith-filled and faithful?
2. Are you born again? Are you in the category of the overcomers, those who know Christ as Saviour and will never face the second death?