

- **\*READ Revelation 1:17-20\*** Unfortunately, there have been too many people who respond to the book of Revelation just as John responded as he saw Jesus in His glorified form. Too many people read through this book, and are scared to death of the vivid imagery and dramatic storyline. However, fear of the great words written in this book will only hinder us from being blessed by those same words.
- If ever there was a part of the book of Revelation that we ought to love to read, it certainly would be the words written to the seven churches that were found within Asia Minor. We started last Sunday by looking at the church in Ephesus that was first commended for their love for the truth, but then they were rebuked for not loving the Lord as they once had, and we read of the warning that they return to that first love before it was too late. May we take those words to heart within our own lives lest we too fall guilty of not loving the Lord as we ought to love Him...with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He is worthy because He first loved us, and He desires to reward our faithful love through granting us eternal access to the tree of life.
- The next church that is addressed within the Revelation is that of Smyrna. Out of the seven messages sent to the seven churches, only two of them do not contain words of rebuke or criticism. Smyrna is the first of those churches, and in a few weeks we will consider the second church, the church at Philadelphia. But for tonight, I would like to look at this persecuted church to see the great encouragement given by Jesus within these short few verses so that we too might be encouraged when we face times of our own persecution. Let's begin with a few notes about Smyrna's historical background, and then we will read through the text and get into Jesus's message to the persecuted church of Smyrna.

## **I. Historical Background Of Smyrna**

### **A. Located on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea, about 35-40 miles north of Ephesus.**

- Though not known nearly as well known for its harbor, Smyrna did benefit from being in such close proximity to Ephesus. Anyone coming from the north would pass through Smyrna in order to get to Ephesus, so this city owed much of its success to its thriving neighbor city to the south. It even tried to compete with Ephesus and Pergamon as being the "First City of Asia." In fact, within Smyrna was the largest marketplace within all of the ancient world.

### **B. It was known as the most beautiful city in all of Asia Minor.**

- Additionally, it was known during its day as the most beautiful city within all of Asia Minor because of its beautiful landscape and building architecture. Not only was it a seaside city, but rolling hills continued up from the sea and throughout the city up to the slopes of Mt. Pagos which housed beautiful buildings that some referred to as the crown of the city. *"One poet compared Smyrna to a statue of the mother goddess Cybele with her feet on the seas and her head crowned with a circle of beautiful buildings"* (Ritmeyer Archaeological Design) which was a reference to the buildings on top of the Pagos. A 20,000 spectator theatre was also located in this city. It was known for its wide and paved roads, and it also hosted its own olympic style games.

### **C. It was home to a multitude of temples dedicated to various gods, goddesses, and caesars.**

- Not only was the landscape something to be admired, but the city was home to a large number of temples dedicated to various "deities." Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Asclepius, and Cybele all had temples dedicated to their honor. Temples for Caesar worship were also present along with a temple dedicated to the great ancient poet Homer who is believed to have been born in & lived in Smyrna.

### **D. It was a hotspot for academia, science, and medicine.**

- Schools for science and medicine, a large public library, and a museum were found within this city, and the name itself has a medicinal background. The name Smyrna is derived from the word "myrrh" which was a resin found within the *commiphora myrrh* tree. This resin was used to help embalm dead bodies and keep fish from spoiling so quickly. You might also remember that myrrh was one of the gifts given to Jesus at His birth.

E. Although a very old city, Smyrna continues to exist today under the Turkish name of Izmir, and Bible-professing Christians still make it home.

- Many believe the city of Smyrna to have been at least 1,000 years old by the time of Christ, and it actually continues to exist until now within present day Turkey, though it is now known by the name Izmir. It is home to around 200,000 people, and there is a population of professing Christians that continue to make the city their home. This is especially notable considering the fact that Turkey is a country where Islam is the dominant religion.

## II. Jesus's Message To Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11):

### A. Jesus begins by establishing Himself as both divine and authoritative. (v.8)

1. As with each of the addresses to the churches of Asia Minor that are found within the Revelation, Jesus begins by addressing Himself, and the way He addresses Himself in this text is not without significance. *"Thus says the First and the Last, the One who was dead and came to life."* This is not the first time that we have read such a thing within this book. Back in **1:17,18** we read, *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He laid his right hand on me and said, 'Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last, and the Living One. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades.'"* What is implied by Jesus stating these things multiple times?

- a) First, this description of Jesus establishes His divine and eternal nature. To refer to Himself as the *"First and the Last"* is to put Himself on level ground with God the Father as being divine, eternal, and authoritative. This type of phraseology is an Old Testament title for God that can be found in **Isaiah 44:6; 48:12**. **Isaiah 44's** reference comes in the context of God establishing that there are no other gods besides Himself, and **Isaiah 48's** reference comes in the context of God having the authority to declare what is to take place. Both are strong statements to God's divinity and authority. Jesus also makes a similar statement in **Revelation 22:13** when He refers to Himself as the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus the Son of God is eternal, divine, and fully authoritative.
- b) Further, Jesus stating that He is the One who was dead and came back to life shows the degree to which He is authoritative. He is even able to have control over life and death. He allowed Himself to come to earth in human flesh to be killed and then showed His power over death in coming back to life. That power was already shown in His raising people from the dead during His ministry, but the ultimate power was seen in Himself being raised from the dead. All power and authority rests in Jesus's hands just as He states in **Revelation 1:18**, *"I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades."* These words will come to have even more significance at the closing remarks that will be given to Smyrna in just a couple verses.

2. For Jesus to begin His address to these brethren in this way would serve as nothing but strong encouragement to them because of the great difficulties that were being experienced by this church in Smyrna. For THE divine, eternal, and all-powerful Son of God to write to them specifically surely must have made them recognize that they were not going through these struggles with their King being unaware. He was more than fully aware of their situation, and He seeks to encourage them by letting them know that the God of the universe knows about their current difficulties.

### B. He acknowledges His awareness of the afflictions & poverty they are enduring. (v.9)

1. As we noted earlier, Smyrna was a city overflowing with deity and emperor worship which made it an extremely difficult place to live as a Christian. This was especially true when it came to the demands of emperor and worship within this Roman city. Under the rule of Domitian, annual sacrifices were demanded to be offered up to Caesar, and failure to do such was considered a capital offense. Even something as simple as failing to verbalize Caesar as Lord could cost a person his or her life. This caused great problems for Christians because we recognize only Jesus as Lord and capitulating to the desires of Rome in this regard would fly in the face of such a belief. Some within Rome saw the refusal of Christians to participate in sacrifices or to say such things as pure rebellion, but such surely wasn't the case since our Lord Jesus expects for His people to be peaceable and compliant citizens. However, these sacrifices and proclamations were no-gos because of the meaning behind them, and thus disciples were suffering.

2. But that is only have of the issue because Smyrna was also known for being overrun with paganism. The buildings located on the Pagos housed all of the places where the gods were worshipped, and the worshipping of these gods was closely tied into the culture of the city. This meant that the Christians, who were opposed to such practices, often found themselves very out of touch with the culture and social life of the city as a whole. Additionally, because of their worship of a God who was not represented by a tangible idol, the Smyrnans often thought of the Christians as simply being confused atheists.
  3. All of this by itself would be difficult to deal with, but there was also further difficulty in the fact that their stand for the truth of Jesus being Lord led to disciples in Smyrna being at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. Jesus acknowledges this reality, but also tries to encourage the Smyrnan believers when He says, *"I know your affliction and poverty, but you are rich."* The specific word that is translated poor in this verse (*ptocheia* pe-to-hay-uh) literally meant they had nothing. McArthur notes *"They lacked not only basic resources, but also the means to improve their situation."* (Christ's Call...pg.78) The reality was surely grim considering their position in society that was a result of their faith and convictions, but Jesus wants to encourage them by reminding them of their riches in Him. They might have been poor in the world, but they were rich in Christ because of their faith, love, holiness, and desire to persevere. This stands in stark contrast to what was said to the church in Laodicea. *"For you say, 'I'm rich; I have become wealthy and need nothing,' and you don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked."* (**Revelation 3:17**) Jesus was aware of their struggles, and He greatly desired for them to know how they stood in His eyes.
- C. Fake Jews are identified as those who are responsible for the troubles they were facing. (v.9)**
1. Jesus was also aware of another group of people that were causing problems for His followers, and those people are described in this text as being *"a synagogue of Satan."* These were people who said they were Jews, but they were not actually Jews in the eyes of Jesus *"For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but from God."* (**Romans 2:28,29**) These Jews in Smyrna refused to believe God in the sending of Jesus, and that led them to hate those who carried the name of Christ. The Jewish community that was in Smyrna caused more problems than just about anyone within the city. History tells us that they would spread false ideas concerning Christianity and Christians so that the secular society would come to have false impressions of believers which would only lead to further persecution and difficulties in their lives as Christian citizens of Smyrna. They surely desired to live quiet & peaceable lives, but the Jews wouldn't allow such.
  2. This isn't anything new when it comes to the Jewish response to Christ. There are numerous examples in the New Testament of different ways in which Jewish people rejected Jesus as sought to stomp out Christianity if at all possible. Time and time again Paul faced Jews in different cities who would try to run him out of town for his proclamation of the Gospel and Jesus as Lord. It is this type of behavior that led to Jesus being so harsh in referring to them as *"the synagogue of Satan."* For Jesus to use such language puts these people in the exact same place as those who were involved in Caesar and pagan worship. They thought they were devoting themselves to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but instead they were only fully aligning themselves with the Devil and his evil deeds. They had no part among the people of God so long as they rejected Christ and persecuted His followers.
- D. Jesus warns of impending sufferings. (v.10)**
1. Things were bad enough as they were, but Jesus uses this portion of this book to not only encourage these disciples in their difficulties, but He also wanted to warn them of more trouble that would soon be facing them. That trouble is mentioned in **Revelation 2:10**. *"Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

2. There is nothing in recorded and preserved history that tells us exactly what Jesus was referring to in this portion of His message to the believers in Smyrna. We are not told exactly who the persecution would come from and what the charges against the Christians would be. Some have taken the stance that this was simply Jesus warning of impending general persecution that would last for a figurative time of 10 days. I don't see why we wouldn't take that time literally, but I'm also open to being wrong on that point. We simply don't know for certain what exactly is being referred to within this verse.
3. Nonetheless, history does show us that perception did continue on within the city of Smyrna for followers of Jesus, and we can probably understand that being the case considering the societal and culture make-up of the city. One of the most famous martyrs of the early church fathers was that of Polycarp. This man is believed to have been a disciple of John in his early years and later a pastor within the church of Smyrna. Polycarp's story is one of ironclad resolved and faithfulness to Christ in the face of death. An excerpt from McArthur's book:

*The story of Polycarp's martyrdom illustrates how the entire city was aligned against the church and eager to usher in its demise. History tells us Polycarp died during a festival of public games (under Rome, that meant public executions). The Jews and the Pagans banded together and clamored for his head.*

*Polycarp had no selfish interest in running for his life. He had a dream in which he saw the pillow under his head burning, and was convinced that this was a sign he would be burned alive. But in deference to the church, he did leave the city to stay with friends in the countryside. His pursuers were enraged when they couldn't find him. They seized two children and tortured them until one gave up his location.*

*Tradition tells us that even the soldiers who arrested him and returned to the city did not want to see him die. They pled with him to curse God and say, "Caesar is Lord," or offer a simple sacrifice to the emperor to save his own life. We're told the pastor responded, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?"*

*When the news of his capture spread throughout the city, the excitement was so great that crowds gather whatever scraps of wood they could find in shops and baths to build the bonfire. The Jews were so eager to see him killed that they brought more wood*

*than anyone else, violating the Sabbath in the process. But Polycarp was unmoved by the threat of death. He challenged his persecutors: "Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt."*

*Tradition tells us that his executioners did not nail him to the stake, as was customary. Before they could, Polycarp told them, "Leave me as I am; for He that giveth me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile."*

*Some accounts include the detail that he seemed so tranquil amid the flames that someone reached in with a sword to hasten his death." (Christ's Call...pages 81,82)*

4. McArthur concludes these thoughts on Polycarp and the impending persecution in Smyrna by writing, *"That's what life was like for the church in Smyrna. Every believer in the church had to live daily in the Psalmist's bold proclamation: 'In God I put my trust, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?' (Ps. 56:11)"*
- E. He closes this message by giving the ultimate encouragement of eternal life to those who are faithful and persevere. **(vv.10,11)**
1. What could possibly give disciples such as Polycarp such confidence to be able to stand up for Jesus in the face of such persecution? I can't help but believe that those in Smyrna and especially Polycarp were very familiar with the closing words of Jesus to this church. *"Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death."*

2. The persecutions were firmly at the doorstep of the believers in Smyrna, and yet they knew that they could overcome whatever was thrown at them because they served Jesus Christ who is the First and the Last. Those introductory words of Jesus were given for the purpose of reminding them who they serve and the power He possesses. They knew that eternal Jesus had the power to strengthen them to stand firm against whatever pressures might come their way. They knew through His strength they could reject Caesar offerings and naming him as Lord, even as Polycarp is recorded as having done.
3. Additionally, there are great incentives contained within these closing words serve as part of the motivation to be able to overcome such sufferings. If they would lean upon Jesus's strength and remain faithful...even to the point of being put to death(!) then they would receive the same crown of life that Paul was so confident that he would receive upon his death. **(II Timothy 4:8)** Some commentators and scholars believe this language of Jesus in this text is a play on the thought of the beautiful buildings of the Pagos being the crown of Cybele, but we can't know that for certain.
4. However, we can know for certain from Jesus's words that those who conquer this world and all of this sufferings and persecutions would only die once. This was true for the Smyrnans and it is true for us, as well. We know it is appointed for all people to die once and then the judgment follows. **(Hebrews 9:27)** The judgement will then determine where we will spend eternity. For those who are faithful, they will experience eternity with God. A forever existence with Him where *"God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away."* **(Revelation 21:3,4)**
5. But those who are unfaithful will not get to experience such a glorious existence for John is shown what will be their eternal existence away from God. *"Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. Then the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them; each one was judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."*

That lake of fire would never be known by the believers in Smyrna if they were faithful to continue to confess Jesus and follow Him in everything they did while on this earth. We might find it heartbreaking and even mind-blowing to think that such things were experienced by our brethren so long ago, but these things have been persevered for us so that we might learn of their faith and seek to replicate it within our own lives. We ought to be thankful everyday to not live in such a place as Smyrna, but we must also be resolved to be willing to be faithful even to the point of death if we ever do find ourselves in such a place. May we be a people who hear and conquer this world so that we too might never be harmed by the second death.