

# Smyrna: The Church of Martyrdom

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Christ's message to the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11) is the second of the messages He sent to seven churches in the Roman province that occupied the territory in the western part of what is the present-day country of Turkey. In last month's brief survey of His first message, the one to Ephesus, we noted that each of the seven messages has seven parts. The message to Smyrna is an exception, however, because it lacks the fifth part: a reference to Christ's coming.

Here are the divisions of the Smyranean message: (1) *an address* in which the Lord addresses the representative whom that church has sent to Patmos (2:8a); (2) *attributes of the speaker* which draw upon John's vision in Revelation 1:17-18, a vision that emphasizes Jesus' death and subsequent life along with His eternal nature (2:8b); (3) Jesus' *knowledge about the people* follows in 2:9, where He reflects His awareness of the opposition they are facing from Jewish sources in their city; (4) He next notes *the state of the church* and offers them words of encouragement about not being apprehensive over even worse conditions that may yet arise (2:10); (5) surprisingly, *the promise of the Lord's coming* to relieve their distress is a missing component of this message, leaving this message with only six parts; (6) *the command to hear* His words is the same as for the church in Ephesus (2:11a); (7) *the promise to the overcomer* contains the Lord's encouragement for Smyranean Christians who are promised deliverance from eternal agonies of the second death (2:11b).

Though Smyrna was an outwardly beautiful city, nowhere was life more dangerous for Christians than in this city. Roman authorities stood by to punish them if they refused to confess "Caesar is Lord" and burn incense in worship of the Roman emperor. Even more hazardous, however, was opposition they encountered from the Jewish citizenry of the city, as Revelation 2:9 makes clear. The church in the city was undergoing affliction caused by persecution, poverty because of a pillaging of their goods by enemies of Christ, and slander in the form of false accusations against them by their persecutors. Such false accusations apparently resulted in imprisonment for a number of the church's constituents (Rev. 2:10).

The source of the slander was people who called themselves Jews. Physical descendants of Abraham demonstrated widespread animosity toward Christians in the early days of the church. The Book of Acts shows this in its descriptions of how strongly such people opposed the spread of the gospel. The Jewish people at Smyrna were no exception in their aggressive hostility toward Christians. Church tradition informs us of an incident occurring about fifty years after the writing of Revelation. In the mid-second century at Smyrna, Jewish-led mobs had an active role in joining with the Gentile leaders of the city in demanding the death of Christian leader Polycarp. They led the way in bringing firewood to burn him to death and in trying to prevent Polycarp's fellow Christians from securing his remains for burial. In the seven messages of Revelation 2-3, three sources of opposition to Christians emerge: Jewish, Gentile, and heretical. It is ironic that Abraham's descendants surpassed even their Gentile counterparts in hostility toward Christians.

Jesus reminds the believers in this city that the loss of their material possessions does not amount to ultimate failure, however. "But you are rich" (2:9) recalls their spiritual riches in Christ. They possessed the ultimate wealth in spite of their material losses. Neither should the stiffest opposition they may face cause them perplexity. They needed to continue faithful according to Jesus' command even if it meant martyrdom (2:10), such as

Polycarp was to experience in that city some fifty years later. The Lord promises them “the crown of life” (2:10), a way of guaranteeing them eternal life even if faithfulness meant the surrendering of their earthly life. Just as material riches are not the ultimate wealth, so physical life is not the ultimate in living. There remains for Jesus’ loyal followers the promise of living forever in His presence after this earthly life terminates.

If that word was not encouragement enough for Christians in bleak circumstances such as those faced in Smyrna, Jesus continues with His promise to the overcomers in this city that they would not be hurt by the second death (2:11). Revelation 20:14 defines the second death as an eternity spent in the lake of fire. That destiny is infinitely worse than simply losing one’s earthly life for Jesus’ sake. Promise of deliverance from that hopeless eternity supplies further encouragement for the persecuted believers in the Smyrnan church. To bolster them more, the Lord’s self-description in 2:8 reminds them that He has already been through the process. He lost His life because of an unjust legal process and rose triumphantly from the dead. Those who remain steadfast in the face of bitter oppression can depend on the same victory for themselves.

A nagging question raised by this message to Smyrna is: Why did Jesus not promise His coming to deliver the faithful in Smyrna the way He promised to deliver their fellow believers in the churches of Thyatira (cf. Rev. 2:25) and Philadelphia (cf. Rev. 3:10-11). We can only speculate about an answer to that question. Perhaps martyrdom for those in Smyrna was of much higher likelihood than for those in the other two cities. Perhaps persecution in Smyrna was much more severe than that in Thyatira and Philadelphia. All we can say is that for some good reason of His own the Lord did not offer such a specific promise to Smyrna.

That does not, however, completely rule out that such a coming to deliver was impossible for this city. Remember, in each of the messages the command to hear extended to all the churches, not just to the individual church addressed (see Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The persecuted at Smyrna could have found solace in noticing that the promises of deliverance to Thyatira and Philadelphia possibly included an indirect promise to themselves. Perhaps they could experience the same deliverance through the Lord’s return as the faithful in the other churches.

But in the meantime they needed to maintain their faithfulness and accept whatever future the Lord had for them. If it was their lot to surrender their lives in defense of the gospel, they had a far better life to look forward to.

We who follow Christ need to remember constantly His sovereign control over circumstances that impact our individual lives. We need to rest in the assurance that He has charted for each of us the course that is best. As He outlined rather dismal prospects for the earthly future of Christians at Smyrna, He may have a life of persecution in store for us. In fact, Paul reminds us that “all who want to live in a godly way in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Rather than letting such prospects cause us depression, we should consider it a cause for great joy (James 1:2) because we know the brightest prospects for the future even if we should be called on to experience the worst our enemies can inflict on us. We have a crown of life awaiting us when our earthly lives end.

Note: For more detailed information about Jesus’ message to the church in Smyrna, see my discussion in *Revelation* (Moody Press, 1992), pages 157-175. To order this volume, you may call Grace Books International at (800) GRACE15