

Smyrna

The church & city were about 40 miles north of Ephesus, near the southern end of a gulf off the shore of the Aegean Sea. It had a good harbour – deep with an inner port through a smaller entrance. It was a wealthy & beautiful city and still exists today as modern day Izmir, and still has a Christian church. It contained temples to Apollo, Asklepios & Aphrodite and was known as a center of learning / for science and medicine. It is the birthplace of the Greek poet, Homer. It had close ties with Rome, and emperor worship existed right alongside the Greek gods' temples.

Under Domitian (AD 81-96), emperor worship became compulsory and one was forced by law to burn incense on Caesar's altar. Once they did, a certificate was issued, without which one could be executed. Faithful Jews and Christians would have refused this practice and as a result, people were martyred at Smyrna in large numbers. One of the most famous martyrs from there was Polycarp, an early church compatriot of John's who was martyred at the age of 86 in about AD 150.

We are not told in the NT when this church was founded or by whom. It is thought that it was planted during Paul's time spent at Ephesus (Acts 19-20) by Paul himself, or one of his companions. The name Smryna is the Greek word, "myrrh" – a perfume for the living & the dead. Its main association was with death. It comes from a plant which is crushed to release the fragrant resin – and is a parallel for the suffering church at Smyrna, whose fragrant aroma as a result of their faithfulness to God in the face of great persecution rose to God. Myrrh is also one of the 3 gifts brought by the Wise Men to the baby Jesus – MT. 2:11 – a symbol of His vicarious death. ①

I. The Speaker

v. 8

"The words of the first & last, who died & came to life." These are immediate words of great encouragement to a church facing intense persecution. He died and came back to life, and the implication for them (or for any church undergoing persecution) is that the worst thing that anyone can do is kill you – they cannot end your eternal life.

As the first & the last, Jesus is expressing for them His eternal nature which also implies His ability to extend to them eternal life, as One who is self-sufficient, and for them, all sufficient. He is capable of keeping His promises forever.

II. The Commendation

v. 9

Christ is aware of the tribulation they are experiencing and their poverty, as well as the slander from those claiming to be Jews but who were really emissaries of Satan. The spectre of persecution dominates this letter to Smyrna (cf. v. 10 also) and the poverty mentioned is likely the natural result of this persecution as jobs would be lost because of believers' inability to work due to beatings, incarceration or the death of the breadwinner or the taking of their property by the authorities.

Adding slander or verbal abuse to the mixture heightens the burden and makes it a certainty that this is a church experiencing immense pressure to deny Christ & avoid the stress, yet they remained faithful, and were being exhorted to continue to be faithful. The word used for poverty here is a Greek word denoting not just a lower class economically, but abject poverty. Surely the warning in v. 10 regarding prison was not just an idle concept but was likely already occurring. You cannot make a living in prison. However, the interesting phrase in parenthesis (but you are rich) brings yet another aspect of the problem into view. Being poor in material goods is not as bad as spiritual poverty. Contrast this with the rebuke to the Laodicean church in Rev. 3:17. The very fact that some were being imprisoned for their faith demonstrates the level of that faith did it not? Note **Matt. 5:10-12**.

During the 1st century 6 types of slander were brought against believers: that they practiced cannibalism; lust & immorality; breaking up of homes; atheism; political disloyalty (treason) and incendiarismⁱ. At Smyrna, a Roman colony, political disloyalty was probably the one thing used to imprison people most because the believers would refuse to worship Caesar.

The Jews, though surely fewer in number than Gentiles were strongly anti-Christian and even 50 years later it is documented that they went out of their way to spearhead the martyrdom of Polycarp at Smyrna. Ironically, the Jews often surpassed the pagans in their hostility against Christians, which is apparent even from the book of Acts.

These were Jews, physical descendents of Abraham, but not spiritual descendents of him, as their actions against the church prove. Note **John 8:31-47**. It is likely that some of the believers @ Smyrna were converted Jews, which would fuel the antagonism. They were Jews (“but were not”) – this denotes that they were not the true Israel (cf. Rom. 9:6), not the remnant, but were among those who were self-righteous and not in need of ^② a Savior, or so they thought. They may have gathered at a synagogue, but its misuse – to plot against Christians suggested it was a gathering place for Satanic deception.

III. Caution & Exhortation v. 10

This church, as we might expect, was not seeing a lot of hope for the future. Under severe persecution, it is tough to envision, let alone experience the joy promised to the believer & the peace that passes understanding. Therefore, Christ’s words, “Do not fear” provide some measure of comfort, because fear, although the wrong biblical response is the natural human response to aggression by a deadly enemy. They needed to trust Christ, even though He is not promising them deliverance here, but in fact, is promising that the persecution is actually going to escalate. This letter alone of the 7 contains no promise of Christ’s 2nd coming.

Specifically, the devil was about to throw (lit. “keep on throwing”) some of them into prison (and we know that he could not do that apart from God’s allowance of it) “that you may be tested”. Satan’s purpose was to try the faith of these believers to see if severe hardship would make them renounce their faith. We know that Satan has a purpose but we also have to recall that God has a purpose too, and His purpose always overrides anyone else’s purpose. Cf. Gen. 50:20.

God was allowing this – in fact, decreeing it – to take place so His people would be refined to come forth as gold (Job 23:10); to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29-30); to prepare & develop & strengthen their character (James 1:2-4); to give

them a greater vision of the glory awaiting them (Rom. 8:18); etc. This testing by Satan is sovereignly superintended by God Himself, yet from Satan's viewpoint it is a test to get them to renounce their faith. It is possible that some would – cf. **Matt. 13:18-21**.

The tribulation from this imprisonment is said to be for “ten days”. Why? Since Christ is warning them, it must be worse than what they are already experiencing, and as you might imagine, the 10 days are interpreted a number of ways:

- 10 specific periods of persecution under the 1st 3 centuries of Roman Emperors during the Christian era. The timing of this is not conducive to what Jesus is saying though. In AD 95, 1 of the 10 was past, the 2nd was almost over, which renders the phrase “you are about to suffer” invalidⁱⁱ.
- The 10 days refers to 10 years. This symbolism is used elsewhere (Ezek. 4:6 & in the 70 “weeks” of Daniel). The persecution under Diocletian (AD 303 – 313) lasted about 10 years & under Domitian (AD 81-91), but the nature of this prophecy necessitates it to be fulfilled in that generation, not decades later or in the past. That type of symbolism is reserved for the Apocalyptic portions of this epistle, but not in the context of these letters written for current encouragement &/or rebuke.
- The 10 days is a long period of time. Ten in the bible often represents a very large number (Gen. 31:41; Num. 14:22; Job 19:3) and this is more in line with the tenor of this warning, but the context does not support it. The warning is expected to be an encouragement to the church at Smyrna so the period of persecution would be expected to be of limited duration, not extended.
- The 10 days refers to a short period of time. Ten is also used in the bible to denote a short time (Gen. 24:55; Num. 11:19; 14:22). It denotes fullness or completion often. Here, it could refer to a short period of intense persecution, but long enough to test the victim's faith. However, there is not really room for symbolism in these 7 letters as the context of chapters 4-22 support. The OT examples cited and others are literal 10 day periods, not symbolic ones. ③
- The preferred interpretation is that the 10 days are literal and refer to a specific but unnamed persecutor who will appear in a definite time during their near future. There are examples of literal short periods of tribulation in the bible – Gen. 7:4; 40:12,13,20; Num. 14:33; Esther 3:13; Matt. 12:40; etc. This is the most natural way to interpret it.

The important thing is the immediate implication that they would recognize it when it occurred.

Be faithful...crown of life”. This charge to remain faithful has to do not with duration but intensity. God gives more grace as we need it and they were going to need even more. They should remain faithful even if it meant “to the death” (cf. Job 13:15), which is not implying that all believers @ Smyrna would be martyred, but that they should be prepared to do so. They had to be willing to make such a great sacrifice, because the reward of faithfulness is so great – cf. **II Cor. 4:7-18**.

The “crown of life” or “stephanos” is a victor's crown, not a royal crown. The widest use of this word in the NT, especially by Paul, is a reference to the Greek games (precursor to the Olympics) – I Cor. 9:24,25; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 3:14; II Tim. 2:5; I Pet. 5:4. Smyrna was well known for its athletic games so this reference makes sense.

The connotation, although connected as an illustration to the games, is more about victory as a Christian, even under intense opposition. This is not necessarily denoting some special reward over & above eternal life, which all believers possess, but could be

tied to that. Hebrews 11:35 talks about those who die for their faith obtaining a better resurrection so this crown may indeed be part of a reward only martyrs receive.

In any case, this faithfulness defined by works does not mean the faithfulness is the means of obtaining eternal life, but is exemplary of those who truly possess real faith. The only incentive given to Smyrna is eternal life – there is no promise of Jesus' coming again found here in this letter.

IV. The Promise

v. 11

Although the command to hear is identical to the one given to Ephesus, the 2nd part is not. The promise to the one who overcomes or conquers is that they will be protected from the 2nd death. This construction of the original Greek is the strongest possible negative assertion which can be expressed. Overcomers will be exempt from the 2nd death. John identifies this – Rev. 20:14; 21:8 – not just physical death (which almost all believers will experience), but eternal death (not annihilation)...eternal, conscious & unending torment. The incentive to overcome is eternal. Note Rom. 8:31-39.

They were facing severe persecution already (especially compared to what we suffer) and it was about to be ramped up. There is no hint here that they would fall away, and this letter contains no real rebuke in it for this church – only words to prop up their resistance to be tempted to fold under Satan's persecution so that they could look forward to their eternal reward.

④

Next lesson – Rev. 2: 12-17 The Church at Pergamum

ⁱ Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; pg. 164.

ⁱⁱ IBID – pg. 169 – the 10 Emperors were: Nero (AD 54); Domitian (AD 81); Trajan (AD 98); Hadrian (AD 117); Septimus Severus (AD 117); Maximin (AD 235); Decius (AD 249); Valerian (AD 254); Aurelian (AD 270) & Domitian (AD 284).