

# **“Crushed to Life”**

## **Smyrna the Persecuted Church**

### **Revelation 2:8-11**

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**Key Words:** Persecution

*The letter to the church of Smyrna is the second letter in a series of seven. The letters were given in a circuit beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea.*

*One of two out of seven that receive only commendation and no rebuke. The other church that received only praise was Philadelphia.*

*The name “Smyrna” means “Myrrh” which was made by crushing the resin of a small thorn bush.*

### ***A letter from Jesus***

**Revelation 2:8** "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write"

- To the messenger or pastor
- Smyrna was a port city located 35 miles north of Ephesus.
- Today it's known as Izmir, Turkey.
- We also know from history that it was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor.
- On one famous street in Smyrna, called the “Golden Street,” stood magnificent temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and a great temple to Zeus. But the worship of those pagan gods was dying out. The real focus was on the worship of the Roman Emperor.
- Its loyalty to Rome was well known.
- The city became the seat of Emperor worship, and in A.D. 26, when several cities were competing for the privilege of erecting a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius, Smyrna was granted the honor.
- The Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.) was the first to *demand* worship under the title “Lord” from the people of the Roman Empire as a test of political loyalty. According to ancient church history, under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision.

## Who's been there

**Revelation 2:8** "These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."

- *Him* –
  - Jesus Christ
- *The First and the Last* –
  - He pre-existed and will outlast anything of this universe!
    - Jesus is GOD!
      - I saw a video of a man stating Jesus never claimed to be God. He said if anyone could show him otherwise, he would immediately become a Christian.
      - If that's you, Jesus absolutely claimed to be God!
        - **John 8:58-59** "<sup>58</sup> Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." <sup>59</sup> Then they took up stones to throw at Him..."
        - **John 10:30** "I and My Father are one."
        - **John 10:31-33** "<sup>31</sup> Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. <sup>32</sup> Jesus answered them, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?" <sup>33</sup> The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God."
- **Isaiah 44:6** "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the First and I am the Last; *besides Me there is no God.*'"
- **Revelation 22:13** "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the *First and the Last.*"
  - To remind them and us of what He Himself went through.
  - To prepare them for what they would soon face.
- *Who died and came to life* –
  - This is great comfort to us!
    - **1 Corinthians 15:56-57** "<sup>56</sup> The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."
  - He died as a man for sin!
    - **1 Corinthians 15:3-4** "<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures..."

## Who knows what's going on

**Revelation 2:9** “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

- “He assured them that He knew the devil’s plans and was in complete control of the situation. 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). The important thing was faithfulness, standing true to Christ no matter what the government might threaten to do.” Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 573). Victor Books.
- “Emperor worship had begun as spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, the final step was taken and Caesar worship became compulsory. Once a year the Roman citizen must burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar; and having done so, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty.” (Barclay)
- “All that the Christians had to do was to burn that pinch of incense, say, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not even formally conform.” (Barclay)
  - All you ever must do to avoid persecution is bow to the culture!
    - Pinch the incense by putting the latest woke thing on your social media.
- *I know* – what a comfort that Jesus Himself knows all that happens to us.
  - They were slandering the Christians
    - They slandered them for cannibalism saying they ate flesh and drank blood.
    - They slandered them as lustful because they greeted each other with a “holy kiss” and held love feasts.
    - They slandered them as home wreckers because someone in the household became a Christian and it brought division.
    - They slandered them for rebellion and political disloyalty.
    - They slandered them as atheists because they rejected emperor worship and the deities of Rome.

*Polycarp (AD 69—156 or 157) was the bishop of Smyrna and one of the last living disciples of John the apostle. The only writing by Polycarp that has*

*survived is his epistle to the Philippians.*

*The Martyrdom of Polycarp is a letter written by one of Polycarp's followers to the church at Smyrna where Polycarp served as bishop. The letter gives the account of Polycarp's (and some others') martyrdom for the sake of Christ. This letter is relatively short. It is widely accepted by scholars to be generally accurate.*

*The Martyrdom of Polycarp begins with an account of persecution and martyrdom of a number of Christians as well as at least one person who renounced his faith to escape torture. The Christians at the time were being told, under threat of death, to renounce Christ, confess that "Caesar is Lord," and offer incense to the Emperor. One of the modes of torture/execution of Christians was to have them attacked by wild animals in a public arena. After a number of Christians had been killed in this way, the crowds began to call for the blood of Polycarp.*

*Polycarp initially wanted to give himself up, but his friends prevailed upon him to try to hide or escape. However, he was eventually found and brought into the city. The following excerpts are from J. B. Lightfoot's translation of the Martyrdom of Polycarp:*

*"And he was met by Herod the captain of police and his father Nicetes, who also removed him to their carriage and tried to prevail upon him, seating themselves by his side and saying, 'Why what harm is there in saying, Caesar is Lord, and offering incense', with more to this effect, 'and saving thyself?' But he at first gave them no answer. When however, they persisted, he said, 'I am not going to do what ye counsel me.'*

*"Then they, failing to persuade him, uttered threatening words and made him dismount with speed, so that he bruised his shin, as he got down from the carriage. And without even turning round, he went on his way promptly and with speed, as if nothing had happened to him, being taken to the stadium; there being such a tumult in the stadium that no man's voice could be so much as heard" (Polycarp 8:2–3).*

*The letter then describes Polycarp's final minutes: "But as Polycarp entered into the stadium, a voice came to him from heaven; 'Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.' And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. And at length, when he was brought up, there was a great tumult, for they heard that Polycarp had been apprehended.*

*"When then he was brought before him, the proconsul enquired whether he were the man. And on his confessing that he was, he tried to persuade him to a denial saying, 'Have respect to thine age,' and other things in accordance therewith, as it is their want to say; 'Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent and say, Away with the atheists.' [Christians were called 'atheists' because they did not believe in the gods of Rome.] Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, 'Away with the atheists.'*

*"But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, 'Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,' Polycarp said, 'Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'" (Polycarp 9:1–3).*

*Realizing that Polycarp would not recant, his captors threatened him with wild beasts. When that did not work, he was threatened with burning alive. That did not frighten him, either. (Earlier in the letter, Polycarp says that he had a vision of being burned alive.) A pyre was made, and the wood caught on fire but Polycarp was unharmed. Then a man stabbed him in the heart, and a great gush of blood came out and extinguished the remaining flames. After his death by stabbing, his body was burned.*

*"Now the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first part of the month Xanthicus, on the seventh before the calends of March, on a great Sabbath, at the eighth hour. He was apprehended by Herodes, when Philip of Tralles was high priest, in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus, but in the reign of the Eternal King Jesus Christ. To whom be the glory, honor, greatness, and eternal throne, from generation to generation. Amen" (Polycarp 21:1).*

*The provenance of the letter is added to the end of the narrative:*

*“This account Gaius copied from the papers of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp. The same also lived with Irenaeus.*

*“And I Socrates wrote it down in Corinth from the copy of Gaius. Grace be with all men.*

*“And I Pionius again wrote it down from the aforementioned copy, having searched it out (for the blessed Polycarp showed me in a revelation, as I will declare in the sequel), gathering it together when it was now well nigh worn out by age, that the Lord Jesus Christ may gather me also with His elect into His heavenly kingdom; to whom be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen” (Polycarp 22:2–4).”*

- *Works/Tribulation/Poverty –*
  - *Poverty* – one who has lost his property and possessions.
  - *Works* – They were doing right in the middle of a culture doing everything wrong. They didn’t participate in the sin of the culture.
  - *Tribulation* – They were being attacked for their faith.
    - Anyone refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord would be excluded from the guilds. This would mean unemployment and poverty.
    - The church in Smyrna lived underground.
  - *“They were poor in the worlds goods, but rich in faith.”* H.A. Ironside
    - **James 2:5** “Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”
- *Material wealth is no barometer of spiritual riches.*
  - **James 2:5** “Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be *rich in faith* and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”
  - **2 Corinthians 8:9** “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, *so that you through His poverty might become rich.*”
- *Synagogue of Satan –*
  - Fakers, posers, imposters etc.
    - Those in the church that talk pretend to be Christians.

- **Matthew 13:24-25** “<sup>24</sup> The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup> but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.”
- **Romans 2:17-20** “<sup>17</sup> Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, <sup>18</sup> and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, <sup>19</sup> and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.”
- **2 Corinthians 11:13-15** “<sup>13</sup> For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”

## ***Who is with us***

**Revelation 2:10** “***Do 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.”

- ***Don't be afraid*** – literally ‘Stop being afraid’
  - **2 Timothy 1:7** ‘For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.’
  - **1 Peter 2:19-21** “<sup>19</sup> For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.”
  - **Psalms 116:15** “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”
  - **2 Timothy 3:12** “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus *will* suffer persecution.”
    - Most of us struggle with concerns about public embarrassment or social rejection. We know little or nothing about laying down our lives for the gospel.
    - These Smyrna Christians were about to be crushed by Satan, but they would soon emit a fragrance, just like the name of their city.
- ***Ten days*** – a reference to a short period of time or possibly a time of testing.

## ***Who turns our crushing to life!***

**Revelation 2:10** “***Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.***”

- **Crown** – There are two different words for *crown* in the ancient Greek language. One described the kind of crown a *king* would wear, a crown of royalty. The other kind of *crown* - the *stephanos*, used here - is given as a trophy to a winning athlete. Jesus looks at the Christians of Smyrna, and says to them: “You are My winners. You deserve a trophy.”
  - a. The *stephanos* was also the crown worn at marriages and special celebrations. The picture is of Jesus and His bride, each wearing their crowns.
  - b. The promise of a *crown* would be especially meaningful for the Christians of Smyrna.
  - c. The city of Smyrna had a *crown* of beautiful buildings at the top of Mt. Pagos.
  - d. In Smyrna, worshippers of pagan gods wore crowns
  - e. In that culture, good citizens and victorious athletes received crowns.
  - f. Jesus promises a special *crown* - the *crown of life*. A champion athlete received a crown of leaves, which would soon turn brown and die. But Jesus’ champions receive *the crown of life*.
    - **Romans 8:18** “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”
    - **2 Timothy 2:11-12** “<sup>11</sup> If we died with him, we will also live with him; <sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him”
    - **James 1:12** “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

## **So, Listen UP!**

**Revelation 2:11** “He 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.”

- **John 3:5-7** “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”
  - Born once (physically), die twice (physical, eternal), hence the second death.
  - Born twice (physically, spiritually), die once (physical), escaping the second death.
    - **Revelation 20:11-15** “<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. <sup>13</sup> The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.



<sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. <sup>15</sup> And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

### **Matthew 10:27-31**

“<sup>27</sup> “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. <sup>28</sup> And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. <sup>30</sup> But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

**2 Corinthians 2:14-16** “<sup>14</sup> Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup> To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.”

*“In ancient Rome, crowds by the tens of thousands would gather in the Colosseum to watch as Christians were torn apart by wild animals. Paul Rader, commenting on his visit to this famous landmark, said, “I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom, they gladly died, and asked myself, ‘Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?’” Rader continued, “I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in my heart, as He worked in Paul’s heart when He brought him on his handcuffed way to Rome.”*

*Those early Christians*

*“Lived on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no possessions to hold them back.”*

*Our Daily Bread.*