



Smyrna: The “Persecuted Church”

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Revelation 2:8-11 8 "And to the

angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 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. 10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw [some] of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

This letter...this church...is very different than the first one. This church was under fire. We can tend to see ourselves in a similar light...and indeed perhaps you are, or WE are on some level. But you can be assured that here in the West, things have yet to degrade to what this church was enduring. Whenever it comes to suffering, we always tend to think ours is the worst. "I had such a bad cold...I thought I was going to die!" "I missed lunch today...I practically starved!" Maybe the next time you find yourself complaining about how hard you have it as a Christian, you would do well to come back to this church account.

Certainly, many Christians and churches outside of the West have it rough today. Open Doors World Watch List 2026 reports some staggering Global Persecution statistics: 4,849 Christians were killed for their faith during the 2026 reporting period, with 93% of these deaths occurring in sub-Saharan Africa. 388 million believers face high-to-extreme persecution globally, representing about 1 in 7 Christians worldwide. 224,129 Christians were internally displaced or forced to become refugees. 67,843 Christians experienced physical or mental abuse, including beatings and threats. 4,055 cases of rape or sexual harassment related to faith were documented. 15 countries now rank at "extreme" levels of persecution, up from 13 in the previous period.

However, few periods in history have been worse for the church than this time in the city of Smyrna. In Paul the Apostle's last letter, he told young Timothy that "If you are going to live a godly life, **you're going to suffer persecution.**" (2 Timothy 3:12) Not *if*, but *when*. It will come. And that is as true in the West as it is in the Eastern nations where the violence against believers is so intense. We generally aren't dying for our faith, but we are often paying in other ways because of it. Especially if you hold to Scripture and refuse to meld to modern revisions of Christianity that have gutted the Bible. Much of the American church rejects Paul's take on this issue and refuses to do anything that might "ruffle the feathers" of the masses. They take the position that one does not need to be persecuted, and moreover, they themselves are not persecuted, which proves their point. The only point it proves is 2 Timothy 3:12...**IF you are going to live a godly life, you will suffer persecution.**"

If you don't, it is likely you won't! Moreover, if you never endure persecution, then alternatively you would have to suspect you are not living a godly life.

God has consistently acknowledged that living for Him would be hard...it would cost us in most every way. He doesn't apologize for that. It isn't intended to be easy. We are intensely and purposely swimming against the current. Our Savior is not without sympathy. He promises His care, His mercy, and comfort! However, David wrote correctly in the 23rd Psalm, saying, "Yes...as I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death." We will indeed walk *through* it! But we are also promised, "You (God) are with me." As authentic believers, we never walk alone.

That said, the church in Smyrna faced the extreme. During the 212-year Smyrna church period, the era of fierce Roman imperial persecution following the Apostolic Age, thousands of Christians across the Roman Empire—including famous figures from Smyrna like its bishop, Saint Polycarp—were systematically executed via decapitation, crucifixion, burning at the stake, or being fed to wild beasts. This was not just a slanderous anonymous Google review. No...this was serious stuff.

This was the age of Nero the emperor. Few individuals in history can rival this guy's violence and brutality toward others...specifically the Christian population of his day. History records with authentic detail the accounts of using Christians as human torches. Coated in pitch or wax, believers were set on fire to illuminate the night in Nero's gardens. They were often sewn inside the skins of wild animals and thrown to vicious dogs to be torn apart, and nailed to crosses, mimicking the execution of Jesus Christ.

Ironically, history has shown that attacks on Christianity often backfire on the critics by deepening the faith, resilience, and unity of believers. External pressure tends to cause Christian communities to bond more closely for mutual support. Statistics have shown that persecution...both then and now, often fuel the growth and spread of the movement rather than stopping it, and opposition has tended to only validate scripture and has come to be seen as a normal part of following our faith.

Christianity continues to grow in several heavily persecuted countries despite severe state or societal repression. Advocacy groups like International Christian Concern report that Iran is home to one of the fastest-growing underground church movements in the world, despite strict enforcement of Sharia law and severe penalties for converts. In China, even with tight state surveillance, church closures, and government crackdowns, millions of Christians continue to practice and grow their faith outside of state-sanctioned organizations. In Nigeria, despite facing extreme violence and targeted attacks by extremist groups, the Christian population in parts of the region remains resilient and large, though communities face ongoing displacement.

Smyrna was a seaport town roughly 35 miles north of Ephesus and, in the first century, was nicknamed the "ornament beauty of Asia." Many Jews lived there, but this made little difference to the plentiful pagan worship that existed there. There was literally a street of gold in Smyrna, with a temple to Zeus on one end and a temple to Sibyl, the "mother of the gods," on the other.

Despite being located in modern Turkey, as was Ephesus, the church there in Smyrna did *not* disappear. To this day, Christians still hold a significant presence in that city. Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna did not "lose its place," but rather endured through incredible persecution to remain standing some 2000 years later.

8 “To the angel of the assembly in Smyrna write: “The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life says these things:

Christ once again reminds both John, as well as this church in Smyrna, that He is “the first and the last.” That He, like the city of Smyrna, was “once dead, but is now alive.” Ironically, the city of Smyrna was at one time completely destroyed and lay in ruins for 300 years before it was “resurrected from the ashes.”

9 “I know your works, oppression, and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Christ again reiterates that He sees everything. He knew who and what these believers were. He said “*I know...*” That statement...that *fact*, either serves to bring each of us great comfort and peace, or great terror. It just depends upon where you stand in Christ! Christ saw their works...their persecutions, and their earthly poverty. He was intimately aware of these believers. He “walked in the midst of them.” He “walks in the midst of us” today!

He knew these people intimately, and that should cause us to especially pause, because He had nothing to say negatively or correctively concerning them.

They apparently were lacking in financial and material wealth. Maybe that made them feel that, without earthly resources, they couldn’t really do anything of significance. But our Lord reminded them that nothing could be further from the truth! In the only eyes that mattered, they were truly rich! From the one who “had no place to lay His head,” came the truth about what were indeed “riches.” We make the same mistake when we fail to grasp what is truly important...what truly has value, and what does not.

Certainly no one would have faulted this church if they felt far from God and His nurturing hand in times such as those. No one would have given them grief if they thought of themselves as small and insignificant. However, one has only to walk through such times to see the very real, personal, and mighty presence of God shine like in no other state. After all, Jesus not only *knew of their tribulation*, but He ***knew** their tribulation*. He walked the road they were walking; He felt the pain they felt.

Jesus, while having only accolades for this fellowship, did have some serious accusations against the pseudo-followers of God in that city...those who claimed to be Jews, but according to Christ, were actually of the “synagogue of Satan.” Ouch. It’s interesting how we so often will go so far out of our way to avoid offending people, but Jesus didn’t really get overly concerned about that. He seemed to be more concerned with truth and clarity.

The word rendered here as “oppression”...or “tribulation” means “pressure from without.” Again, many of the believers died during those years, and that’s a reality. We need to let go of the idea that the walk in Christ is an easy street. We need to let go of the idea that Christ will remove every bump and discomfort in this life. If we fail to do so, we will run the risk of not surviving when the hard times come, and they *will* indeed come!

During those years, the pastor of the church was martyred because of his kingdom work. The man’s name was “Polycarp,” and when they arrested him, he famously refused to recant. He said to the Roman senate, “For 86 years, I have served my king and He has been faithful to me. Why should I deny Him now? You ask me to

forsake my God for a fire that burns for less than an hour. You're in danger of fire that will never die." Because of such malicious behavior, the crowd of course demanded he be burned alive. History recounts that Polycarp asked not to be nailed to the stake, saying the one who gave him strength to face the fire would keep him still on the pyre without ropes or nails. There is recorded eyewitness accounts that, when they put him in the fire, the flames billowed out like a ship's sail in the wind, surrounding him like a wall rather than burning his flesh, all the while emitting a sweet smell like baking bread. Then, seeing that the fire did not consume him, the executioner was ordered to stab him with a dagger or sword. Witnesses wrote that a gush of blood came out and extinguished the flames before he died of the wound.

The historian and theologian Tertullian remarked that the blood of martyrs was the seed of the church, and that the suffering at Smyrna had led to the salvation of many. Are you personally willing to make that sacrifice? It would certainly clarify that those in your church are serious about God! In our world...our day...the authenticity of such is constantly and rightfully suspect! You just wouldn't find most American churchgoers at Sunday church in Smyrna. It was just too dangerous. Too costly. Too hard.

John wrote through Christ, speaking of "the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." It's a hard thing to acknowledge, but the truth is that the greatest persecution that the church has ever faced throughout history did not...*does not*...come from the world, but rather from such pseudo-religious people who oppose the truth of God's Word, and ultimately do Satan's work for him.

"God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way." (Matthew 5:11-12)

10 Don't be afraid of the things which you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested; and you will have oppression for ten days. Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Instead of correction and rebuke, this body of believers in Smyrna received encouragement. "*Fear not...*" is his direction. Thus, we can gather that despite the difficulties, this church had not let such enter into their fellowship. It seems that at times like these a fellowship either "folds" or "thrives." Smyrna thrived.

Even though this persecution was coming via the hands of men...*often the hands of religious men*, note that Jesus was still looking behind the curtain to see that OZ in this case was actually Satan himself. All of this business...despite humanity's worldly, fallen state, is still because of the devil. In the end, all those whom you see as your enemies? It's all still Satan.

It was Satan who was going to throw them into jail. Not Nero...not Rome...not the "Jews." Remember that when they come at you. Remember who the culprit really is.

These believers were told not to fear the suffering, even though the suffering was no doubt intense. They would indeed be tried and even thrown into prison. And yes, some would even die for their faith. He never tries to "sugar-coat" the truth, or "pad" the reality of the cost of walking in the Spirit. He simply reminds them that when it is all over, we will still be standing with Him.

(1 Pet 3:14)

He says they would be “tested.” **You** will be tested. There is no way to hide well enough, avoid ministry and service far enough, or duck a witness thoroughly enough to avoid being tested. God is going to “test” you. He knows what you are made of, but in testing, He will show you that fact. There is no guarantee the experience will be free of scrapes and bruises. Probably not. But you’ll have some cool scars to show your friends...

Job says in 23:10, “...*he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.*”

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies. He who overcome won’t be harmed by the second death.

This does not mean we will be without feelings of dread, as we still remain in human flesh. What He does ask of us, is that we yet continue. To refuse to succumb to the enemy’s intimidation. If we have those spiritual ears, then we are again called to hear His words. We may die, but we will never die the eternal death. We will live abundantly, and then we will live eternally...