

Introduction (2:8)

2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, Who was dead, and has come to life, says this...”

- Ancient Smyrna is modern-day Izmir, Turkey. It’s existed as a city for millennia.
 - In the Greek, the city’s name is the same as the myrrh (σμύρνα, Matthew 2:1; John 19:39).
 - It’s possible it was founded on Paul’s third missionary journey, since while he was in Ephesus for two years we are told that “*all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks*” (Acts 19:10).
- “*The first and the last*” is, again, a title used of the LORD of the O.T. in Isaiah 41:4; 44:6. This title is helpful to the church since they are going through difficulty; it’s comforting to be reminded that Jesus Christ is the God of all human history.
- Jesus has already identified Himself as “*the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore*” (1:18).
- This is one of two blameless churches.
 - This tells us that the majority of churches have things Jesus would have them fix!
 - And, if you’re looking for a blameless church, odds are it’s being persecuted.

Current Difficulties (2:9)

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

Financial Tribulation

- Since Jesus puts “*tribulation*” and “*poverty*” together, we can assume that part of the difficulties the Smyrna church is facing is economic difficulties related to being believers.
- This sort of persecution will become universal for believers later: “*...no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name*” (13:17).
- “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (Luke 6:20). See also 2 Corinthians 8:2.

The Persecutors

- This is not a statement about race, and is not anti-Semitic. Jesus, according to His human nature, was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and John, human author of the Revelation, is a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is not about mere ethnicity. Jesus is denying the religious/spiritual claims that go along with the Jewishness of these people.
 - READ Matthew 3:8//Luke 3:8.
 - READ John 8:31-44.
 - READ Romans 2:28-29.
 - READ Galatians 3:7,36-39.
 - READ Philippians 3:2-3.
- Jesus will use the same language in His words to the church in Philadelphia (3:9).
- The persecution of the Church began with those Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah.
- “*...beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues*” (Matthew 10:17; see also 23:34). For parallels, see Mark 13:9; Luke 12:11; 21:12. READ Acts 26:9-11.
- At least in Smyrna and Philadelphia, the chief persecutors of Christians were the non-believing Jews.
 - What are the groups opposed to the Gospel this day? The chief is our secular culture.

- The first command of the Gospel is “*repent*,” which implies that we are sinners before a holy God. Every part of that is denied by our secular culture: there is no holy God with righteous standards, there is no sin, and there is no need for anyone to change from who they feel like they are. “*Repent*” is a command, and there is a rebellion against any commands by a higher power in the secular culture.
- Faith, or trusting only in the saving work of Christ, is denied. We need no one but ourselves (this includes the government of humanity). Again, Christ’s substitutionary atonement is offensive because it admits sin and a penalty for sin.
- The secular culture cannot call Jesus “*Lord*” because every individual is seen as the highest authority.

Coming Difficulties (2:10)

2:10 “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Do Not Fear

- This is the only other “do not fear” in the Revelation (1:17). We are to fear the Lord (11:18; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5).

Ten-Day Testing

- The “*devil*” intends for the imprisonment to be a time of temptation; the Lord Jesus, however, uses it to test and prove the genuine faith of His people.
- In Daniel 1:8-16, Daniel requests that he and his friends be tested “*ten days*.” The issue was being defiled by eating the food of the Babylonian king. Here in the Revelation, it is choosing death over being defiled by allegiance to Rome’s king.
- Ignatius writes a letter to Polycarp, calling him overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of “the church of the Smyrnaeans.”¹ In *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in the name of “the church of God which sojourns at Smyrna,” describes the arrest and trial of Polycarp. The proconsul ordered Polycarp to “Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent; say, ‘Away with the atheists!’” Polycarp had no problem saying “Away with the atheists!”² The “magistrate persisted and said, ‘Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ.’” Polycarp responded, “For eight-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King Who saved me?” Polycarp, whom tradition tells us was a disciple of the apostle John, was burned to death between 151-155 A.D.

Faith Unto Life

- “*Life*” explains “*the crown*.” In other words, the victory crown is life itself.

Letter Closing (2:11)

2:11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

- Notice the plural “*churches*.” Even though this is a letter to “*the church in Smyrna*,” it is for all true churches in all places in all ages. True churches will hear what the Lord says through the Spirit to the churches in this letter.
- The phrase “*second death*” won’t occur again until the end of the Revelation (20:6,14; 21:8).

¹ For the title ἐπίσκοπος, see Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9. It is used in parallel with the title “elder.”

² Christians were slanderously called “atheists” because they did not believe in the Greek or Roman gods. In fact, when the charges against Polycarp are being read, he is called “the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.”