



WEEK 3: SMYRNA - THE SUFFERING CHURCH

Of the seven cities Jesus mentions in His letters, only Smyrna still exists. Today it is called Izmir. The city is one of the largest in modern Turkey, housing a population of a half million.

Located 35 miles north of Ephesus, which received the first letter, on the west coast of Asia lay the city of Smyrna. The city of Smyrna was one of the proudest, most beautiful cities of Asia. It was thought of as the most exquisite city that the Greeks had ever built. The city sloped downward towards the sea, giving it a beautiful view. Described on coins as “first of Asia in beauty and size,” it housed the largest public theatre in Asia as well as a famous stadium and library.

Built into one of the hills overlooking the sea was the large amphitheatre that would seat 20,000 people. Because it controlled the trade of the rich Hermus Valley, it was a great, wealthy, and important city.

Smyrna had been a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B.C. Around 600 BC it was invaded and destroyed by the Lydeans and for 400 years there was no city there at all. Then around 200 BC it was rebuilt with streets that were broad, sweeping, and beautifully paved. The city had experienced death and had literally been brought back to life. It is undoubtedly because of Smyrna’s historical past, that Christ refers to Himself as, “He who was dead and has come to life.”

“The Greek word translated ‘Smyrna’ was used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh, a resinous substance used as a perfume for the living (Matthew 2:11) and the dead (John 19:39). Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant, the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God.”¹

Smyrna was a free city, one that knew the meaning of loyalty and fidelity to Rome unlike most cities. Cicero called it, “one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies.” It was the first city in the world to

¹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Revelation 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 69-70.

erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the spirit of Rome. Her fidelity to Rome was famous in the ancient world.

Because of their requirement of emperor worship, as well as the small but highly anti-Christian Jewish population, being a Christian in this city was very difficult. In fact, evidence suggests that life in Smyrna for a faithful Christian was more perilous than it was anywhere else in the Roman Empire.

One of the most famous martyrs of the city was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. On one festival day, the cry went up to seize Polycarp the Christian bishop. He freely confessed that he was a Christian. He was given the choice – sacrifice to Caesar or be burned at the stake. He gave this immortal answer, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

It was to the church that resided in this hostile city, that Jesus dictated a letter of comfort and encouragement.

⁸“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. Revelation 2:8-11NIV

This was a message meant to encourage them in light of what they were facing presently and were about to face in the future. The church at Smyrna was to undergo some intense persecution and tribulation. Jesus wanted to encourage them to stand strong, even if it meant physical death.

Be encouraged as you study the message sent to this church. Ask God to strengthen your faith so that you can endure the suffering in your own life more victoriously.

DAY 1: THE DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:8-11 (Our focus will be on verse 8 today, but read the entire letter to get an overview.)

1. How is Jesus described in verse 8 and which attribute(s) of God does His description emphasize? (Notice the similarities to the description of Christ in 1:17-18).
2. Why would this description of Christ be especially encouraging for this church?
3. How do these verses affirm Christ's equality with God?

Isaiah 41:4

Isaiah 44:6

Isaiah 48:12

4. How do these verses help us understand the meaning of Christ as He "who was dead, and has come to life"?

Romans 6:8-9

Hebrews 2:14-15

1 Peter 3:18

II. Looking Upward

5. Which attributes of God most comfort you in the midst of trials and why?
6. Have you experienced suffering in your life where it was difficult for a time to stand firm? How did you handle the situation?

III. Looking Deeper

How would these verses encourage you in the midst of tough times?

Hebrews 2:17-18

Hebrews 4:14-16

Hebrews 12:3

IV. Looking Reflectively

“When fear grips the human heart, and our very life is threatened, nothing can bring tranquility like faith in Him who is both the first and the last.”²

Take some time to praise God for who He is in light of the Scripture you read today.

² Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 44.

DAY 2: THE COMMENDATION

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:9

1. What three things did Jesus mention that He was aware of concerning the church at Smyrna?
2. What does He mean when he refers to their being rich in the midst of poverty? How does 2 Corinthians 6:10; 8:9 and James 2:5 shed light on this?
3. Why are these blaspheming Jews referred to as a “synagogue of Satan”? (How does Romans 2:28-29 relate to this?)

Note: Jesus' use of the strong term blasphemy, which was usually reserved for hostile words against God, indicates the slander's wickedness, intensity, and severity.³

II. Looking Upward

4. In what ways are you rich in Christ? (Ephesians 1 is a good reminder of our riches in Christ.)
5. How have you seen God use trials and suffering in your life?
6. How would you encourage someone who is being persecuted for his faith or going through a tough time?

III. Looking Deeper

Look at the conversation between Jesus and the Jews in John 8:31-47. List reasons why those Jews were not considered “real Jews” in Jesus' eyes.

How does this compare with the strong terminology Jesus uses in Rev 2:9?

IV. Looking Reflectively

God is very much aware of all that is going on in your life and is not surprised by anything.

Is there something difficult going on in your life today? God knows and He cares for you. Hand over those difficult and overwhelming situations to the One who knows and cares. Rest in His presence.

“Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.” - Psalm 37:7

³MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary*, 71.

DAY 3: THE ADMONITION

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:10a

1. What did the future hold for the church at Smyrna and what would be the purpose?
2. Christians are not exempt from suffering. What are some reasons God allows suffering in our lives?

Romans 5:3-5

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Hebrews 5:8

Hebrews 12:4-11

3. They already were in the midst of tribulation (v. 9) and Jesus had no rebuke or condemnation for them. Why would there be a need to be tested further?

4. What do these verses imply about persecution and the believer?

John 15:20

Philippians 1:29

2 Timothy 3:12

II. Looking Upward

5. Why does God allow Satan to bring tribulation in our lives if God is ultimately in control? (Look also at the story of Job in Job 1.)
6. How do you respond to suffering and tribulation? What helps you endure?

III. Looking Deeper

How would these verses encourage you to persevere in the midst of tribulation and suffering?

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

1 Peter 5:10

IV. Looking Reflectively

“Suffering either gives me my self or it destroys my self. If you receive yourself in the fires of sorrow, God will make you nourishment for other people.” – Oswald Chambers⁴

As believers, we should expect persecution and suffering in this life. Allow it to deepen your relationship with Christ, not push you away from Him.

How have you “suffered” on this earth?

Spend some time thanking Jesus for what He endured for us.

⁴ Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, June 25.

DAY 4: THE INSTRUCTION

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:10

1. What two instructions did Jesus give them concerning the upcoming tribulation?
2. How is it possible to not fear impending tribulation and suffering? What Scriptures come to your mind concerning this?
3. When Jesus refers to "the crown of life," is He referring to eternal life or to a reward for those who are faithful through tribulation on this earth? Explain your answer.
4. What additional insight do these verses give concerning the "crown of life"?

1 Corinthians 9:24-25

James 1:12

II. Looking Upward

5. What does it mean to "be faithful until death"?
6. In 1 Peter 4:12-19, what are some "lessons for life" concerning suffering?

III. Looking Deeper

The "crown of life" is one of several "crowns" mentioned in Scripture. What are the other "crowns" and to what are they referring?

1 Thessalonians 2:19

2 Timothy 4:6-8

1 Peter 5:4

Rev. 4:4

According to Revelation 4:9-11, what are "crowns" ultimately for?

IV. Looking Reflectively

*"Faith and fear are opposites. They cannot coexist. Faith banishes fear."*⁵

We are called to be faithful, even if it means death.

⁵ Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 43.

Is there anything in your life that is causing you to be fearful? Give it to the Lord, trust His hand, and look ahead to the blessings that await you eternally.

DAY 5: THE PROMISE

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:11

1. What does He promise to the one who overcomes?
2. According to Revelation 20:14-15 and 21:8, what is the "second death" and who would experience it?
3. What else do we learn about those over whom the second death has no power according to Revelation 20:6?
4. Why would this promise be especially encouraging for the church at Smyrna?

II. Looking Upward

5. How would Jesus' words in Luke 12:4-7 encourage someone about to suffer for his faith?
6. Do you fear God more than people? Are you a God pleaser more than a people pleaser? If so, how is that evident in your life?

III. Looking Deeper

Read 1 Peter 5:6-11

What similarities to Revelation 2:8-11 do you see in this passage?

Read Revelation 12:9-11

Satan had plans to cast some of the Smyrna church into prison. How is Satan described in this passage and how does he work against believers?

How do believers overcome him?

IV. Looking Reflectively

We can have confidence as believers that we will spend eternity with God and not face the second death.

Are you secure concerning your eternal destiny? If not, talk to your small group leader or myself, and we will be glad to answer any questions. If so, pray for those who don't know Christ and don't have eternal security.

"You and I and our congregation may not be a Smyrna church just now. But we do experience our own pressures, suffering, and afflictions. And whenever we do, the vision of Jesus standing among us in all His glory, and the words of promise He speaks, will sustain and guide us."⁶

⁶Richards, L., *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 1075.

Ask God what He wants to teach you from this letter to the church at Smyrna. What is one area in your life you may want to focus on?

Map of the Seven Churches of Revelation

Ancient world: Asia Minor

Modern world: Turkey

