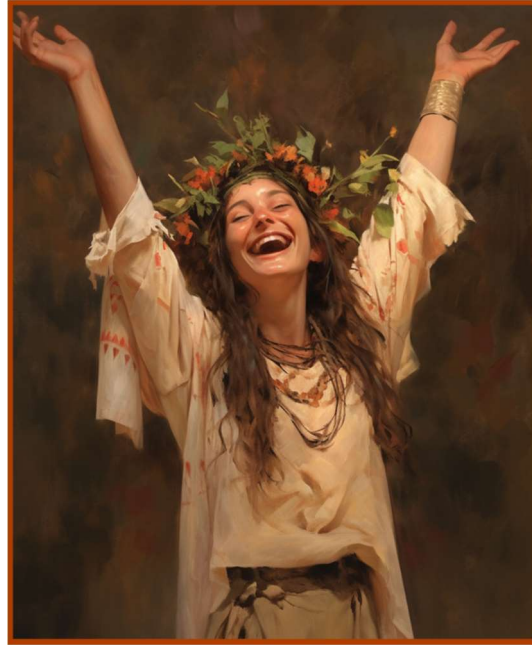


Jesus' Seven Letters to the Churches

Part 2 Smyrna: Faithful in times of persecution



*“And to the angel (messenger) of the assembly (church) in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, Who died and came to life again: I know your affliction and distress and pressing trouble and your poverty—but you are rich! and how you are abused and reviled and slandered by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Fear nothing that you are about to suffer. [Dismiss your dread and your fears!] Behold, the devil is indeed about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested and proved and critically appraised, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be loyally faithful unto death [even if you must die for it], and I will give you the crown of life. He who is able to hear, let him listen to and heed what the Spirit says to the assemblies (churches). He who overcomes (is victorious) shall in no way be injured by the second death.” **Revelation 2:8-11 (AMP)***

Portion for the Journey:

At the time prior to Jesus' birth, communication across distances was rare because of the danger and great difficulty travel posed. Only a few of the people were educated with the ability to read and write. It was God's perfect timing that the early Church was composed of men, like Paul, who were educated and able to write to a large audience of varied backgrounds utilizing not only Hebrew and Aramaic language but also Greek and Roman vocabulary and concepts. William Ramsay, noted Bible scholar, historian and archeologist, noted that letter writing and travel were the greatest factors in the development of the early Church. Letters were sent via a messenger and read out loud in the churches. Through letters the early church was unified and strengthened in their mutual affection for one another even though separated by long distances. Letters prevented the widely separated local churches from being swallowed up by the society of the surrounding area. In his book, “The Seven Letters to the

Churches,” he noted, “Christians developed the older class of letter writing to new forms, applied it to new purposes, and placed it on a much higher plane than had ever before stood upon. In their hands, communication by letter became one of the most important, if not, the most important agencies for consolidating and maintaining the sense of unity among the scattered members of the one universal church.”

vs. 8 Address: *“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:”* Smyrna was called “the city of greatness.” was Smyrna was a great trade city. Smyrna is located in Asia Minor in the area of modern Izmir. It stood 35 miles north of Ephesus. It had a magnificent harbor and was especially known for being rich in commerce and trade. Smyrna was founded as a Greek colony about 1000 years before Jesus’ birth. The city was proud of its beauty. Great, straight, spacious streets ran from one end of the city to the other. The most famous street was called the Golden Street.

The word “Smyrna” is the Greek word for ‘myrrh’ which is an emblem of bitter suffering and death. Myrrh is a sweet perfume unto God. In the Old Testament, myrrh was an ingredient in holy anointing oil and in incense offered to the LORD in His temple. In the New Testament, myrrh was also one of the prophetic gifts of the Magi (gold to recognize His kingship; frankincense used in the worship of God to recognize His deity; and myrrh/used to embalm the body for death which foreshadowed Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. Myrrh mixed with wine was offered to Jesus to ease His pain while on the cross but He refused. It was also wrapped inside the cloth when Jesus was laid in the tomb for embalming.

Matt. 2:1-12; Mark 15:23; John 11:25-26

Smyrna was an important seaport city in Greece. It was a religious center for pagan worship and politically important to Rome. The city was very conscious of its greatness. The ‘crown of Smyrna’ was a familiar phrase. Smyrna utilized crowns or garlands of flowers in the worship of their gods, the type of crown was associated with their particular deity. Smyrna was renowned for cult temples, including a large temple for the Mother goddess, Temple of Cybele, as well as temples to Apollo, Aphrodite and Zeus. It was noted for a large Jewish population who were also Roman citizens. The Jewish population especially hated the Christians who had converted from Judaism because they placed “unclean pagans” on the same level as the Jews.

Believers in Smyrna were poor and suffered for the sake of the Gospel. Smyrna was a beautiful city of much wealth and commercial greatness. It is said, “It would be easy for the little Christian church to be stifled and suffocated by the weight of heathen splendor which surrounded it, but all the darkness of this world cannot quench the smallest light, when the light is kindled and constantly nourished by God.” (Barclay)

Two factors made life for the Christians a constant and continued peril:

- **Mandatory worship of the Emperor:** Smyrna was one of the centers of Caesar worship. As Rome sought to unify such a vast conglomeration of states and cities consisting of many different races and nations into a peaceful empire by eliminating all who they viewed as threats to this universalized state, referred to as “Pax Romana, the Roman peace.” Before deification of the emperor, there first came a deification of Rome, believed to be inhabited by the spirit of the goddess Roma. The emperor of Rome was believed to be the incarnation of the god of Rome. At first worship of the Caesar was accepted and then the emperor was officially recognized as a god. Then Caesar worship became compulsory. Once a year all the citizens had to make an offering on the altar of the godhead of Ceasar. Having done so, they proved their political loyalty to the Roman

kingdom. Christians refused to call any man “Lord,” and because of this, they were deemed disloyal and dangerous. They lived with the shadow of death always over their heads. No where in the world could life have been more dangerous for a Christian than Smyrna.

- **The second threat to the believers in Smyrna was from the Jews.** There was a very large and politically powerful Jewish population in Smyrna and they had the ear of the authorities. They were so bitter against the Christians that they would pretend concern for the pagan gods and even join with their Gentile enemies, if in so doing, they could bring about the death of Christians. Christians might have been swallowed up by the hatred of the city, but they remained faithful even unto death. The Jews frequently sought to incite the population against the Christians with fabrications which the Lord called ‘blasphemy.’

Polycarp, the beloved Bishop of Smyrna, was a follower and convert of John. He had faithfully served in ministry for 60 years. The Jews were responsible for the most famous martyrdom in Church history, the martyrdom of ninety-year-old Polycarp. He was given the choice, either to sacrifice to Ceasar or to be burned at the stake. His answer, “Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” It was the Sabbath day and yet the Jews were foremost in gathering the faggots for the fire. Polycarp said, “It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season, and after awhile is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will.” As the flames licked his body, he prayed this great prayer, “I thank Thee that Thou has graciously thought me worthy this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ.” His praises to God could be heard as he was engulfed in flames.

“Persecution could not diminish the ever-increasing flow of converts. It served, indeed to make their numbers greater, for, to the Christian, death was but the beginning of eternal happiness. They therefore welcomed it almost with joy, and the sight of their cheerful countenances as they were led to execution, astonished the onlookers, and made many inquire what this belief could be that would rob death of its terrors.” John Fox (Foxes Book of Martyrs)

Smyrna survived and with a predominantly a Christian population until 1922. From the early AD centuries to the late middle ages all of the inhabitants of Asia Minor practiced Christianity. They primarily comprised the Greek Orthodox doctrines after the schism with the Catholics in 1054 AD. On January 13, 1915 the New York Times headlines read, “Christians in great peril.” The leader of Turkey declared, “There is room only for Turks in Turkey.” Persecution started with boycotting of Christian businesses, seizure of property. Ethnic cleansing started in the summer of 1914. Greek men were conscripted to hard labor with little or no food or water. They were forced to choose Islam or face death. Churches and schools were burned to the ground. From 1915-1918, a large portion of Christian communities were starved to death. In 1918, 774,235 Greeks were removed from their homes and sent into the interior of Turkey and they were never seen or heard from again. From 1919-1922 the Turkish government continued its policy of extermination against the largely Christian Greek populations. Over this period of time, they burned over 30 villages and massacred over 12,000 Greeks. In 1921, New York Times headline stated, “700,000 dead – Victims of the Turks.

The genocide of Smyrna took place September 13, 1922 when armed forces entered Smyrna as a deliberate act of the Turkish government to destroy or expel the Greek population made up primarily of Christians. The Turks began killing soldiers but then began killing regular citizens and refugees. They set the Armenian Greek Orthodox section of the city on fire and 1,000’s of people were burned alive. Overall, over a 100,000 Greeks and Armenians were brutally killed for their religion and ethnicity and

over 1 million became refugees. Many of the refugees died in harsh and brutal conditions. Villagers were driven into the mountains. For 3 ½ months they lived on grass, roots and occasional raiding of olive groves at night. By the end of 1922, most of the Greeks had either fled or been killed. In 1924, 400 tons of human bones were transported to Marseilles. These were the victims of the massacre of Asia Minor Christians.

The city of Izmir, Turkey continues on the site of Smyrna's ruins to the present time. It is the third largest city in Turkey with a population of 3 million people.

vs. 8 Author: *"The First and the Last, who was dead and has come to life."* A more accurate translation would be "who was dead and yet is still alive." The phrase 'was dead,' means literally became dead, but the tense indicates it was a passing phase. An episode through which He passed. The phrase, 'is alive' emphasizes that He came to life again, describing the triumphant event of the resurrection. In a world of constantly changing circumstances, we can put our trust in Jesus, who changes not. **2 Cor. 4:16-18**

This name would have been tremendously important to Christians facing incredible persecution and death for the sake of their Savior. He had experienced the worst the world could do to Him. He died in the agony of the cross. No matter what happened to the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus had faced these same situations and had endured the cross. The RISEN LORD had conquered the worst that man can do and had triumphed over pain and death. His example shows them that life's circumstances, no matter how extreme lead to eternal life and victory over one's foes. Since He suffered and died, He is able to understand and sympathize in our times of trial. **Heb. 4:14-15**

Jesus' title as the First and the Last directly confronted the pagans who were attempting to destroy the Christians and their God so they could bring back the pagan gods. This name would have been especially encouraging to believers in Smyrna. He is telling the believers in Smyrna that life persists in and through death, so they will know there is nothing to fear. The emphasis is upon the everlasting resurrected life which is theirs. They need have no fear of those who would kill the body. When a man becomes convinced of this great truth, there enters his heart a great peace and security. The fear of death has no hold over him. **Isa. 44:6-7; 48:12; Matt. 10:28; John 5:25; Ezek. 37:1-5; Rom. 8:16-19; 35-39; Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5, 8, 17; 21:6-7; 22:13**

v. 9 Commendation: ...The church in Smyrna is commended for their triumph over hardship and persecution. Persecution and poverty kept the Church of Smyrna pure.

vs.9 Commendation: *'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.'* In the history of the Church, the most severe persecution has come from religious zealots.

Jesus says, in tones of infinite tenderness, "I know..." "I know your tribulation." "I know your poverty." "I know the blasphemy spoken against you." There are two ways in which Jesus knew their suffering:

1. The word for 'know' used in this passage is 'oikeios' and it means that Jesus had tenderly witnessed their suffering in a very close, personal way. He is the God who sees and is very aware and understands what we endure for His sake. He is intimately acquainted with our pain!
2. Jesus knew and understood their suffering because He had experienced all of these things to their deepest depths. He is a man acquainted with sorrows, He suffered and laid down His life

out of His love for us. **Isa. 41:10-13; Heb. 13:5-6; Deut. 31:6; John 14:27; Ps. 27:1; 46:1-3; 55:22; 1 Pet. 5:17; Isa. 63:9; Phil. 1:28-30**

What incredible comfort comes from this revelation of Jesus identification with all of His suffering saints. Wherever the church goes through tribulation, He stands near and says, "I know."

- **"I know your tribulation"** Tribulation comes from pressure from the outside. 'thlipsis' (G2347) means, 'pressure, a pressing together. It speaks of the pressure of stones that grind the wheat, or the crushing of grapes to make wine. metaphorically, oppression, affliction, distress, straits, anguish, persecution. From root, thlezbo, meaning 'trouble, to afflict, narrow, tribulation, to crush (as in grapes or olives), to press hard upon, contracted, suffering due to pressures, circumstances, or people acting as antagonists, opposition, attack, ostracism, scourging, pillaging. The church in Smyrna was being pressed, even to the death on account of their loyalty to Jesus. **Heb. 4:15; 5:8-9; Isaiah 53:3-12; Matthew 26:36-39**

- **"I know your poverty"** 'ptotechia (G4432) is more descriptive than mere poverty, it speaks of utter destitution and loss of all material things. This is the poverty of a man who has nothing at all in worldly goods. The early Christians of Smyrna had nothing. Many had lost their homes and their belongings had been deliberately pillaged and plundered. It was dangerous to be a Christian in the ancient world. They were poor in world's goods but rich in God's Kingdom. **1 Cor. 1:26,27; James 2:5; Heb. 10:34**

'I know ...your poverty (but you are rich) ...' The kingdom of this world might have counted the believers to be poor, but they were rich in His Kingdom. We must not view riches and wealth as the world views it. Our time on this earth might be filled with afflictions, but we can take joy in knowing our treasure is in heaven. **Luke 12:13-21; James 2:5; 2 Cor. 6:10; 8:9; Matt. 6:19-21; 1 Thes. 1:3**

- **"I know...the blasphemy..."** Jesus Himself was intimately acquainted with the Jews who bore false witness against Him and slanderously accused Him of treason. In Smyrna, the persecution arising against them was fueled by blasphemy coming from the Jews. The Greek word, 'blasphemeia' (G988) is better translated slander or reviling which included lies, abusive language, and vilification against God and the children of God. The root of this word indicates these false reports came from evil intentions to destroy reputation and hinder, injure, or hurt the believer. **Matt. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:23, Isa. 53:1-12**
 - Christians were blamed for any public calamity, pestilence, fires, famine, floods, saying the Christians had brought down the anger of the gods upon the city.
 - "This is My body; this is My blood." Christians were believed to practice cannibalism, even eating their own children.
 - Christians gathered to eat together in believer's homes. These were called 'love feasts' but accused of holding orgies of lust.
 - They were called 'atheists' because pagans could not understand worship of a god that was not made out of graven images to be worshipped.
 - They were accused of being rebels against the government because they would not say, "Caesar is lord."

v. 9 These Jews were referred to as of the synagogue of Satan. The persecution of Jesus, Himself, began in the synagogue and was initiated by the religious leaders. They had gone so far away from the Living God that they were now serving God's enemy, the devil.

Criticism: The Lord offers no criticism of this church. Only two of the churches were found to be without fault or criticism, this one and the church in Philadelphia.

vs. 10 Instruction:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.” The Amplified translation says, “fear nothing, dismiss your dread and your fears!” There was not a single promise that the believers in Smyrna would escape death or suffering. In fact, He warns them that persecution will continue and increase. Jesus never offered His people an easy path. He offered them a path that included suffering, imprisonment and death. The Lord tells the believers in Smyrna they will continue to suffer, but instructs them not to fear and maintain their courage. He wants them to keep their focus on the promise of life eternal. He says, “the devil will cast some of you into prison....” So that you may be tested. **1 Pet. 1:7** This may not have meant literal prison for at this time, most often Christians were not imprisoned for their faith, but were in prison only awaiting trial where they would be executed. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” **Ps. 23:4**

In **Psalm 140**, David prayed, *“Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; Preserve me from violent men Who devise evil things in their hearts; They continually stir up wars. They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their lips. Selah. Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; Preserve me from violent men Who have purposed to trip up my feet.”* **Psalm 140:1-4**

When David asked God to rescue him, the Hebrew word he used, does not mean to swoop in like a white knight and remove him from the battle. ‘Chalatz’ means to deliver, to equip for a fight, to make ready, prepare, to make strong for war, to brace up, and invigorate. Sometimes God does deliver us in times of great warfare, but often, He equips us and makes us strong for war so that having done all else, we will stand! One of the most powerful battle stances we can take is to stand in faith and be strong and of good courage. We must guard our hearts from the fear of man.

v. 10 *“Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days.”* Jesus does not offer comfort that things will get better in this world! He warns the church in Smyrna that persecution will increase and their tribulation will be more severe, that the pressure would get heavier. Yet, they are encouraged not to fear these things. In **John 16:33**, Jesus said, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

“Ten days” The number 10 is symbolic of testing and trial. Ten days offers a set number of days. There is comfort in knowing this time of trial and testing was for a period of time that could be measured with a definite beginning and end. They could take hope in the fact it was temporary. ‘Ten days’ is a Greek phrase that actually means ‘for a short time.’ Thus, they were assured that while persecution would rage for a time, the Church would live and survive. Jesus assured them they had no reason to be afraid. **2 Cor. 4:17-18**

vs. 10 Instruction: *“Be faithful (loyal) until death...”* To be faithful means to be fully convinced and to hold fast to the Truth. The faithfulness that Jesus calls us to is that borne out of a deep conviction, a

certainty that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This faithfulness is grounded and founded in the faithfulness of Jesus and the certainty of His Word. Whatever trial we go through, any circumstances of pain or trials we face, if we are convinced of the faithfulness of Jesus, we will be faithful to Him. Many of our trials will only make sense in the light of eternity. **Rev. 12:11**

G. Campbell Morgan, said, "It is as though He had said to them, You are going to be cast into prison, "the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried. Be faithful, believe still. Live within the limit of great assurance. Don't question Me, don't doubt Me, depend on Me. The Lord did not mean, Gather yourselves and get through it. He simply meant, Trust Me. He did not intend to advise them to gird up their loins and be determined that they would see the business through. He meant rather, Trust Me, let Me be your courage. I am alive, and I was dead. I have gone to the limit of this matter. There is no depth I have not fathomed. No darkness I have not penetrated. Be faithful, follow Me, not in the effort of a strenuous determination, but with the ease of a simple trust."

Jesus called us to take up our cross and follow Him. In American, most of us do not even think that the cost of being His disciple might be to choose death for His sake, but the reality is that this is the situation facing many believers all over the world. It is a reality that we could face in any country at any time. When death is the price to be paid for the sake of the Gospel, Jesus gives us the promise that our life in Him cannot be taken away by anything man can do to us.

vs. 10 Promise: *"and I will give you the crown of life."* Jesus wore a crown of thorns so He could give us the crown of life! Jesus Himself will place the crown of life on your head. The crown speaks of glory and reigning with the Lord in His Heavenly Kingdom.

The Bible frequently refers to crowns. The crown is often a symbol of royalty and position. The most memorable crown being the crown of thorns worn by our Savior as He was crucified. He endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. On earth, Jesus wore the crown of thorns as a suffering servant, but in His eternal Kingdom, He will be crowned as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! When we meet our Savior, He will place crown of life upon our heads! **James 1:12; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4**

The Greek word for crown, 'stephanos,' is not the crown of royalty but is used to describe three types of crowns:

- **The victor's crown:** "Out of the tribulation, we shall have our triumph. Out of the darkness, we shall come to life." The crown of victory in the games, a crown that was given to the victor. The crown of life was in contrast to the crowns given in this world, which are of fleeting importance. The laurels given to the victor of the Greek games would quickly fade. The race may be long and hard, but the one who perseveres will receive a crown which is of lasting value.
- **The crown for faithful service:** In Smyrna, a crown was given to those who were faithful in municipal service. On their coins, the magistrates were pictured wearing a crown of laurel leaves. And so, the believer who serves Christ will receive a crown that is of far more value because he has faithfully served his King and this crown is a crown of life eternal! Imagine having Jesus Himself set a crown on your head to reward you for your faithful service!!
- **The festal crown of celebration:** This crown was given at a celebration of great joy. It was a practice to give those who joined a wedding celebration wore crowns.

vs. 11 Instruction: *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." "He who is able to hear, let him listen to and give heed to what the Spirit says to the assemblies (churches)."* The

word for 'hear' used in this passage means to listen carefully, to attend to and consider carefully what has been said in order to understand and comprehend with the intention of obedience. This word is used 428 times in the Bible! Jesus has the words of life and for this reason, we must listen to His words very carefully! **John 6:45, 68**

v. 11 Promise: *"He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death."* The word "overcomes" is 'nikao' (G3528) which means to subdue, either literally or figuratively, to conquer, to prevail, get victory. It means to carry off the victory over all foes and speaks of Christians who will hold fast in the hour of temptation and persecution, to maintain one's cause. The word comes from the root, 'nike' G3529, meaning to be victorious, or to have the victory. **Rev. 4:2; Rom. 3:4; 8:37 John 16:33, 1 Cor. 15:57-58.**

v. 11 *"will not be hurt by the second death."* The first death is that moment when our spirit leaves the body on this earth. The second death is when we stand before the LORD and the faithful are separated from those who have rejected Jesus. Unbelievers will experience the second death when they are sent to the lake of fire. **Rev. 20:14,15**

The Church of Smyrna was encouraged with the knowledge that faithfulness gives life. Even though they would go through persecution, the LORD wanted them to focus on His promise of life which is eternal! Faithfulness is not something that we develop all at one time. It develops and grows as we face each new challenge with our focus on the LORD and putting all of our trust in Him. We may fear we do not have the faith to stand in times of persecution that the believers in Smyrna faced, but God gives us grace to grow in faith as we remain in His Word and learn to trust Him in every circumstance. Take time to meditate on His Word every day and turn to His Word in times of trouble. Keep your lamps full of oil!

What is the Lord Speaking to me?

Responding to the Lord: