

# The Persecuted Church

Revelation 2:8-11

By Scott Huckaby

6/22/2025



## Review: Rev 2:1-7 – The Loveless Church, Ephesus

- We should test those who claim to be messengers of God... they must be aligned with God's Word.
- Doctrinal purity is important but it should not eclipse love for Jesus and His people.
- God hates sin; we too should hate sin.
- Overcomers will eat from the Tree of Life.

## Revelation 2:8 – To the church at Smyrna.

*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:*

### What do we know about Smyrna?

This was a large, beautiful, and proud city. It was a center of learning and culture, and claimed to be the 'Glory of Asia.'

- This was a *rich* trade city... Smyrna had a specially rich trade in wines. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a city of wealth and commercial greatness.
- Smyrna had temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and Zeus — but the real focus was on the worship of the Roman Emperor.
- In a.d. 23 Smyrna won the privilege (over 11 other cities) to build the first temple to worship the Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna was a leading city in the Roman cult of Emperor worship.

### How did Roman emperor worship foreshadow worship of the Antichrist?

Emperor worship had begun as demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, *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.

### How did Christians respond to the mandate for Caesar worship?

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 Christians would not do that. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

### What is the significance of the title, *The First and the Last*?

Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Rev 1:11, 1:17) to speak of His eternal character.

- The First and the Last are titles that belong only to the LORD, Yahweh, according to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12.

### Why did Jesus remind Smyrna that He was the One *Who was dead, and came to life*?

Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:18) to remind the Christians in Smyrna that they served the risen Lord, victorious over death.

- Death could not hold Jesus, and it cannot hold His people.
- The association with death — and the victory of resurrection — is throughout this letter. The name *Smyrna* comes from the word *myrrh*, a sweet-smelling perfume used in embalming dead bodies.

### Revelation 2:9 – What Jesus knows about Smyrna.

*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.*

### What did Jesus know about Smyrna?

*I know your works:* Just like the church in Ephesus, Jesus also knew their works. In Smyrna, Jesus knew their **works, tribulation, and poverty.**

- He knows these hardships both in the sense that He saw what happened to them, and in the sense that He knew their hardships by His personal experience.

### Why did poverty characterize the church in the prosperous city of Smyrna?

The Christians of Smyrna knew **poverty** because they were robbed and fired from jobs in persecution for the gospel. Early Christians...

Hebrews 10:34 – joyfully *accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.*

Even today, this is a common form of persecution against Christians.

### What was the blasphemy that contributed to the suffering of the church at Smyrna?

Jesus knew the abuse these Christians endured at the hands of “religious” men, **those who say they are Jews and are not.**

- There was a large and hostile community of Jews in Smyrna.
- A *true* Jew is one who trusts God and believes in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:3). Others may be Jews ethnically — which still has its place before God — but they are not Jews spiritually before God.

### What was the *synagogue of Satan*?

The *synagogue of Satan* was a group of unbelieving Jews who were persecuting Christians.

### How was the church at Smyrna actually rich?

Every outward circumstance said that the Christians in Smyrna were poor, but Jesus saw through the circumstances to see that they were spiritually rich.

- if Jesus considered them **rich**, then they were **rich**. Our estimation of ourselves is far less important than God’s estimation of us.

In contrast, the Christians at Laodicea thought they were rich, but they were really poor (Revelation 3:17).

- Laodicea was a poor rich church. Smyrna was a rich poor church. Better to be a rich poor church than a poor rich church.

The church at Smyrna was also rich in leadership. One of the pastors there was Polycarp. He was a disciple of the Apostle John and served at Smyrna until a.d. 155 when he died heroically as a martyr.

### What is the relationship between material and spiritual riches?

The contrast between material poverty and spiritual riches of the Christians in Smyrna reminds us that there is nothing inherently spiritual in being rich.

- there is also nothing inherently spiritual in poverty.

### How can material riches become an obstacle in knowing the Lord?

Mark 10:23 – *Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!”*

Prosperity gospel... people associate material wealth with being approved by God. And they don’t feel the need for God if they have riches.

- There is nothing wrong with having money; the trouble is that money so easily “has” us.

### Revelation 2:10 – What Smyrna should do.

*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.*

### What did Jesus want the church at Smyrna to do?

**Do not fear:** Literally, this is better translated “stop being afraid.” The Christians in Smyrna suffered under persecution, and they were afraid.

- There were **things which** they were **about to suffer**, and Jesus wanted them ready to stand against **those things**.

### What was about to happen at Smyrna?

*The devil is about to throw some of you into prison:* Here, Jesus described the nature of the persecution that would come against the Christians in Smyrna.

- Apparently, they would be imprisoned, and for a specific period of time (**you will have tribulation ten days**).

### Why was it the persecution was from the devil?

It was inspired by the devil. At the same time, it was measured and limited by God.

- The devil wanted to imprison them for a longer time, but God limited the **tribulation to ten days**.

### Why was being thrown into prison severe persecution in that day?

In that day, **prison** was never used to rehabilitate someone, and rarely used to punish people.

- Normally, you were thrown **into prison** as you awaited trial and execution.

### Why were Christians considered outlaws in Smyrna?

They rejected the worship of Caesar and were thus considered enemies of the state.

- In Smyrna, for a man to enter the Christian Church was literally to take his life in his hands.
- In Smyrna the church was a place for heroes.
- The tribulation mentioned here is trouble they would not have had if they had not been Christians.

### Is there any reason to think the reference to 10 days is anything other than 10 days?

Some think this really meant **ten years** of persecution.

- That was the duration of the persecution under *Diocletian* which afflicted all the Asiatic Churches.

Others think that Jesus really meant persecution over the reign of **ten Roman Emperors**.

- Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Adrian [Hadrian], Septimus Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, Diocletian, a.d. 284

Still others take strange and confusing approaches:

- ten days are two hundred and forty hours, which make up the number of years from 85, when the second persecution began to 325, when all the persecutions ceased.

Others say that **ten days** is simply an expression of speech not to be taken literally:

- it is the normal Greek expression for a short time.

However, there is no compelling reason to believe it means anything other than **ten days** of persecution

- The emphasis is on the idea that it is a *limited* time.

### If this attack was from the devil, why couldn't the Christians in Smyrna just rebuke Satan to stop it?

Because God had a purpose in their suffering, and so He allowed it.

1 Peter 1:6-7 – *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ*

God uses suffering to purify, to make us like Jesus (Romans 8:17), and to make us truly witnesses of Him.

- In all ages, the blood of the martyrs has been seed for the church.

### What does it mean that the church at Smyrna was tested?

God allowed their persecution so that they **may be tested**, in the sense of being *proven*.

- Through their suffering, God displayed the true riches of the church in Smyrna to everyone, including themselves — even though *He* knew they were rich already.

The Christians in Smyrna would **be tested**, but they passed the test. This church, compared to the other six, has no rebuke.

- Only this church among the seven survives today, and it has survived through centuries of Roman and Muslim persecution.

### Does God test us today?

Yes, He does... We may not have the same opportunity to suffer for Jesus that the Christians in Smyrna had, but we can have their same heart.

- We may never be in a place to die a martyr's death, but we can all live a martyr's life.
- Sadly, many Christians avoid persecution of any kind by conforming so much to the world that they are no longer *distinctively* Christians.

### What did Jesus promise the Christians at Smyrna?

*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life:*

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."
- The *stephanos* was also the crown worn at marriages and special celebrations. The picture is of Jesus and His bride, each wearing their crowns.

The promise of a **crown** was especially meaningful for the Christians of Smyrna.

- The city of Smyrna had a "crown" of beautiful buildings at the top of Mt. Pagos.
- In Smyrna, worshippers of pagan gods wore crowns.
- In that culture, good citizens and winning athletes received crowns.

A champion athlete received a crown of leaves, which would soon get brown and die.

- Jesus' champions receive **the crown of life**.

### **What is the crown of life?**

James 1:12 – *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

The crown of life is a gift from God that will be awarded to those who, because of their love for Him, faithfully endured trials and tests on earth

### **Revelation 2:11 – The promise of a reward.**

*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.”*

### **What does it mean, *he who has an ear*?**

The Spirit has something to say to us through every one of the churches, this letter to the Christians in Smyrna may apply least of all to modern, western Christians.

- We simply don't face the kind of persecution the Christians in Smyrna experienced.

### **Who were the overcomers in the church at Smyrna?**

This promise is for those who overcome the threat of persecution, and the presence of persecution.

John 16:33 – *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world*

We overcome by our close association with Jesus, who is the ultimate overcomer.

### **What is *the second death*?**

The second death is hell, the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14 and 21:8). Though Satan threatened and attacked their life, Jesus promises His overcomers that death is conquered for them.

### **What applications come to mind from this passage?**

- Better to be a spiritually rich, materially poor Christian than a spiritually poor, materially rich Christian
- Persecution is to be expected by spiritually rich Christians; this testing makes us more like Christ
- The Crown of life is a special reward for enduring persecution in this world.