



The Church at Smyrna

AND unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; ⁹ I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. ¹¹ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. (Rev 2:8-11)

It is quite noteworthy that our Lord has only commendation for the Church at Smyrna. I cannot help but love and admire this one church more than the other six combined for I feel it represents, at least to me, the True Church of God through every century. Located on a beautiful coastline of the Mediterranean at the modern city of Izmir, Smyrna was perhaps thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. It was above Ephesus geographically, and it was above Ephesus spiritually, as well. There was no stain or rot in the spiritual heart of this wonderful church.

As in the case of the other six, this letter is addressed to the “*Angel of the Church in Smyrna*” which I believe represents its spiritual leadership under Christ. Each letter to the Seven Churches is addressed to its Angel – or under-shepherd. It seems likely that, based on historical documents of the period, preserved in the writings of Eusebius and others, Polycarp may have been the superintending pastor of this church at the time of the writing of Revelation, and is suggested in the Apostolic Constitution. Eusebius shares an epistle written by the Church at Smyrna to the churches at Pontus describing

the martyrdom of Polycarp as bishop of Smyrna contemporaneous with the writings of John the Revelator.

The name of the Church – SMYRNA – is suggestive of the suffering and sacrifice of the good Christian brothers and sisters there. The name, Smyrna, is derived from the Greek translation of the Old Testament Septuagint for the brownish-red resin called myrrh. Myrrh is bitter symbolizing the suffering of the Church at Smyrna, but it has a very endearing aroma that also portrays the warm and loving spirit of the Christians of that Church. Myrrh is an ointment used in embalming or preparing the dead for burial. It was one of the three symbolic gifts of the Magi of GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, and MYRRH. Gold signified his royalty as King of Kings; Frankincense to signify His Divinity; and Myrrh to signify His sacrificial death and burial. (see John 19:39) Myrrh was used as a perfume for the living (its sweet aroma emanated from the crushed plant) and as anointing substance for the dead. The Christians of Smyrna lived as if dead to the world but alive in Christ forever. Many of the Christians of Smyrna lived their daily lives under the threat of martyrdom, but remained faithful to our Lord to the end. It would be interesting to know how many ministers and laypersons would be the same in our American churches. We do have churches abroad that fit this description, however.

I do not believe the Church, by any means, was perfect. They presumably had the same shortcomings as the greatest saints and missionaries of our past possessed; yet, they were as faithful to Christ as human flesh could be in following His Holy Spirit and rendering to Him the most abundant vessels of love their heart chambers could muster. God knows our frailty and weakness, but He loves us above all else for our humility and love rendered to Him and His own. Many were poor and uneducated; yet they set an example of faithful discipleship under austere circumstances. I have witnessed a deeper and more fervent faith among our brothers and sisters of the deprived churches of the Pacific Basin and Africa than I have ever witnessed in our modern churches of the West. In view of their present suffering, our Lord declines to mention any transgressions of such a faithful people.

The Lord offers a meaningful, and unique, greeting to each of the Seven Churches. There is no exception to this suffering church: *“These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;”* Our Lord knows well, better than even we ourselves, the plights and dangers that we face in this life. He knows them long before we saw the sunrise, or were made joyful at the fragrance of a rose. He is ever watchful over His people, and sees every heart-break, every hurt, and every offense done to us. So, He reminds the people of the Church at Smyrna that He is the First, and the LAST – and all in between; and, as such, He is also eternal so that their LAST is not their END. He, more than them, was persecuted, martyred, and buried; but He ROSE FROM THE DEAD, and so will they. The iron-heeled oppressor cannot hurt them for more than a short breath, and then they join company with the Lord at His abundant table filled with the delicacies of spiritual wine, fruits of love, and Bread of Life.

“I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich)” I see a most profound meaning in the Lord’s remark here. Though this Church is located in a city of fishers and laborers, and are poor and persecuted, they are truly rich in the important considerations of Eternal Security. This is further evidence that impressive walls and spires do not a church make. There may be more Christian heart and soul in a day of a small wilderness or house church than a year’s worth of attendance at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Our Lord is not ashamed of our poverty, endured for His sake, but He commends us for it.

“ . . . and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” The honorable John Gill described these people, much

like those today who profess Christ with their lips and deny Him with every other muscle of their bodies, thusly, (those) *"who asserted themselves to be the true Israel of God, Jews that were so inwardly, regenerate persons, or truly Christians; for the Christians, baptized persons, were by the Heathens called Jews; but these were not, they professed Christianity in words, but in works denied it; they were men of bad principles and practices, and both blasphemed the ways and doctrines of Christ themselves, and caused them to be blasphemed by others also; they were false Christians, nominal professors, and shunned persecution for the Gospel; who were not what they would be thought to be: these were the broachers of heresies in this period of time, in which there was a multitude of them, and which chiefly disrespected the doctrine of the Trinity, and the person of Christ; and they were introducers of Pagan and Jewish rites into the church, and were men of flagitious lives and conversations, and paved the way for the man of sin: but were the children of the devil, imitated him, and were influenced by him, and were the forerunners of antichrist, whose coming was after the working of Satan."*

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." No, we should not fear those things mentioned, nor anything earthly powers can work against us. We belong to the King of Kings. Though we may be persecuted in an outlying province of life, He is King there, too, and will exact justice and retribution. *"After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands..... And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."* (Rev 7:9,14) A crown is a royal grant that only a King can make, and the life to which He makes reference is an Everlasting life in the Royal realm of Heaven.

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." Not all sitting in the pews on Sunday have new ears to hear. Their ears are those they had before they half-heartedly professed Christ as Lord. They hear the sermon Sunday after Sunday, yet seemed unphased by any part of it. They may believe *"Those old stories of Adam, of Cain, of David and Bathsheba, of Job, of Ruth, or of Gideon, etc. were not intended, surely, for modern man."* Really? Reality Check! The accounts of the Old and New Testament are intended more for us today than for many in ages past. Have we gotten somehow better? No! We have grown even more wicked and sophisticated in our imaginations. *"And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* (Gen 6:5) What, has there been a drastic alteration of the DNA of man from that time to this? You KNOW better!

At the return of our Lord, the small Remnant which He has preserved over the ages will remain small compared to the world. In fact, that Remnant will be reduced to a 'Camp of the Saints' against the four quarters of the earth. *"And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them."* (Rev 20:9) That Camp will be small, but large enough to harbor the Church of Smyrna, and every elect member of the Church of God. Will you be found within its walls of defense in that day. If you examine and judge your own heart, the answer may be found therein.