



The Persecuted Church

REVELATION 2:8-11

October 13, 2024

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

This church is known as the “martyr’s church”. *Martyr* means ‘witness’ and the word *Smyrna* is where we get the word ‘murder’ from; it means ‘suffering’. The Turkish name is ‘Izmir’ and their lamp was not removed. Today, there are up to 500 Christians scattered among 12 churches and they worship in secret.

Smyrna was one of the loveliest cities of Asia, often called “the crown of all Asia.” Its acropolis sits on Mount Pagos and Alexander the Great helped build it. It had wide boulevards, abundant myrtle trees with flowers and many temples dedicated to false gods like Zeus, Diana and Aphrodite.

Smyrna was known for their love of entertainment - they had a theater renown as the center of music and a huge stadium. But like other cultures devoid of God, Smyrna’s entertainment soon turned dark and murderous. In 155 AD, Polycarp, a student of John the Apostle, was burned alive at 86 years old in this stadium as gleeful people cheered.

Some of Polycarp’s last words were, “*For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*” (Wilson, p. 311) Eusebius writes, “*the Jews, being especially zealous . . . ran to procure fuel*” for the burning (The Ecclesiastical History 4:15). This is the age of persecution for Christ’s Church and Christ sees all.

To these persecuted brothers and sisters, Christ introduces Himself as “*the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life*” (Rev. 2:8). Nothing came before Christ and there will be nothing to follow Him. He is the final statement of all things we will ever face. These dear, persecuted believers needed to know He was in charge, He faced death and overcame it, and He feels their pain. “*Who was dead, and came to life*” has a hope-filled message for martyrs: Christ knows your suffering.

I. COMMENDATION

Jesus commends this Church for:

1. Works, *ergon*: toil (as an effort or occupation); deed, doing, labour (Col. 3:23, Ti. 2:7-8)
2. Tribulation, *thlipsis*: affliction, anguish, oppression, persecution (Matt. 13:20-21, Acts 14:21-23)
3. Poverty, *ptōcheia*: beggary, destitute of riches and abundance (2 Cor. 8:1-15, Phil. 4:11-13)
4. Not taking part in the synagogue of Satan (also mentioned in Rev. 3:9). Understand three aspects:
 - I. *Blasphemy*: these people used slander, abusive language, evil speaking, “railing” aimed at God
 - II. *Synagogue*: this was a house of worship dedicated to Satan, not God
 - III. *By Jews*: this passage is often misused to presuppose Israel today is not God’s covenant people. The ‘synagogue of Satan’ refers to specific Jewish communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia persecuting the church, not to any modern situation. In the spiritual sense, ‘Jew’ means people who are of the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29); in this context it can be those who say they are of God but are not doing God’s will, like Saul did before becoming ‘Paul’. In the ethnic sense, many Jewish people in the first century rejected Christ and persecuted Christians while calling themselves ‘people of God’ thus becoming liars in Christ’s eyes. As Romans 9:6 says, “*Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*”.

II. CHASTISEMENT

None!

III. RECOMMENDATION

Jesus recommends:

1. Do not fear suffering (Phil. 1:29) even though you will be thrown into prison (2 Thes. 1:4-12)
Suffering of the New Testament Church through history:
 - I. Nero: 64-68 AD, Paul was beheaded under him
 - II. Domitian: 95-96 AD, John exiled
 - III. Trajan: 104-117 AD, a pastor named Phocus was placed into a pot of boiling water until dead. Ignacious, pastor of antioch, was tortured to death and burned
 - IV. Marcus Irelious: 161-180 AD, Polycarp martyred. He was a stoic philosopher, athlete and hunter, who after a plague blamed it on Christians
 - V. Septimus Severus: 193-211 AD continued persecution
 - VI. Maximus Thrax: 235-238 AD, historians claim he stood 8' 6" tall and was very strong and brutal. He ordered all Christian leaders put to death. He was eventually assassinated by a group of people fed up with his brutality, waiting in ambush for his special-made chariot to pass by
 - VII. Trajanus Declus: 249-251 AD, continued persecution
 - VIII. Trebonius Gallus: 251-253 AD, continued persecution
 - IX. Pubilus Licinius Valerian: 270-284 AD, continued persecution
 - X. Diocletian: 284-305 AD, the horrors of this persecution are vividly described by the church historian Theodore (Ecclesiastical History i. 6), who writes about the gathering of the bishops of the church to the Council of Nicaea some years after the end of the persecution (AD 325). Some came without eyes, others with their bodies horribly maimed in various ways and many did not survive.
2. Be faithful to death (1 Pet. 5:8)
Are you afraid to suffer for Christ? What Scripture verses help comfort you?

IV. REWARD

Jesus promises His faithful followers who suffer persecuted that they will receive a crown of life! We should joyfully look forward to this no matter the pain or current suffering we may face. Remember, corruption must put on incorruption! (1 Cor. 15:15-58)



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