

Patmos and the Seven Churches of Asia

By Doug Hamilton

C) The Church in Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

Rev 2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life..."

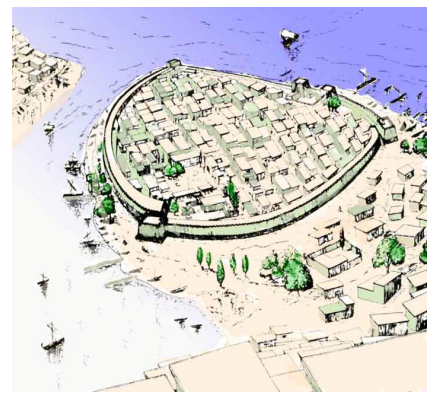
Thirty five miles to the north of Ephesus, Smyrna was considered the loveliest city in Asia. Today it is called Izmir and is the third largest city in the nation of Turkey. Back then it was referred to by three names 1) the ornament of Asia, 2) the flower of Asia and 3) the crown of Asia. Situated on a beautiful harbor and traversing through a group of rolling hills, Smyrna was positioned at the foot of a large hill called the Pagos, which was covered with multiple ornate temples and noble buildings.

The city was a thriving location as far back as 1000 BC, but was destroyed by invading Lydians from the east in 600 B.C. The people of the city prided themselves on the splendor of the restoration that had taken place over the centuries, for now it was greater than ever in appearance. Perhaps this adds meaning to the phrase "*who was dead, and lived again*".



It was one of the few locations in the world which had rectangular blocks and well-planned roads. The greatest of these roads was called the "Street of Gold", which began at the Temple of Zeus and ended at the Temple Cybele, containing the most ornate buildings in the city.

A beautiful location and fanciful buildings were not the only things that Smyrna could boast, but also a deep nationalism for the Roman Empire. Long before Rome became the official world empire, Smyrna was loyal to the upcoming giant. In one case, when Roman soldiers who were waging war were found out to be in extreme hunger and cold, the people of Smyrna stripped off their own clothes and sent them for a contribution to the war effort. Cicero referred to Smyrna as "one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies". They were true Roman



patriots and loyal to the core.

One could not be loyal to Rome without being loyal to the Roman god system, which spelled trouble for the Christian's in this city. It was the leading center for "Empire Worship". Four months after Julius Caesar was executed, a comet appeared in the sky (July 44 BC). It was accepted this signified that Caesar was a god. From there, the movement to exalt emperors had begun. The "Emperor cult" was small until Augustus accepted the honor.

In AD 26, there was a contest between all the cities of Asia to see who would build the temple to the godhead Emperor Tiberius. With all the major cities competing, Smyrna won. The city swore allegiance to Caesar as a result and it became a dangerous location for Christians.

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They were actually labeled as “Atheists” because they did not worship the Roman gods. They were considered enemies of the state.

Jesus described Himself as “the first and the last, who was dead, and lived (again)”. Jesus is “the first and the last” is significant because up to this moment in scripture it only referred to God the Father.

- *Isa 44:6 "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides me.*
- *Isa 48:12 "Listen to me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last.*

Being the “first and the last” means that we are complete in Him. “First and last” means that Jesus has the first and last word on everything. “First and last” means that the Christian should have Jesus on their minds from the first in the morning to the last in the evening. We have a “first and last” Savior who is complete and sufficient not only in the hour of need, but in all our needs.

Rev 2:9 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.

Smyrna was also an area where the Christians were in utter poverty. If you went to worship at Ephesus, there would be an extravagant church building and everyone in town knew where it was. Smyrna on the other hand would be another story. The church building would have been on the poorer side of town. They were really poor and likely few in number. There are two words in the Greek for poverty. One means not possessing anything luxurious or superfluous. The other, which applies here, refers to possessing nothing at all. They were extremely poor!

There are three primary reasons for poverty in the lives of the first century Christians. First, most of the Christians during this time came from the lower class and slaves. Most did not have much to start to begin with (James 2:5). Second, many times Christians would suffer the loss of all their possessions in raids and mistreatment from others in power (Hebrews 10:34). It also was quite common for an angry mob to destroy the home of a Christian at the inciting of a riot. Third, there was the threat of economic persecution. Often hostile employers would hold back employment and wages from poor Christians knowing they did not have the means to fight it (James 5:4). Not swearing allegiance to Caesar or belonging to heathen guilds often meant unemployment. Life for the Christian in the first century was not easy by any stretch of the imagination.

What sweeter words could Jesus say to the Smyrna church than “*I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty*”? They are at risk of losing their faith. All they have to do is take a little incense, throw it onto the altar, say “Caesar is lord” and their situation would be immediately better. But Jesus comforts them by letting them know that He knows what they are going through. Jesus was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He did not even have keep the clothes on His back when crucified. Do you think He knew the definition of poor?

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He also said they were rich. “Rich” referred to their steadfast approach to the faith. Jesus told us in Matthew 6:19-20 not to lay up treasures on earth, but to lay them up in heaven. These folks have been banking on the afterlife. Perhaps we should open up the bankbook of our heart and take inventory of our heavenly investments. Paul explains this type of poverty in 2 Corinthians 6:10, “...as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” It is the positive attitude of the Christian that Paul emphasized in Philippians 4:12-13, “*I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.*”¹³ *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*” The Smyrnan Christians knew earthly poverty, but they kept in mind the eternal wealth of a heavenly future.

There was a large Jewish population in Smyrna. They were the hostile and vocal type who loved to see the Christians persecuted. When the physical and economic persecution arose, the Jews of Smyrna thought nothing of it to add to the Christians woes. Because Christianity was cutting into their proselyte business, they often would incite the riots against the Christians. Often there would be groups of Jews following the steps of Paul, trying to destroy his work.

- *Acts 14:2 But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren.*
- *Acts 14:5 And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them,*
- *Acts 14:19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.*
- *Acts 17:5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.*

He called the Jews a “*synagogue of Satan*” in contrast to one of their favorite references to themselves as the “assembly of the Lord” (Numbers 16:3; 20:4; 31:16). Even a true Jew of that day would have no reason to persecute people like they were the Christians. They constantly tried to hurt the Christians. God wanted the Smyrnan Christians to know that they were of the devil and have nothing to do with Him (1 John 3:10).

*Rev 2:10-11 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast 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.'*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.'*

Do you realize that Jesus has said nothing negative concerning this Church? Yet they were going to have to suffer. We tend to have a mindset that Christians do not have to suffer unjustly. This is wrong! In this life it rains on the just and the unjust; the sun will rise on the good and the evil (Matthew 5:45). He never promised us an easy time in this life. He did promise eternal life to those who follow him. Then and only then will He wipe away our tears, there will

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be no more death, there will be no more mourning, there will be no more crying, there will be no more pain (Rev 21:4). That is the promise Christians cling to, not for this life. Don't cling to promises that Jesus didn't make and get our expectations out of order.

Ten days referred to a short and complete persecution. They will not suffer the second death like the condemned. This is the life that Jesus promised. Their reward for being faithful unto death was the garland wreath of the champion. There was a stadium in Smyrna that hosted a yearly athletic contest for Asia. Like all the athletic games of the day, the champions, the ones overcoming the odds and coming out as champions, were given a victors wreath to wear on their head. It was equivalent to the gold medal in the Olympics. This is the same crown that is given to the one who overcame. *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.* It is a “crown of thorns” on the head of Jesus in Matthew 27:29. It is a “crown of exultation” in 1 Thessalonians 2:19. It is the “crown of righteousness” in 2 Timothy 4:8. It is the “unfading crown of glory” in 1 Peter 5:4. That is the crown that Christians who overcome the world will have.

We must have an attitude of being “Faithful unto Death”

Jesus said in *Matthew 5:11-12*, “*Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” Notice He did not say “IF” people insult you and persecute you, but “WHEN”. If you are a faithful Christian, you will be persecuted. We are contrary to the world and they will hate us simply for that fact (John 3:19). It is simply a matter of how great and how long the persecution will last.

We in America sometimes undergo mild persecution for our Christian faith. The liberal media does not like Christianity and will use the bully pulpit of the airwaves to ridicule Christians. The educated elite in the universities do not like Christians because we know the only possess the “wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 3:19). Sinners definitely do not like Christians in America because we cramp their lifestyle. Christians in America have lost jobs, friends, family, academic opportunities, money and freedoms. Jesus said there would be persecution for a Christian faith and that includes here in America.

Overall we really have it pretty good in the U.S. compared to the rest of the world. Since Jesus uttered those words, more than 70 million people have been put to death for their Christian faith (christiantoday.com 2014). Execution of Christians in the world have doubled each of the last two years. They are being beheaded, burned alive, shot, stabbed and buried alive. It is not just a few countries, but in China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Nigeria, Egypt and dozens of other countries. To the right is a map (Christian Freedom International) of the nations that are active in deadly persecution of Christians. More than half the world's population is represented on this



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map. If we think that map will stop heading our way, we are only fooling ourselves. The world's persecution is coming our way and we must be prepared to defend it.

Though Jesus warned the Smyrnans to be *faithful unto death*, it applies to all Christians. This is why Jesus commands for us to be baptized in order to enter the covenant with Him. He died so that we could live. We in return understand at baptism that we are going to be faithful unto death. If someone threatens to kill us lest we deny Christ, we think back to when we entered the death, burial and resurrection relationship with Him. If we are not willing to die for Jesus, then we are not willing to live for Him either. We must have an attitude of being *faithful unto death*.

Closing story:

On Saturday, February 23rd, A.D. 155, a faithful, aged leader in the church at Smyrna named Polycarp, a student of John the apostle, was martyred. It was the time of the public games and the people were excited. As it often occurs, the crowd was becoming out of hand when someone yelled out, "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for." His whereabouts was betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. When the police went to the location to make the arrest, Polycarp offered them a meal. As they were hauling him to the stadium, the police captain pled with the old man, "What harm is it to say, 'Caesar is Lord' and to offer sacrifice and be saved?" But Polycarp was adamant in his stand that Jesus is the only Lord.

He was led into the coliseum which was filled with an angry mob and before all given the choice to call Caesar Lord or die. The proconsul threatened to burn him at the stake to which his response was:

"Eighty and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? ...You threaten me with fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in the everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

With that refusal, Polycarp was ordered to be tied to a stake in the coliseum and burned alive. Even though it was the Sabbath, the Jews had no problem being the primary haulers of the wood to fuel the fire. Before the fire could finish the job, the executioner pulled out his sword and stabbed him to death. This great church leader who studied at the feet of John the apostle was faithful unto death.



Conclusion: Be faithful unto death. Hang in there with the Lord regardless what happens in this life. Jesus will see to it that all Christians are taken care of.