

The Book Of
REVELATION
THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA
Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

Structure of the Book

Paul was exhorted to:

Revelation 1:19

Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.

- **Revelation 1** *things which you have seen*
- **Revelation 2-3** *things which are*
- **Revelation 4-22** *things which will take place*

Four Approaches To Understanding The Seven Churches

1. Historic - Seven historic churches that literally existed at the end of the first century
2. Characteristic - Seven characteristic churches that can exist at any point in history
3. Prophetic - Seven chronological prophetic periods of church history
4. Individualistic - Seven individualistic profiles of believer

The Church

Destination

Revelation 2:8a

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

Basic Facts

Second of the Seven Churches

- Located 35-40 miles north of Ephesus
- At the time of writing was a church facing extreme trial and persecution

Location: Ancient city located on Turkish coast of the Aegean Sea, in what is now Izmir
First City: 1000BC (Old Smyrna) Founded as a colony of Greece (King Saul)
Demise: 627BC Captured and destroyed by the Lydian kingdom (capital Sardis)
Second City: 290BC (New Smyrna) Reestablished by two of Alexander the Great's successors
Loyalties: 195BC Loyalty switched to Rome; they built a temple to Rome

Name Facts

Smyrna: Means, "bitter" – apt considering their trials
Etymology: Hebrew/Arabic - Myrrh (chief export in ancient times) (Izmir means the same)
Source: Myrrh is an aromatic resin drawn from flowering shrubs, used to embalm the dead

- Apt, considering the martyrdom they are facing
- The subsequent embalming that would be called for

Acropolis

- The new Smyrna was built on Mount Pagus
- Temples to Cybele, Zeus, Apollo, Askelepios, Aphrodite
- Circles of porticos ringed the top of Mount Pagus made it look like a diadem
- Crown of flowers, hedges and myrtle trees around the Acropolis
- Smyrna called "The Crown of Asia" and the symbol of the city was a crown

Alliance With Rome

- Smyrna was shrewd enough to identify with the rising power of Rome
- Alliance remained unbroken and the city worshipped Rome as a spiritual power since 195BC

- 26AD petitioned and were granted permission to build a temple to the deity of Tiberius
- Smyrna was at the heart of Caesar/Emperor worship

Emperor Worship

Emperor worship was compulsory

- Failure to comply meant death
- Every year each citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar
- When burning incense the citizen would declare, "Caesar is Lord"
- After this the citizen would be awarded a certificate
- To be found without a certificate meant the death penalty

Persecution at Smyrna

John writes the Revelation of Jesus Christ

- During the reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96AD) who persecuted the church
- As an encouragement to the churches facing that persecution
- Some Christians experience greater persecution than others

In a city with

- A special alliance to Rome
- A temple to Caesar
- Renowned for Emperor worship
- The persecution of Christian's there would be heightened

Hence why Smyrna is referred to as the Persecuted Church

Description of Jesus

Revelation 2:8b

These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.

The First And The Last

The Lord Jesus identifies Himself to the Smyrna Christians

- With the title, "*the First and the Last*"
- This is how the Lord Jesus identified Himself to John in **Revelation 1:17**
- This is how the Lord Jesus identifies Himself again in **Revelation 22:13**

Prior to this the Lord God

- Identified Himself to the nations with this title **Isaiah 41:4**
- Identified Himself to Israel with this title **Isaiah 44:6; Isaiah 48:12**

It is a title that speaks of the deity of Jesus Christ

- As both He and the Lord God adopts the title

Illustration

Jehovah's witnesses object due to upper and lower cases

It is a title that speaks of Jesus Christ's Lordship over history

- He bookends human history
- "*The First*" He was already in existence before all things
- "*The Last*" He will be in existence after all things come to an end

Yet, the Lord Jesus Christ, who here identifies as God:

- Became fully human
- Became part of human history

He underwent

- The agony of death
- The victory of resurrection

Who Was Dead, And Came To Life

Smyrna is the city that had died and come back to life

- Conquered and destroyed under the Lydians in 627 BC
- Rebuilt by the Greeks in 290 BC
- As the city had died and been resurrected
- As Jesus had died and been resurrected
- So, the persecuted Christians are guaranteed resurrection
- God doesn't abandoned His children
- But gives them a hope beyond their current conflict

Commendation

Revelation 2:9

I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

I Know

I know your works

- Know = to see, to perceive with the eyes

Illustration

- A hurt child, where things haven't gone their way comes running to their mummy or daddy
- They say to their child, "It's alright, I know, I know."

The Lord is not ignorant of our circumstances

- Of the pain we feel
- The fears that rise within us
- The struggles we face

He knows, He empathises

- He is the one to whom you can turn
- He is the one who can bring comfort and encouragement in it all

Tribulation/Pressure

Jesus speaks of their tribulation

- Tribulation = suffering, affliction, distress, pressure

Matthew 24:21	Siege works against a city	-	rising pressure and anguish
John 16:21	Distress of woman in childbirth	-	rising pressure and pain
Colossians 1:24	Afflictions of Jesus Christ	-	rising pressure, up to and during the cross

He then provides the two sources of that tribulation/pressure:

1. Poverty
2. Blasphemy (at the hands of the Jew's)

Poverty

This is the first cause of the pressure the Christians of Smyrna experienced

This more than living a comparatively poor lifestyle

- This is abject poverty; extreme poverty
- Destitution, resorting to begging, poorer than slaves

The abject poverty was the result of the persecution facing the Smyrna Christians

- Fired from jobs (working guilds)
- Robbed of possessions (confiscated)
- Led them to hide in the catacombs

Hebrews 10:34

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

This type of persecution still exists today

- Christian's find themselves taxed higher in Muslim territories
- Don't enjoy the benefits of other countrymen due to their religion

Jesus sees their physical poverty and contrasts it with a spiritual richness

- The believers could only see their physical circumstances
- Jesus encourages them to look beyond into the spiritual

He does the same to us as well - The greater reality is the spiritual

James 2:5

"Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

Interesting contrast with church in Laodicea which is described as:

Revelation 3:17

Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

Blasphemy

This is the second cause of the pressure the Christians of Smyrna experienced

- Blasphemy - Slander, injurious speech, evil speaking, verbal abuse

This blasphemy/slander was

- At hands of the Jews
- Who are described as "synagogue of satan"

Not like the Church of St Luke

- Or the Church of the Holy Cross

Question: Where do you attend?

Answer: The synagogue of Satan

- Synagogue - An assembling or gathering
- Satan - Adversary, accuser
- Satan gathered or assembled these Jews for his purposes

Historically we are told there was a large community of hostile Jew's in Smyrna

- They slandered (and falsely accused) the Christians
- They sided with Rome
- Informed against Christians
- Incited the local governor to attack them
- In a way that led to legal penalties
- Resulted in imprisonments

The church has a sad history of anti-semitism

- Which cannot and should not be excused or diminished
- Yet, it's important to note that unbelieving Jews first persecuted the church

Six Accusations Against Christians

1. Cannibalism - Partaking of the Lord's body and blood in communion
2. Gross Immorality - Brother and sisters marrying, professing love for one another
3. Family Break-ups - Becoming part of the family of God, causing division in existing families
4. Atheism - Rome had many gods, all rejected by Christians (thus called atheists)
5. Political Disloyalty - Civic and religious festivals were combined, so Christians abstained
6. Causing Disasters - Due not honouring pagan God's, natural disasters were ascribed to them

Revelation 2:9 Paraphrase

I see with my own eyes the rising pressure that you under, the crushing weight of circumstances you are facing, due to the extreme poverty you are experiencing and the slander, the evil words of the accuser that are coming from the mouth of the Jews.

Condemnation

- Smyrna was one of two churches, along with Philadelphia, that didn't receive a condemnation
- These two locations are the only two with a lingering Church presence today
- Persecuted believers are facing enough

Counsel

Revelation 2:10a

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Prepared For Persecution

When a person or a church is

- Under intense pressure
- Enduring poverty and persecution
- Experiencing accusations and attack
- Facing death and martyrdom

The natural desire

- Is for escape
- Is for the Lord to come and deliver you

- The Lord does not promise deliverance
- The Lord prepares them for persecution

There is no pulling of punches

- The Lord is clear, *"you are about to suffer"*
- The Lord states, *"Do not fear any of those things"*

Power In Persecution

Question: What is are response to the thought of persecution?

Answer: Do we think:

- I can't handle that level of pressure!
- I can't handle that level of persecution!
- I don't have the resources to manage it!

While such things are not pleasant (and nobody wants to face them)

- They do force you to cry out to God and rely upon Him in a new and deeper way
- It is then that His resources come into play
- You find yourself equipped and able to deal with such things
- Seeing God's hand operate in your life
- Experiencing His power and enabling you to deal with is an encouragement

Nature of Persecution

The Lord, in His foreknowledge, elaborates on the nature of the persecution

- At the hands of the devil
- Testing
- Imprisonment
- Ten Days

The Devil

The devil cannot operate without the permission of the Lord to do so

- Whatever the Smyrna Christians face
- It has first been vetted by the Lord

It is always reassuring to know

- That when events seem out of control
- The Lord reigns and is in control

The devil always has agents through whom He operates

1. Romans
2. Jews

Testing

that you may be tested

There is no doubt the Lord uses adverse circumstances

- To test our faith
- To perfect out faith

However, the testing here appears to be at the hand of the devil

- The enemy is using imprisonment and no doubt torture and fear of death
- As a tool to try to get Christians to renounce their faith

Ten Days

However, the Lord has limited the extent of the devils testing to ten days

- We have seen the church in Smyrna is living in a state of rising pressure
- Yet there is an intensified period of persecution and trial approaching (denoted by the term ten days)

Ten Literal Days

This was a literal period of ten days of intense persecution

- The church in Smyrna would (and did) experience
- A surge of persecution happened after the publication of the apocalypse
- Mass executions of Christian's took place on multiple occasions
- A surge of persecution happened in the days of Polycarp

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna

- A convert and disciple of John
- Was martyred in 155AD

Polycarp is recorded as saying on the day of his death

"Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong, how then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."

Polycarp was burned at the stake and was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor.

A Call To The Faithful

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

Added to this forewarning of ten days of persecution

- Comes the exhortation to *"be faithful until death"*

The Lord does not measure success

- By church numbers
- By financial income
- But through faithfulness

Regardless of what any other believer is, or is not doing

- He will ask of you when you face Him, "Have you been faithful?"

There are no limits to that faithfulness

- We don't serve the Lord, until the going gets tough
- We don't serve the Lord, until we get to a passage we disagree with
- He says, *"Be faithful until death"*

No doubt this is a call to

- Faithfulness throughout your life on earth
- Until you die naturally or are raptured

- In context it is faithfulness, even if your life is forfeit in serving Jesus Christ

Such a notion is alien to us

- Martyrdom has not been seen in this country for 400 years
- However, it is commonplace elsewhere in the world
- Just as persecution is on the rise in this country
- Martyrdom is not far behind it

The Crown Of Life

The reward for such faithfulness is the gift of *“the crown of life”*

This echoes the words of James

James 1:12

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

In a city known as the Crown of Asia

- With a diadem of porticos and a crown of myrtle trees and hedges
- The greatest crown was to be found serving Jesus Christ

Challenge

Revelation 2:11

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

The message to Smyrna was not to them uniquely

- Jesus commands us to listen to what the Spirit say to the churches
- The call for faithfulness in the face of rising pressure, persecution and even death
- Is relevant to all the seven churches
- But also to us as a church as well

Question: Who is the overcomer?

Answer: The believer – the one who has put their faith and their life into Jesus hands

Question: What is the second death?

Answer: The lake of fire

Revelation 20:14

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

This is the destination for

- The beast and the false prophet
- The devil and all his demons
- The unbeliever

The Bible is clear what is meant by the second death

- It is not annihilation
- It is conscious, unending, punishment

The believer however dies once and then goes into the presence of God

In this the church in Smyrna, and by association us too

- Are encouraged to take an eternal perspective to life
- To not live with temporal goals as much as we should have eternal goals

Closing Thoughts

Prophetic Approach

The Seven Churches can be understood to represent seven general periods of overlapping church history

AD30-100 Ephesus

AD100-313 Smyrna

This is the period of great Christian persecution

- There were ten periods of persecution
- Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, Diocletian
- *“you will have tribulation for ten days”*

The persecution ended when Rome adopted Christianity as the state religion

- This period of history is covered in the next church, Pergamum

Present Church

Every day, 11 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith.

Every week, 182 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.

And every month, over 30 Christians are imprisoned unjustly.

Christians are persecuted in over 140 countries worldwide

Between 300-600 million Christians face persecution

Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus:

1. North Korea
2. Afghanistan
3. Somalia
4. Libya
5. Pakistan
6. Eritrea
7. Sudan
8. Yemen
9. Iran
10. India

Appendix

Ten Periods Of Persecution

Ten Days

Ten specific periods of persecution under the emperors of the first three centuries of the church age

1. Nero 54AD
2. Domitian 81AD
3. Trajan 98AD
4. Hadrian 117AD
5. Septimus Severus 117AD
6. Maximin 235AD
7. Decius 249AD
8. Valerian 254AD
9. Aurlian 270AD
10. Domitian 284AD

Weaknesses

- One persecution is past
- One is present
- Jesus says, "you will have tribulation ten days"
- The future tense renders the argument weak
- It is more than the church in Smyrna that would experience these persecutions
- The church throughout the entire Roman world would experience these persecutions