

Text: Rev 2.8-11

Our attention shifts now northwards to Smyrna. I don't want to spend a lot of time on the history and situation of Smyrna, but we do have to say something, because it is pertinent to the message the Lord has for Smyrna.

Smyrna is derived from "myrrh" – it was known for its trade in that bitter herb.

The city had a long history, although there was a period of abandonment from 600 BC to the time of Alexander, in the 300s BC. Alexander decided to build a Greek city there, but its building wasn't completed until after his death.

The current Turkish city of Izmir is on this site, the city being occupied continuously since Alexander's days.

The most important thing to know about the history is the relationship of Smyrna with Rome.

- Smyrna allied itself with Rome long before other eastern cities, building a temple to "deified Rome" about 195 BC
- In AD 26, the city gained the favour of Tiberias and build a temple in his honour – made it a free city and reduced its tax burden
- Emperor worship became a thing in the days following Tiberias as a way of unifying the many different peoples of the empire

"The first emperors did not take their deification very seriously, regarding it merely as a matter of political expediency. However, under later reigns emperor worship became not only a sign of patriotism but a test of loyalty, and refusal to worship at the emperor's shrine was considered an act of treason."¹

Dr. Neal quotes a letter from someone asking for a certificate proving their compliance with this ritual.

"Once a citizen had made his yearly sacrifice, he could worship any other god or gods he chose. All the Christian had to do was appear at the temple, burn his incense, and repeat the formula 'Caesar is lord.' But this is exactly what Christians refused to do."²

¹ Marshall Neal, *Seven Churches: God's Revelation to the Church Today* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1977), 27.

² Neal, 27.

That brings us to our text, so let's read the passage:

Rev 2.8-11

Proposition: The faithful church must not fear when facing persecution.

I. The Lord's comfort (8-9)

A. By his person (8)

What two features of the vision in Chapter 1 does the Lord recall?

1. **position: first and last**
2. **resurrection: was dead, came to life**

How does this encourage a persecuted church?

By reminding that history has a purpose (there is something coming) and by reminding that Jesus already conquered death

B. By his intimate knowledge (9)

What three things does the Lord say he knows?

1. **your tribulation**
2. **your poverty**
3. **the blasphemy of evil Jews**

There was a significant Jewish population in Smyrna. "The numerous Jews in the city very probably caused the Christians trouble. Everywhere the gospel went, the Jews banded together to oppose it with all their energy and influence."³

Notably, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was burned to death there in AD 155. We will talk more of him at the end of our study.

How does the Lord characterize these Jews?

synagogue of Satan

"The gen. *Σατανᾶ*, *Sataná*, is probably the possessive gen. These Jewish persecutors, instead of being God's people, are the 'assembly of Satan,' i.e. Satan's people."⁴

³ Neal, 29.

⁴ Charles B. Williams, "Satan, Synagogue Of," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2696.

Another cause of trouble may have been the strong cult of the emperor in Smyrna. *Tribulation* means “pressure.” They were caught between the Jews and the Gentiles.

“We have seen a parallel in our own times. Before the Second World War in Japan the government was insisting that all the people, and especially all school children, participate in ceremonies giving worship to the emperor as the head of state. Some Christian leaders pointed out that this was merely an expression of patriotism somewhat like saluting the flag in our country. Others insisted that it was an act of idolatry and therefore should be resisted by Christians at all costs. *Those who took this hard inflexible position saw their converts survive and prosper while those who allowed emperor worship by their converts saw them drift back into paganism.*”⁵

II. The Lord’s command (10)

A. Do not fear

What revelation is given to them about the source of their tribulation?

It ultimately comes from Satan

“While man is the instrument, Satan is the instigator, and the Lord the permitter of the trial.”⁶

What other biblical story does this recall to mind?

The story of Job

What insight does this give us about some tribulation that God allows into our own lives?

God may permit Satan to buffet us

Despite this, the command: *do not fear*. What reassuring word about the tribulation is given in our text?

You will have tribulation ten days [implies limitation]

⁵ Neal, *Seven Churches*, 30 (emphasis added).

⁶ J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1961), 67.

B. Be faithful to the death

How far should faithfulness and “no fear” take us?

To the point of death

What promise is given in light of this admonition?

The crown of life [the crown which is life] (this crown is the victor’s crown in the Olympic games, not a royal crown)

III. The Lord’s call to hear (11)

What is the result of hearing the Lord’s message to Smyrna?

The second death will not hurt the one who hears

See Rev 20.14. What is the second death?

The lake of fire

Conclusion:

The angel of the church of Smyrna was its pastor. At the time John wrote, we don’t know for sure who the pastor was, but as mentioned, Polycarp was burned at the stake in AD 155 in Smyrna. He was the pastor then. He was accused of failing to worship the Emperor. The proconsul pleaded with him to do this “little thing.” His reply is famously reported in many books since:

“Four score and six years have I served the Lord, and He never wronged me: How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?”⁷

The execution occurred on a Sabbath, but the Jews of Smyrna were so eager to see Polycarp burn, they violated their own Sabbath laws to bring wood to the fire.

Now, that was AD 155. John wrote this letter about AD 95, just sixty years before. Polycarp was already a seasoned Christian of 21 years by that point.

“Polycarp, still a young man, may have been one of the members addressed in the letter.”⁸

⁷ John F. Walvoord, “Revelation,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 64; Neal, *Seven Churches*, 28.

⁸ Neal, *Seven Churches*.