

## VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH

### 6. His View of Smyrna: The Suffering Church

#### Revelation 2:8-11

#### INTRODUCTION

This morning is our 5<sup>th</sup> installment in a study through the first three chapters of the book of Revelation titled VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH.

At the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century the Roman government banished the apostle John to the isle of Patmos *for preaching the word of God and for his testimony about Jesus*. John was old and alone on a rock in the middle of the ocean when he was given a vision of Jesus. Then Jesus told John

*Revelation 1:11 (ESV) <sup>11</sup>.... “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”*

That vision of Jesus would be crucial to all that Jesus was going to say to each of these seven churches — and to every church through the ages until He returns. Jesus was going to reveal their condition and their needs in light of who He is!

As we look at the second of these seven letters it is so important for us to remember that each of those 1<sup>st</sup> century churches possessed strengths and weaknesses common to all of the churches in the decades, centuries and millennia that followed. That means that the words of Jesus to those 1<sup>st</sup> century churches (and the individuals within those churches) are prophetic! They carry wisdom and application for all churches throughout history until Jesus comes again. We need to hear those words of Jesus to those seven 1st century churches for what they are. They are the living, powerful and enduring Word of God. They're a divine diagnostic by which every church in every age can discern their true spiritual condition.

The letter of Jesus to the church in Smyrna — like each of these seven letters — begins with Jesus introducing Himself by way of a specific element of His nature and attributes that John saw in his vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:13-16. That specific element of Christ's nature speaks to the specific NEED and

CONDITION of the church in Smyrna. This is key: Jesus Himself is sufficient for every need of every church and every believer.

Jesus will then tell them that He knows them — tell them how He sees them and then He will tell them what they are going to face and how to live in light of who He is. In that, we see what it means to be a Christian! A Christian is someone who thinks and lives in light of who Jesus is!

So, here we go!

**Revelation 2:8–11 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. <sup>9</sup>’ ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into 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. <sup>11</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’

## **SMYRNA**

Smyrna was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus on the coast of the Aegean Sea (modern day Izmir). The name Smyrna means “bitter” and is related to the word myrrh (more on that in a bit).

The city dates back to the time of Alexander the Great. It was such a beautiful place that in the days of Alexander they said that it should be the capital of the modern world. It was called *the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia and the flower of Asia*.

The city began at the harbor and followed the narrow foothills. Within the city was a stadium and a Library! Behind the city was a hill called the Pagos. It was covered with temples and beautiful buildings. The Pagos was often referred to as “The Crown of Smyrna”. Aristides (Greek philosopher) said that Smyrna was like one great statue.

Smyrna was not only beautiful, it was prosperous.

**William Barclay** — *Smyrna stood at the end of the road which served the valley of the river Hermus, and all the trade of that valley flowed into its markets and found an outlet through its harbor. It had a specially rich trade in wines. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a city of wealth and commercial greatness.*<sup>1</sup>

This is significant when we hear what Jesus knows about them.

But above and beyond of Smyrna's famous beauty and prosperous economy, Smyrna was completely devoted and loyal to Rome. This is huge to our understanding why the church in Smyrna suffered so greatly.

Long before Rome ruled the world, Smyrna cast its lot with Rome (195BC) and never wavered. For example — A ruler in Asia Minor named Mithradates waged a fierce campaign against Rome. Things were going badly for the Roman troops. They were suffering from hunger and cold. The people of Smyrna stripped off their own clothes to send to them. Cicero (a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher) referred to Smyrna as "One of Rome's most faithful and most ancient allies!"

Smyrna was Beautiful — Prosperous — unwavering in its loyalty to Rome — and totally pagan!

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary — *As early as 195 B. C., Smyrna foresaw the rising power of Rome and built a temple for pagan Roman worship.*

Going across the Crown of Smyrna was a street of gold that ran from the temple of Zeus to the temple of the goddess Cybele. It was said that the Pagos was the crown of Smyrna and the Street of Gold was the necklace.<sup>2</sup> They also worshipped Apollo, Nemesies, Aphrodite and Asclepius.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 83). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Tied to their unwavering loyalty to Rome was their deep commitment to the worship of Caesar as god. Smyrna was a leading city in the Roman cult of Emperor worship.

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary — In 23 B. C., Smyrna was given the honor of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius because of its years of faithfulness to Rome. Thus, the city became a center for the cult of emperor worship — a fanatical 'religion' that later, under such emperors as Nero (ruled A. D. 54-68) and Domitian (ruled A. D. 81-96), brought on severe persecution for the early church."*

The Roman Emperor Domitian (A. D. 81–96) was the first to *demand* that the citizens of Rome worship him as “Lord”. By the way — according to ancient church history, it was under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision.

Under Domitian, the Roman citizen was to burn a pinch of incense on the altar to Caesar and say “Caesar is lord” — and once they did that, they were given a certificate to guarantee that they had performed their religious duty.”<sup>3</sup>

It would have been possible for Christians to burn that pinch of incense, say, “Caesar is Lord,” receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But they would not call a mere man “Lord” — they reserved that title for Jesus and Jesus alone.

One last bit of historical background that is important to our understanding of what Jesus wrote to the church in Smyrna.

Within Smyrna was a Jewish population that was influential. History tells us that they were known for having donated 10,000 denarii for the beautification of the city.

There was tremendous hostility towards Christians from within the Jewish population because Jews, and those interested in Judaism, were coming to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. To stop that they persuaded the

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<sup>3</sup> Guzik, D. (2013). Revelation (Re 2:8a). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

Roman authorities to persecute Christians — the most notable was the bishop of the church in Smyrna — “Polycarp”(more on him in a bit)

**Revelation 2:8 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The church there was evidently founded out of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. We’re told in **Acts 19** that Paul taught and reasoned from the Scriptures in Ephesus

*Acts 19: 10 (ESV)* <sup>10</sup>*This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

Jesus introduces Himself to the church in Smyrna by two very specific elements of the vision John had of Him back in chapter one — specifically verses 17-18

**Revelation 2:8 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘**The words of the first and the last**

The One writing these words to you is *the First and the Last*. In the Old Testament this title is reserved for YHWH (Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12) because He alone is eternal and infinite.

Jesus reminds THIS church that HE is the eternal and abiding one — that HE was already in existence at the beginning of all things, and HE will still be when everything temporal ends and the new heavens and new earth come into being. Jesus wanted THIS church to know that *Neither time nor things within time pose any limitation for Him.*<sup>4</sup>

It was SO crucial for THAT church to know THAT about Jesus. And it is just as crucial that THIS church knows THAT about Jesus.

**Revelation 2:8 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, **who died and came to life.**

TWO THINGS HERE — <sup>1</sup>. No matter what your experience (suffering, pain, death) Jesus can identify with you. <sup>2</sup>. Jesus wanted THIS church to process everything

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, R. L. (1992). Revelation 1-7: an exegetical commentary (p. 161). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

they were going to face in light of the fact that death could not hold Jesus — and death cannot hold His people.

Death and the victory of resurrection run through this letter. The name Smyrna comes from the word myrrh, a sweet-smelling perfume used in embalming dead bodies. Myrrh gives off a very sweet fragrance — but it could only be extracted from the Balsam tree by means of crushing — and only when it was crushed did it give off its aroma.

So, Jesus tells them WHO HE IS. Next, he tells them WHAT HE KNOWS.

**Revelation 2:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>“ I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)**

Tribulation — thlipsis = distress; pressure; crushing

They were distressed, under pressure, being crushed because they refused to compromise and say, “Caesar is Lord.”

Remember how Jesus introduced Himself — *‘The words of the first and the last, who died*

700 years before the coming of Jesus, Isaiah told us HOW Jesus died — He was *crushed for our iniquities.*

**DON'T MISS THIS** — Jesus tells them that He KNOWS the distress, pressure and crushing they were experiencing — and because this is the living, powerful, abiding word of God, Jesus says these very words to US. Jesus knows what METRO is experiencing! Jesus knows what YOU are experiencing — in the sense that He sees it all **and in the sense that He knows our distress, pressure and crushing by His own personal experience.**

*I know your distress! I KNOW you are being crushed. I KNOW FULLY what you are going through **because** I was CRUSHED for the sins of the world. I was in the Garden of the Olive Press where the weight of the sins of the world crushed me.*

Back to what we learned about myrrh: All the while the church at Smyrna was experiencing the crushing bitterness of persecution — their faithful testimony was like myrrh or sweet perfume to God.

**Revelation 2:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>“ I know .... your poverty (but you are rich)**

This word *Poverty* ≠ just having a little. We could read it as “I know that you have NOTHING at all.” This was crushing poverty.

Here’s where the history of this city helps us understand the nature of such distressing and crushing poverty. According to history, Smyrna was a prosperous city. Yet Jesus says that they were living in abject poverty.

Here’s where the devotion of this city to Rome and its radical commitment to the worship of Caesar is so very important to understanding how they got to be so poor. They experienced economic persecution because they refused to call Caesar “Lord.” There were times when a mob would suddenly attack the Christians and wreck their homes and plunder their possessions.

*Hebrews 10:34 (ESV) <sup>34</sup>For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.*

Life was not easy for a Christian in Smyrna or anywhere else in the ancient world. Even today, this is a common form of persecution against Christians.

**Revelation 2:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>“ I know .... your poverty (but you are rich)**

All of the other churches, save the Church in Philadelphia, is rebuked by Jesus. But not here. Jesus looks at *THIS* church with all of its distress, pressure and crushing persecution and poverty — and there is no rebuke. In fact, He tells them that even though they were living in crushing poverty He knows that they are RICH! Evidently Jesus measures wealth in a completely different way. Evidently Jesus has a different value system than the world.

Listen to this:

*James 2:5 (CSB) <sup>5</sup>Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*

*Matthew 6:20 (ESV) <sup>20</sup>but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

The church in Smyrna lived for eternal values that could never change, riches that could never be taken away.

*2 Corinthians 8:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

*2 Corinthians 6:4–10 (ESV) <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; <sup>7</sup>by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*

By the way — In the margin of your Bible next to verse 9, write Revelation 3:17 — because there is a radical contrast between what Jesus says to the church in Smyrna and what He says to the church in Laodicea.

**Revelation 2:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>“ I know .... the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

The instigators of persecution were from among the Jews. They slandered the Christians in the city. When we read the book of Acts we see this time and again (at Antioch in Pisidia, Acts 13:50; at Iconium, Acts 14:2, 5; at Lystra, Acts 14:19; at Thessalonica, Acts 17:5).



*Acts 13:50 (ESV)* <sup>50</sup>*But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.*

Church history tells us that in 155 AD the Jews in Smyrna instigated the murder of Polycarp calling him “the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches numbers not to sacrifice nor to worship”.

Jesus essentially said that Jews were no longer worthy of the name “Jew” — that they had become *a synagogue of Satan*. The name *Satan* means an accuser, slanderer; this group of Jews had taken on the character of Satan.

Later in Chapter 3 Jesus says that He is going to turn the tables on those Jews who slandered the church.

*Revelation 3:9 (NASB)* <sup>9</sup>*Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you*

**Revelation 2:10 (ESV)**<sup>10</sup>**Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into 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.**

I doubt that any, or many of us would have heard the last phrase of verse 10! We would start shutting down as soon as we heard Jesus promise suffering — shut down more at the promise of direct Satanic activity leading to imprisonment — shut down even more at the prospect of a period of tribulation — and then totally shut down at the words “*Be faithful unto death*”.

Did Jesus Just say: *Don't worry — just be faithful unto death?! If I was there, I probably would have been thinking: You sure you sent this letter to the right church? Send this letter to Laodicea or somewhere else!*

Let's start with this — Jesus gave no promise of deliverance from their physical persecution and affliction! Instead, Jesus says, *Be faithful unto death!*

Here was a church that had NO food — NO job — NO reputation (constantly being accused). They had lost everything except life itself. Jesus says to them: Don't be afraid of losing even that! I believe that when we realize that Jesus Himself IS life — is OUR life — is our EVERYTHING — that we become faithful, rather than fearful.

*Philippians 1:21 For me to live is Christ, to die is GAIN!!*

**Revelation 2:10 (ESV)<sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison,**

Jesus promises this church suffering and imprisonment.

Prison in the Roman Empire was not like prison in our society. There was no life imprisonment. There was no set number of years with the possibility of time off for good behavior. There were no TVs or conjugal visits.

**New Bible Commentary** — *Prison was not for punishment, but a place to await sentence, whether for forced labour in salt mines, or deportation, or death<sup>5</sup>*

**William Barclay** — *“For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna above all places, for a man to enter the Christian Church was literally to take his life in his hands. In Smyrna the church was a place for heroes.”*

**Revelation 2:10 (ESV)<sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.**

There are those who believe that this was predicting ten waves of persecution by the Roman government during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Others take the position that ten days should be understood to mean ten years. Whether you agree with those views or not — the CERTAIN understanding of the passage is

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<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). Revelation. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1428). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

that their suffering was MEASURED! It would not be indefinite or limitless. There would be an END to it.

These words of Jesus were lost on much of the church in 2020 — and even today.

**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

The word **crown** here is *stephanos* — the crown given to a winning athlete. The champion athlete received a crown of leaves, which would soon get brown and die. Those who live victoriously in Jesus receive **the crown of life**.

The promise of a **crown** was especially meaningful for the Christians of Smyrna. The city of Smyrna had a “crown” of beautiful buildings at the top of the Pagos. In Smyrna, worshippers of pagan gods wore crowns. In that culture, good citizens and winning athletes received crowns. Jesus is a King unlike any other king. His Kingdom is unlike any other kingdom. Because He is the King of life, He can offer the citizens of His Kingdom a crown unlike any other — the **crown of life**.

**Revelation 2:11 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup>**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

This letter to the church in Smyrna is so relevant to our lives today! Since day-one, persecution has always been a part of the story of the Christian Church. History has shown as that “The church Persecuted has always come out Pure while the church Pampered has always been Polluted!” We might not be distressed, pressured and crushed — but there are churches and individual Christians being persecuted throughout the world at this very moment.

It’s been estimated that in the 20th century alone more Christians were martyred for their faith in Christ than in the past 1,900 years combined. Christians are being imprisoned, tortured, and murdered for Christ in many different parts of the world today. Those are our brothers and sisters in Christ! We need to remember and support our brothers and sisters who are suffering for Christ all over the world

**Hebrews 13:3 (NLT)** *Don’t forget about those in prison. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as though you feel their pain in your own bodies.*

SECOND — These words of Jesus teach US that being a Christian does not make us immune to hostility and suffering in this world. In fact, the Bible teaches that suffering is a **normal** part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ:

***John 15:19 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup>If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*

***Philippians 1:29 (ESV)** <sup>29</sup>For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,*

***2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)** <sup>12</sup>Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,*

**The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'**

The Bible teaches us that there are actually TWO deaths. One is BIOLOGICAL death — the other is SPIRITUAL death. Barring the rapture of the Church, everyone is going to experience BIOLOGICAL death.

For the man or woman who believes with their heart on the Lord Jesus, physical death is the ONLY death you will experience because to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

But for the unbeliever — physical death is only the FIRST death. Following physical death they will experience the SECOND death — which is eternal separation from God in outer darkness ([Revelation 21:8 \(ESV\)](#)!)

**BORN once — DIE TWICE**

**Born TWICE — Die ONCE**

**CLOSE**

**THE BELIEVERS IN SMYRNA FOUND JESUS WORTH DYING FOR**

**Corrie Ten Boom tells a story of a time Before the fall of the iron curtain.**

Two Russian soldiers who burst into a secret meeting of the church that she was attending and said - *Deny Christ or die!* Nobody would deny Christ.

Then one of soldiers said: *“Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are believers, too, but we did not want to worship where everyone was not completely committed to Christ and willing to die for Him. May we be part of your fellowship?”*

What a far cry from most of Christianity in America today.

Forget about dying for Jesus. Many feel it will kill them to have a Sunday service that lasts more than 60 minutes.

If you don't find Jesus worth LIVING for, then don't think you will find Him worth DYING for.

**Everyone is going to DIE** – The question is: “Is the thing you've lived for going to be worth it in the end?”

**2 Corinthians 5:14–15 (NLT)** <sup>14</sup>*Either way, Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life.*  
<sup>15</sup>*He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.*