

THE CHURCH ABOUT TO BE TESTED

The Message to Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: ⁹“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Brief historical context:

Smyrna was a thriving port city of the Roman Empire in the first century. It is the closet sea port to Europe (modern name Izmir). Smyrna was devastated by the *Lydian kingdom* (an Iron Age kingdom of Western Asia Minor) but was rebuilt by Alexander the Great. The city was known for its beauty, architecture and tropical climate.

It is this theme of death and resurrection (destruction and restoration) that Jesus picks up when he writes to the Church in Smyrna.

Smyrna was rich in myrrh hence its name. Perhaps myrrh in the life of Jesus (at his birth and death) came from Smyrna.

Jesus' Identity:

The first and the last, the one who was dead and came to life.

Message:

I know — Jesus is so intensely present with his church that he is aware of their situation of *poverty and slander* and *predicts imprisonment and death* for some of the members. *Be faithful and I will give you a crown of life.* Taking a stand for Jesus often leads to imprisonment and even death. In Smyrna, the Christians were a despised minority. Jesus knows their tribulation and poverty but he told them that they are rich in him — the upside down kingdom is in view here. The Church in Smyrna though poor in material things was rich toward God.

Jesus words in Luke 12:15

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

In one of the DVDs I used when I was reflecting on Jesus' letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, the presenter explained in the video the slander and tribulation by the Jews of the synagogue of Satan [vs. 9]. ‘Christians were accused of cannibalism (eating body and drinking blood). Also, the Christians were being accused of being anti-family (calling each other brothers and sisters). This made them a despised subculture.

Some Jews at that time didn't want to associate with Christians because they felt Christians [followers of Jesus Christ] caused trouble with Rome.'

Jesus predicted suffering in Smyrna (imprisonment and death). Polycarp (69-155) Bishop of the Second Century Church was martyred in Smyrna. Legend has it that when they tried to burn him at the stake that a mysterious wind came and blew the fire away and the guard command one to stab Polycarp and so he died.

Smyrna is the only church Jesus did not have a grievance with, and yet, they suffered greatly.

Reward:

A **Crown of Life** was very significant for the Christians in Smyrna since the 'crown' was the symbol of the city of Smyrna. Crowns were on coins, and were given to people who won in the games, etc. The Christians in Smyrna had no earthly crowns [because of their faith in Jesus Christ], a visible symbol of their disenfranchisement from society.

The crown of life is also mentioned in chapter 3:11 and is found in James 1:12.

Paul's words in Philippians 1:21

²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

Relevance:

Hardship, suffering, persecution, and marginalization, do not have to result in water-down Christian beliefs and integrity — genuine faith in Jesus Christ always stands the test of time.

Counter cultural reflection points:

- How have you experienced marginalization because of your Christian faith?
- What cost or price are you willing to pay in order to fit in?
- What helps you to maintain personal integrity when you are tempted to give in to the pressures around you and within you?