

# THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA



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*Week Three - January 23, 2022*

## **BACKGROUND:**

Smyrna was located in what is now Turkey, approximately 40 miles from the more well-known Ephesus. Like Ephesus, it too was a popular trading point, with rivers that would allow sailing inward to Lydia. Smyrna had been settled and become known about the 3rd century BC, and sometime around 133 BC it became aligned with Rome. It therefore began to promote emperor worship and pagan worship styles of Rome. Additionally, at the time of this writing, Smyrna is believed to have had a good size Jewish population.

While we aren't completely certain who founded the church in Smyrna; it's possible that it was founded by the Apostle Paul. We know that he traveled to the region on his third missionary journey (and definitely visited nearby Ephesus.) In his travels, Paul would often seek out Jewish communities where he hoped the message of Jesus the Messiah would be accepted. This makes Smyrna a prime opportunity for the gospel, but also a place of persecution. We also know that Paul experienced the same type of hostility that is described toward Smyrna in these verses. A church leader named Bishop Polycarp lived and was martyred in Smyrna in AD 155. It is said that he had large opposition from the Jewish population there who offered to bring wood for the fire that was used to execute him. The Jews in this city were particularly fervent in their persecution of Christian believers.

## **DAY 1**

### **CONTEXT:**

When beginning to study a passage, I usually like to begin by knowing the context. This book of Revelation, received from God and written down by the Apostle John, reveals the nature of the evil influences rebelling against God and His people. It also includes prophecy of the unfolding of end times. In the passages we are looking at together over these seven weeks, we are reading the revelation John received regarding seven specific churches. The format of each church letter usually contains a unique message from Jesus commending a specific set of good qualities or works, and a rebuke for weakness and sin. Most often contain a specific warning of judgment and persecution.

Before we go more specifically into the letter to Smyrna, please read (or re-read) all seven of the letters found in Rev 2-3. Look for patterns and repetitions. What similarities or patterns do you see in each of the letters? What differences do you see?

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You might have seen that one similarity is that each letter begins with a unique description of Jesus Christ. What is the unique description to Smyrna in verse 8?

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Which two churches are not given any correction or rebuke? What is significant about this to you?

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**KEYWORDS:**

After I've looked at the context of the verses I'm studying, I usually go through a passage and look for key words. These key words are important nouns that reveal the subject matter or purpose statements like "therefore" or "so that." Specific commands are also key words of any passage.

**Read Revelation 2:8-11.** Make a list of all the key words that stand out in these verses. Mark them in your Bible in some way or list them below.

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Spend some specific time in prayer over these verses today. Let the Holy Spirit guide you as you seek Him in prayer.

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# DAY 2

Open again to Revelation 2:8-11. Read the full letter but reread verse 9 several times. What is happening in Smyrna?

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Let's look at some of the keywords here: tribulation, poverty, and slander.

**1. Tribulation:** Tribulation means pressure, oppression, affliction, distress. I think sometimes the word tribulation makes us think of inconveniences and general difficulties in life (things like: sickness, disease, accidents, money, and people problems.) In Scripture, however, it often means intentional persecution, physical affliction, imprisonment, and death. Tribulation carries with it the implication that these things are happening to us because we're following Jesus Christ.

Read the following verses. What do they reveal to us about tribulations and afflictions?

**John 16:33** \_\_\_\_\_

**Matt 24:9** \_\_\_\_\_

**2 Corinthians 1:3-5** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Poverty:** Poverty is lacking economical, material, emotional, and even spiritual necessities.

Take a moment to consider the types of poverty we might face in this world. Write down a few examples. Economic poverty will likely come to mind quickly. Don't move on until you've thought of an example of spiritual poverty too.

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Note the contrast of these verses: *"I know your poverty - but you are rich."* How can they be both impoverished and rich? Consider the words of the verses on the next page as you answer:

Matthew 6:19-21 \_\_\_\_\_

Ephesians 1:3-13 \_\_\_\_\_

James 2:5 \_\_\_\_\_

When have you observed Christians who lived in material poverty, yet exhibit nothing but joy and contentment in Christ? What do you think the source of that joy is?

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Take time to consider some “tribulations” you frequently focus on. What would you say you’ve suffered? Consider the true riches you have in Christ. How can setting your mind on your true riches in Christ affect your daily experience?

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**3. Slander:** The believers of Smyrna are being slandered. They have been falsely accused and lied about by the ones who say they are Jews.

Why do you think that the Church of Smyrna would face slander?

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How (and why) might modern Christ followers face slander? What suffering can slander lead to?

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Some of us consider tribulation, poverty, and slander as among the worst things that could possibly happen to us. What brings comfort from these verses?

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Pray specifically for those Christians, in your life and around the world, that are experiencing these difficulties.

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**BONUS:** It would be an interesting study to consider “those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.” Study this considering the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. Here are some places to start:

- Gods unfolding Promise of Salvation: **Gen 3:16** offspring (victory of evil), **Gen 15** offspring (that he would be a father of many nations), **2 Sam 7:9-14** offspring (who will be the king, the Messiah, the Son of God.)
- What does scripture say about those who rejected Jesus? **Matt 23**, Paul in **Romans 2:12-29**
- **Go further:** Consider the concept of being made righteous through Faith in both the Old Testament and the New Testament

## DAY 3

We don't like the word suffering. We don't talk about it much, but we might describe circumstances or say, “They're really suffering right now.” With Smyrna, the suffering that they are about to experience is an unjust prison sentence – most likely tied to the slander and false statements being made.

What types of circumstances would you consider to be suffering today? What is the cause of the circumstances you listed? Is it just or unjust?

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Read these accounts of suffering in the Bible. What is the cause? Is it just or unjust?

**Matthew 16:21** (Jesus) \_\_\_\_\_

**Acts 9:16 and 2 Corinthians 11:24-29** (Paul) \_\_\_\_\_

**Philippians 1:29** (The Church, written by Paul while in prison) \_\_\_\_\_

**KEYWORD: COMMAND**

We have another key word in verse 10 of Revelation 2. Do you see the command? What is it?

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Do you struggle with fear? List some of the things you have feared in the past few weeks or months. And go beyond the simple answer, "Spiders." Be honest with yourself. What really scares you?

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What was the outcome of that fear? Did it change your plans? Your mood? Your heart disposition toward someone else?

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We can't let fear be the driver. Faith must take its place. How can we grow in our faith and learn to not fear?

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**KEYWORD: PURPOSE**

We have another keyword, this time it's a phrase of purpose. Why were the believers about to be thrown into prison?

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**Does it surprise you to know that you might experience suffering to have your faith tested?** Our academic understanding of the word "test" here might not be so helpful. Imagine that you see a rope bridge spanning a large river. Would you walk over the bridge without pause? More likely, you'll tug on it. You'll pull on it. Shake it up and down a few times. You'd TEST it first. And when you tested it, you'd know if it could withstand the weight of your river crossing. If it failed the test, you'd spend some time reinforcing the bridge. If it passed the test, you'd be excited to be on the other side of the river unscathed. **Testing here in these verses might be to answer, "Do we have a genuine faith to stand with Christ during suffering?" Have you ever been tested in this way? What was the result?**

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**Encouragement and Admonition:** The Apostle Peter was one who would know suffering and martyrdom. Consider what our response to suffering communicates to others.

**Read 1 Peter 2:19-23 and 1 Peter 4:12-19.** How should we endure suffering? How do both passages affect your perspective and experience of suffering?

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## DAY 4

**Read Revelation 2:10-11 again.** Stop and consider: The result of this persecution was prison and even death. *“Be faithful unto death.”*

Search for stories of modern Christian martyrs. (Use google or another resource if you have one.) Read a few of the stories and make a few notes of their experiences here.

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Jesus makes a massive promise here. *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* Rev 2:10b. Let us again look through this specifically to understand the implications of this promise. If Jesus made it, we should understand it!

**The Crown of life** was not the crown of royalty (like a King or Queen wears), but rather the crown of victory given to victors in a competition. The crown makes one more like an Olympic Gold Medalist than a royal. Consider this understanding as you read the following verses. What do you see here?

**1 Corinthians 9:25** \_\_\_\_\_

**James 1:12** \_\_\_\_\_

**Read Hebrews 12:1-2.** This is one of my favorite passages. If you've ever been a runner, you'll probably agree with me that life is not a sprint but a marathon. It's a long race. It takes endurance. And in a marathon, one of the primary motivators is the finish line. We need to fix our eyes on the Victor (Jesus Christ!) and the Victory. So, ask yourself honestly, how are you running the race set before you? Do you see a crown ahead? Do you often consider this future crown as you "run your race?"

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How does suffering impact this? The believers at Smyrna were being challenged to endure and remain faithful until the end. Paul spoke of this very thing. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul was writing from a Roman prison. His life was near the end. Look at Paul's faith amid suffering. **Read 2 Timothy 1:12 and 2 Timothy 4:7-8.** How does this speak to you today?

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**Escaping the second death:** The promise doesn't end with the Crown of Life. There's more! "*The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.*" We will die physically. Each of us and all of us. But if we are in Christ, we will continue to live spiritually - and this is really living! Let's skip ahead to the end of the book to see what happens.

**Read Revelation 20:4-6 and Revelation 20:11-15.** This is the final judgment of those not in Christ. If we are in Christ, there is no judgment for eternal life or death. We who are in Christ have been counted righteous by our faith in Him. There is no second death displayed in the passages above. Those in Christ will not be hurt by the second death. What is it that brings confidence that this can and will be you?

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If you lack that confidence (and as a great comfort and reminder for the rest of us), read the following verses. Take special note of what is God's responsibility and what is yours.

- **Ephesians 2:8-9** - Salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not by our own works.
- **Romans 5:1** - The result of our faith in what Christ has done is peace with God.
- **Romans 8:1** - Those who have come to faith in Christ will not stand condemned by their own sinfulness. It is finished.

In what ways do you live each day as one who has victory over death? How does it affect how you live?

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Would you say that your actions, affections, and attitudes show that you stand solid on the promises of the gospel regarding eternal life? Why or why not?

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## DAY 5

HOW DO I APPLY THIS?

A pastor friend and mentor often reminded that when we study (asking who, what, when, where, why, and so what?), it is the “so what” that is often the most important and deserving of the most attention. We know the facts (if you’ve studied diligently!), yet it is the “why” and the “so what” that lead to deeper understanding and application. To ask, “So what?” is to ask why it matters – and what it might mean for me as a believer. Sometimes it’s easier to avoid that. Sometimes it’s easier to not attempt to live out what we have learned. But it’s never better to avoid it. We must respond to truth from God’s Word.

In any study or message, we should spend time to ponder. What should I do about this? What needs to be different? What will it take to change? Through this process we ask God to open our hearts and provide the strength to change. We pray.

**Start today with prayer.** Ask the Lord to take everything you’ve learned this week and to open your heart to be molded by the truth.

Ask yourself: Do I believe that there could be tribulation and persecution that could lead to suffering, imprisonment, or death? Do I believe that could someday be a reality here in our culture?

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How strong is my faith to handle such a time? Think of some past experiences. What have those experiences (my past “testing”) shown in me: strength or room to grow in faith?

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Let’s return to the command not to fear. On day 3, we interacted with this command. As you’ve had more time to reflect, have you come to realize any fear or worry in your life? How has your growing faith in Christ helped overcome?

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If your relationship with Christ was pictured as a running race, where are you? How well are you running? How well will you finish?

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Offer a prayer to God that would include what needs to change to make your journey of faith the best it can be and worthy of our Lord. Recognize and acknowledge in your prayer that the strength needed to finish the race well comes from the finished work of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the truth of God’s Word. With Christ, it can be done.

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