

THE THINGS PRESENT, REVELATION, 2:1-3:22

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS, REVELATION 2:8-11

A. Destination - Ephesus (2:8a), **And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

1. Background

- a. Smyrna which is now called Izmir, is about 35 miles north of Ephesus and had a population over 100,000.
- b. It was one of the seven postal districts on a circular route in the province of Asia.
- c. E. J. Banks (ISBE), *In Roman times, Smyrna was considered the most brilliant city of Asia Minor, successfully rivaling Pergamos and Ephesus. Its streets were wide and paved . . . It was celebrated for its schools of science and medicine, and for its handsome buildings.*
- d. William Barclay, . . . *it was one of the very few planned cities in the world . . . Most famous of all the streets was the Street of Gold, which began with the Temple of Zeus and ended with the Temple of Cybele.*
- e. It was home to guilds of basket-fishermen, tanners, silversmiths and goldsmiths.
- f. Charles Ryrie, *It was also a center of growing worship of Caesar . . . It other words, a man-god was being substituted for the God-man. In its early stages emperor worship was voluntary, but patriotic/religious enthusiasm began to make it compulsory.*

2. Progress of the Gospel

- a. J. Ramsey Michaels, *There is no record of how Christianity came to Smyrna. Like the other Asian cities, Smyrna was probably reached as a result of Paul's ministry in Ephesus (compare Acts 19:10).*
- b. Alexander Souter, *The Jews in Smyrna had been specially hostile to the Christians, and had informed against them before the Roman officials . . . The hatred of the Jews there can be explained only by the supposition that many of the Christians were converted Jews.*
- c. Grant Osborne, . . . *Anti-Jewish sentiment following the destruction of the temple made Jews especially concerned to guard their Rome-given right to practice their religion, and they felt Christianity endangered what little freedom they enjoyed.*
- d. Polycarp, a pupil of the Apostle John and the bishop of Smyrna, was a prominent leader in Smyrna in the 2nd century. He suffered martyrdom in 155 AD.
 - 1) He was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar "Lord.
 - 2) Charles Ryrie, . . . *Jews eagerly assisted by gathering on the Sabbath wood and fagots for the fire in which he was burned.*
 - 3) Recorded by William Barclay, *The proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar—or death. 'Eighty and six years have I served him,' said Polycarp, 'and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: 'You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.'*
- e. Smyrna was the last of the Christian cities to hold against the Mohammedans and fell into the hands of the Turks in 1424.
- f. The city now has a population of over 200,000 with one-third who profess Christ and the only city of the seven still in existence. Michael Wilcock, *In sharp contrast to the fields which once were Ephesus, Smyrna thrives even today as Izmir . . . And resurrection was to be the experience of its church also.*

B. The Lord (2:8b), **The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.**

1. John Walvoord, *Christ described Himself as the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. Christ is portrayed as the eternal One (cf. 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13) who suffered death at the hands of His persecutors and then was resurrected from the grave (cf. 1:5).*
2. Charles Ryrie, *To a church under persecution, many of whose members would experience martyrdom, the Lord appropriately presents Himself as the One who died and lived, thus assuring them of the hope of resurrection.*
3. Thomas Constable, *The word Smyrna means bitter. The Greek word translates the Hebrew mor, translated myrrh, which was a fragrant perfume used in embalming dead bodies (cf. Matt. 2:11; John 19:39). It becomes very fragrant when someone crushes it. These believers would have found encouragement that, even though the prospect of death threatened them, resurrection and eternal life with Christ were certain.*
4. Kendell Easley, *Christ's power over time ("First and Last") and his power over sin ("died and came to life") will be just what the persecuted saints of Smyrna need in order to carry on.*

5. Warren Wiersbe, *The assembly at Smyrna was persecuted for the faith, which explains why the Lord emphasized His death and resurrection as He opened His message. No matter what experiences God's people may have, their Lord identifies with them.*
 6. Grant Osborne, *As 1 Corinthians 15:20 states, Jesus was raised from the dead as the "firstfruits" for his followers, guaranteeing their own eternal life. Their persecutors may take their lives, but their vindication is certain. With the risen Lord, their eternity is absolutely secure. Smyrna can take away their present life, but their future in heaven is certain.*
 7. Michael Wilcock, *Like their city their Lord also 'died and came to live,' and guarantees a resurrection for them too.*
- C. Commendation (2:9), ***I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.***
1. Jesus commended the church at Smyrna for enduring suffering.
 - a. He declared them *rich*.
 - b. Charles Ryrie, *The church is commended for its wealth in the midst of the most trying circumstances. Of course, this is spiritual wealth, for they were poor and persecuted.*
 - c. J. Michael Ramsey, *The Smyrnaean Church had had a more trying and difficult career than any other of the Asian Churches. It had been exposed to constant persecution.*
 - d. John Walvoord, *Though extremely poor, they were rich in the wonderful promises Christ had given them (cf. 2 Cor. 6:10; James 2:5).*
 - e. Warren Wiersbe, *They lived for eternal values that would never change, riches that could never be taken away.*
 2. The suffering was caused by faithful testimony for Jesus.
 - a. Consider the words used by Jesus to describe their suffering.
 - 1) *tribulation*
 - a) It may be translated *oppression*.
 - b) This word means *distress brought about by outward circumstances*.
 - c) William Barclay, . . . *originally meant crushing beneath a weight. The pressure of events is on the church at Smyrna.*
 - c) Grant Osborne, *Suffering for Christ is a privilege, not a sorrow, a participation in Christ at a deeper level. Affliction is the overarching ingredient and refers to persecution, linked with the tribulation of the last days.*
 - 2) *poverty*
 - a) It means *deep, extreme poverty, complete destitution, the state of having nothing at all*.
 - b) This usage in verse 2 deals with poverty due to the actions of others.
 - c) Kendell Easley, *The Smyrnan believers were very poor. Perhaps some had lost property due to the slander of the Jews.*
 - d) Grant Osborne, *The poverty of the church in Smyrna is the result of opposition and mistreatment. Those who did not give in to pagan pressure would lose their jobs; mobs would destroy their property and mistreat them, as happened to Paul . . . It is poignant that the poverty-stricken churches (Smyrna, Philadelphia) please God, while the wealthy churches (Sardis, Laodicea) are failures.*
 - e) William Barclay, *The poverty of the Christians was due to two things. It was due to the fact that most of them belonged to the lower classes of society. The gulf between the top and the bottom of the social scale was very wide . . . There was another reason for the poverty of the Christians. Sometimes they suffered from the plundering of their possessions (Hebrews 10:34). There were times when a mob would suddenly attack the Christians and wreck their homes.*
 - 3) *slander*
 - a) It means *defamation, blasphemy*.
 - b) Note Revelation 3:9 which expresses the seriousness of such actions.
 - c) Thomas Constable, *In the first century the enemies of Christians leveled six slanderous accusations against them: cannibalism, lust/immorality, breaking up homes, atheism, political disloyalty, and being incendiaries (because they taught that the world would burn up)*

- d) The slanders of Smyrnan Christians.
 - 1) Some believe they were Jews.
 - a) Charles Ryrrie, *The instigators of the persecution were apostate Jews who were in reality instruments of Satan.*
 - b) Grant Osborne, *The rest of the verse sets the record straight—these persecutors are no longer “Jews,” for they have turned from God by rejecting his Son. Their claim to be the people of God is obviated by the fact that they are tools of Satan against God’s true people, the church . . . We must remember that John here is not speaking of all Jews but only of those persecuting followers of Christ.*
 - 2) J. Ramsey Michaels believes they were Judaizing Christians, . . . *the label synagogue of Satan was directed not at Jews, but at Judaizing Gentiles. Some in the Judaizing community may even have agreed with this judgment!*

D. Condemnation - None

- 1. Thomas Constable, *Jesus Christ had no rebuke for the saints of Smyrna. evidently they had remained pure in belief and behavior in their trials.*
- 2. John Walvoord, *Notable is the fact that there was no rebuke whatever for these faithful, suffering Christians. This is in striking contrast with Christ’s evaluations of five of the other six churches, which He rebuked. Smyrna’s sufferings, though extremely difficult, had helped keep them pure in faith and life.*
- 3. Warren Wiersbe, *No words of accusation are given to the congregation in Smyrna! They may not have enjoyed the approval of men, but they certainly received the praise of God.*

E. Exhortation (2:10a), ***Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.***

- 1. Jesus declared that there was no need to fear coming suffering.
 - a. Michael Wilcock, *The message therefore is that Smyrna must be not fearful, but faithful - to look not at the suffering, but beyond it to the all-controlling God.*
 - b. Warren Wiersbe, *He assured them that He knew the devil’s plans and was in complete control of the situation.*
 - c. Thomas Constable, *These persecuted Christians did not need to fear their adversaries or death because they would live forever with Jesus Christ.*
 - d. Grant Osborne, *What they are about to suffer is imminent and unavoidable, but the exalted Christ is assuring them that he will be with them, and their ultimate vindication is certain. There is no promise in Scripture of an easy life, only of divine comfort and blessing in the midst of struggle.*
 - e. John Walvoord, *The problem of human suffering, even for a limited time, has always perplexed faithful Christians. Suffering can be expected for the ungodly, but why should the godly suffer? The Scriptures give a number of reasons. Suffering may be (1) disciplinary (1 Cor. 11:30–32; Heb. 12:3–13), (2) preventive (as Paul’s thorn in the flesh, 2 Cor. 12:7), (3) the learning of obedience (as Christ’s suffering, Heb. 5:8; cf. Rom. 5:3–5), or (4) the providing of a better testimony for Christ (as in Acts 9:16).*
- 2. There will be ten days of tribulation for some.
 - a. Some believe the ten days refers to ten emperors who would persecute Christians. There is no reason to take the ten days symbolically.
 - b. Another consideration is that it is a specific time period of intense suffering for the church in Smyrna.
 - 1) Mark Hitchcock, *It is preferable to interpret the ten days of tribulation as a reference to a literal ten-day period of brief, intense trial that the believers in Smyrna were going to suffer.*
 - 2) Michael Wilcock, *If one great lesson is that suffering is certain, the other is that it is limited . . . Nowhere does the New Testament promise freedom from suffering in this life; indeed, without the cross there will be no crown.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *The devil (Gr. diabolos, slanderer or accuser) would incite their foes to imprison some of them shortly, having received permission from God to do so (cf. Job 1). This would be a trial (Gr. peirasthete) that Satan would use (“you will be tested”) to try to entice them to depart from the Lord . . . There is nothing in this text that provides a clue that we should take this number in a figurative sense (cf. Dan. 1:12, 14–15).*
 - 4) Warren Wiersbe, *Some of the believers would be imprisoned and tried as traitors to Rome. Yet their tribulation would not be long; in the Bible, ten days signifies “a brief time” (Gen. 24:55; Acts 25:6).*

- 5) Grant Osborne, *There is some question as to whether it is God or Satan who is doing the testing. Likely the answer is similar to the testing/temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 and parallels. In that instance, God was using Satan's temptation to test his Son. It is the same here; Satan is tempting them to apostatize, while God is testing their faith—the Greek word peirazo here means both. The trial is limited to 10 days; God is ensuring them a manageable time, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 10:13: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”*

F. Promise (2:10b-11)

1. **Crown of life (10b), *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.***
 - a. Thomas Constable, *This appears to be a victor's crown (Gr. stephanos) given for enduring the trials and tests of life even to the point of death without denying Christ. It is not the gift of eternal life itself but the fullness of that life (cf. John 10:10, et al.). The person who endures these trials will receive the crown of life after Jesus Christ has approved him or her. This approval will take place when the Lord evaluates that believer's works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:13). He will award the crown at this judgment (1 Cor. 3:14).*
 - b. John Walvoord, *In their suffering the believers at Smyrna were exhorted, Be faithful, even to the point of death. While their persecutors could take their physical lives, it would only result in their receiving the crown of life.*
 - c. Warren Wiersbe, *The “crown of life” is the winner's crown awarded at the annual athletic games. Smyrna was a key participant in the games, so this promise would be especially meaningful to believers living there.*
 - d. Kendell Easley, *The only other biblical instance of “crown of life” uses the same symbolism James 1:12—“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*
 - e. William Barclay, *In this life, it may be that their loyalty will bring Christians a crown of thorns; but in the life to come it will surely bring them the crown of glory.*
2. **Second death (11), *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.***
 - a. Thomas Constable, *The second death is eternal separation from God. It follows the first death, which is separation of the soul from the body (the immaterial part from the material part).*
 - b. Robert Thomas, *It [second death] is not annihilation, but conscious unending punishment.*
 - c. John Walvoord, *The promise is given to overcomers, referring in general to all believers, assuring them that they will not be hurt at all by the second death (cf. Rev. 20:15).*
 - d. Warren Wiersbe, *Even if they were martyred, they would be ushered into glory, wearing crowns! They would never face the awful judgment of the second death, which is the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14; 21:8).*
 - e. Kendell Easley, *The Lord who “died and came to life again” is powerful enough to keep his faithful people safe even if they pass through the gates of martyrdom. The first death is merely death of the body; the second death is eternal separation from God (Matt. 10:28).*
 - f. Grant Osborne, *We might be hurt by the first death but cannot be destroyed by it. Our destiny is life.*
 - g. William Barclay, . . . *when John spoke of the faithful being unharmed by the second death, he meant precisely the same as Paul when he said that nothing in life or in death, in the present time or in eternity, can separate those who love him from Jesus Christ. They are safe from all that life or death can do to them (Romans 8:38–9).*
 - h. Charles Ryrie, . . . *the believer will share in the resurrection, not in the torment that awaits the unbeliever.*

CONCLUSION

- Kendell Easley, *These persecuted believers were not promised escape from tribulation; they were promised instead something far greater: the grace to endure afflictions without fear and the pledge that the one who died and came to life again will certainly bring them through to the “crown of life.”*
- Grant Osborne, *The major theme of this letter is that Christ will bring life out of death. We may have to pay for our faithful walk with Christ with our lives, but in reality that is the path to eternal life.*
- Michael Wilcock, *The message therefore is that Smyrna must not be fearful, but faithful - to look not at the suffering, but beyond it to the all-controlling God.*
- John Walvoord, *The reassuring word of Christ to Smyrna is the word to all suffering and persecuted Christians. As stated in Hebrews 12:11, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*
- Warren Wiersbe, *It costs to be a dedicated Christian, in some places more than others. As end-time pressures increase, persecution will also increase; and God's people need to be ready (1 Peter 4:12ff).*