

Revelation Chapter 2:8-11 the Message to Smyrna

By Daniel Deininger

December 10, 2025 - United Church of God Montana Online Bible Study

Introduction & Purpose of what we are covering tonight:

Look at the message to the church in Smyrna and extract lessons we can apply today.



Background information:

From Easton's Bible Dictionary:

Myrrh, an ancient city of Ionia, on the western coast of Asia Minor, about 40 miles to the north of Ephesus. It is now the chief city of Anatolia, having a mixed population of about 200,000, of whom about one-third are professed Christians. The church founded here was one of the seven addressed by our Lord (Rev_2:8-11). The celebrated Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was in the second century a prominent leader in the church of Smyrna. Here he suffered martyrdom, A.D. 155.

From Smith's Bible Dictionary:

Smyr'na. (myrrh). A city of Asia Minor, situated on the Aegean Sea, 40 miles north of Ephesus. Allusion is made to it in Rev_2:8-11. It was founded by Alexander the Great, and was situated twenty shadesm (2 1/2 miles)m from the city of the same name, which, after a long series of wars with the Lydians, had been finally taken and sacked by Halyattes. The ancient city was

built by some piratical Greeks 1500 years before Christ. It seems not impossible that the message to the church in Smyrna contains allusions to the ritual of the pagan mysteries which prevailed in that city.

In the time of Strabo, the ruins of the old Smyrna still existed, and were partially inhabited, but the new city was one of the most beautiful in all Asia. The streets were laid out as near as might be at right angles. There was a large public library there, and also a handsome building surrounded with porticos, which served as a museum. It was consecrated as a heroum to Homer, whom the Smyrnaeans claimed as a countryman. Olympian games were celebrated here, and excited great interest. (Smyrna is still a large city of 180,000 to 200,000 inhabitants, of which a larger proportion are Franks than in any other town in Turkey; 20,000 are Greeks, 9000 Jews, 8000 Armenians, 1000 Europeans, and the rest are Moslems. — Editor).

From Pulpit Commentary:

Verses 8-11. - **The epistle to the Church at Smyrna.** Verse 8. - *The metropolitan, setting out from Ephesus to visit the Churches of Asia, would naturally go first to Smyrna. It ranked as one of the most beautiful cities in Asia; but its magnificence must at times have seemed poor compensation for the neglect of the architect, who, in planning the city for Antigonos and Lysimachus, omitted the drains. In time of floods the streets became open sewers. For its fidelity to Rome against Mithridates, it received exceptional privileges, but suffered heavily when Dolabella laid siege to Trebonius, one of Caesar's assassins, who had taken refuge there. When eleven cities of Asia competed for the honour of erecting a temple to Tiberius, the senate decided in favour of Smyrna. This temple was no doubt standing in St. John's time. But just as Artemis was the great goddess of the Ephesians, so Dionysus was the great god of Smyrna. Dionysus represented the mysteriously productive and intoxicating powers of nature - powers which are exhibited most abundantly in the vine, which in the neighbourhood of Smyrna is said to have borne fruit twice in a year. He was regarded as the dispenser of joy and fertility, the disperser of sorrow and care. Hence the myth of his death and resurrection, which was frequently rehearsed and acted at Smyrna - a fact which gives special point to the greeting in this epistle - "From him who became dead, and lived." The priests who presided at this celebration were presented with a crown; to which there may be allusion in the promise, "I will give thee the crown of life." Not long after the martyrdom of its first bishop, St. Polycarp, Smyrna was destroyed by an earthquake, in A.D. , and was rebuilt by Marcus Aurelius. Earthquakes, fires, and pestilences have always been common there. But in spite of such calamities, it continues to flourish. From the large proportion of Christians there, it is known among Mohammedans as "the infidel city." Christianity seems never to have been extinguished in Smyrna, which shares, with Philadelphia, the honour of receiving unmixed praise in these epistles. "Down from the apostolic times a Church has existed here, and she has repeated, with more or less boldness and distinctness, the testimony of her martyr bishop, 'I am a Christian' (R. Vaughan). The stadium in which he suffered may still be seen there. We have already (see on Revelation 1:20) decided that "the angel" of each Church is probably not its bishop. But, even if this were the meaning, this epistle could not be addressed to St. Polycarp, if he was martyred A.D. , in the eighty-sixth year after his conversion, and the Apocalypse was written in A.D. . **The First and the Last, who became (e)ge/neto dead, and lived** (see notes on Revelation 1:17, 18). As in the epistle to Ephesus, the words of the address are taken from the titles of the Christ given in the opening. It is no mythical deity, with his mock death and resurrection, but the absolutely Living One, who indeed died, and is indeed alive forevermore, that scuds this message to the suffering Church of*

Smyrna. In the epistle to the Church in Thyatira we have what seems to be an allusion to the worship of Apollo, similar to that to the worship of Dionysus here. Revelation 2:8

From Barclay's Daily Study Bible:

Smyrna, The Crown Of Asia (Rev_2:8-11 Continued)

If it was inevitable that Ephesus should come first in the list of the seven Churches, it was but natural that Smyrna its great rival should come second. Of all the cities of Asia, Smyrna was the loveliest. Men called it the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia and the flower of Asia. Lucian said that it was "the fairest of the cities of Ionia." Aristides, who sang the praise of Smyrna with such splendour, spoke of "the grace which extends over every part like a rainbow...the brightness which pervades every part, and reaches up to the heavens, like the glitter of the bronze of armour in Homer." It added to the charm of Smyrna that the west wind, the gentle zephyr ever blew through its streets. "The wind," said Aristides, "blows through every part of the city, and makes it as fresh as a grove of trees." The constant west wind had only one disadvantage. The sewage of the city drained into the gulf on which the city stood, and the west wind tended to blow it back upon the city rather than out to sea.

Smyrna was magnificently situated. It stood at the end of the road which crossed Lydia and Phrygia and travelled out to the far east, and it commanded the trade of the rich Hermus valley. Inevitably it was a great trading city. The city itself stood at the end of a long arm of the sea, which ended in a small land-locked harbour in the city's heart. It was the safest of all harbours and the most convenient; and it had the added advantage that in time of war it could be easily closed by a chain across its mouth. It was fitting that on the coins of Smyrna there should be an inscription of a merchant ship ready for sea.

The setting of the city was equally beautiful. It began at the harbour; it traversed the narrow foothills; and then behind the city there rose the Pagos, a hill covered with temples and noble buildings which were spoken of as "The Crown of Smyrna." A modern traveller describes it as "a queenly city crowned with towers." Aristides likened Smyrna to a great statue with the feet in the sea; the middle parts in the plain and the foothills; and the head, crowned with great buildings, on the Pagos behind. He called it "a flower of beauty such as earth and sun had never showed to mankind."

Its history had not a little to do with the beauty of Smyrna, for it was one of the very few planned cities in the world. It had been founded as a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B.C. Round about 600 B.C. disaster had befallen it, for then the Lydians had broken in from the east and destroyed it. For four hundred years Smyrna had been no city, but a collection of little villages; then Lysimachus had rebuilt it as a planned whole. It was built with great, straight, broad streets. Strabo speaks of the handsomeness of the streets, the excellence of the paving and the great rectangular blocks in which it was built. Most famous of all the streets was the Street of Gold, which began with the Temple of Zeus and ended with the Temple of Cybele. It ran cross-wise across the foothills of the Pagos; and, if the buildings which encircled the Pagos were the crown of Smyrna, the Street of Gold was the necklace round the hill.

Here we have an interesting and a significant thing which shows the care and knowledge with which John set down his letters from the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ is called, "He who died and came to life." That was an echo of the experience of Smyrna itself.

Smyrna had other claims to greatness besides its city. It was a free city and it knew what loyalty was. Long before Rome was undisputed mistress of the world, Smyrna had cast in its lot with her, never to waver in its fidelity. Cicero called Smyrna "one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies." In the campaign against Mithradates in the far east things had gone badly with Rome. And when the soldiers of Rome were suffering from hunger and cold, the people of Smyrna stripped off their own clothes to send to them.

Such was the reverence of Smyrna for Rome that as far back as 195 B.C. it was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. And in A.D. 26, when the cities of Asia Minor were competing for the privilege of erecting a temple to the godhead of Tiberius, Smyrna was picked out for that honour, overcoming even Ephesus.

Not only was Smyrna great in trade, in beauty, in political and in religious eminence; it was also a city where culture flourished. Apollonius of Tyana had urged upon Smyrna the truth that only men can make a city great. He said: "Though Smyrna is the most beautiful of all cities under the sun, and makes the sea its own, and holds the fountains of the zephyr, yet it is a greater charm to wear a crown of men than a crown of porticoes and pictures and gold beyond the standard of mankind: for buildings are seen only in their own place, but men are seen everywhere and spoken about everywhere and make their city as vast as the range of countries which they can visit." So Smyrna had a stadium in which famous games were yearly held; a magnificent public library; an Odeion which was the home of music; a theatre which was one of the largest in Asia Minor. In particular, Smyrna was one of the cities which laid claim to being the birthplace of Homer; it had a memorial building called the Homereion and put Homer's head on its coinage. This was a disputed claim. Thomas Heywood, the seventeenth century poet, wrote the famous epigram:

*Seven cities warr'd for Homer, being dead,
Who, living, had no roof to shroud his head.*

In such a city we would expect magnificent architecture, and in Smyrna there was a host of temples, to Cybele, to Zeus, to Apollo, to the Nemeseis, to Aphrodite, and to Asclepios.

Smyrna had rather more than its share of a characteristic which was common to all Greek cities. Mommsen said that Asia Minor was "a paradise of municipal vanity", and Smyrna of all cities was noted for "its municipal rivalry and its local pride." Everyone in it wished to exalt Smyrna and wished himself to climb to the top of the municipal tree. It is not without point that in the address of the letter the Risen Christ is called "the first and the last." In comparison with his glory all earthly distinctions are worthless.

There remains one feature of Smyrna which stands out in the letter and which had serious consequences for the Christians there. The Jews were specially numerous and influential (Rev_2:9). We find them, for instance, contributing 10,000 denarii for the beautification of the city. It is clear that in Smyrna they were specially hostile to the Christian Church, no doubt because it was from them and from those interested in Judaism that Christianity drew many of its converts. So, then, we may well end this study of Smyrna with the story of the most famous Christian martyrdom which happened there.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred on Saturday, 23rd February, A.D. 155. It was the time of the public-games; the city was crowded; and the crowds were excited. Suddenly the shout went up: "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for." No doubt Polycarp could have escaped; but already he had had a dream vision in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire and he had awakened to tell his disciples: "I must be burnt alive."

His whereabouts was betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. They came to arrest him. He ordered that they should be given a meal and provided with all they wished, while he asked for himself the privilege of one last hour in prayer. Not even the police captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief journey to the city, he pled with the old man: "What harm is it to say, 'Caesar is Lord' and to offer sacrifice and be saved?" But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

When he entered the arena there came a voice from heaven saying: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." The proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. "Eighty and six years have I served him," said Polycarp, "and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

So the crowds came flocking with faggots from the workshops and from the baths, and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire. They were going to bind him to the stake. "Leave me as I am," he said, "for he who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails." So they left him loosely bound in the flames, and Polycarp prayed his great prayer:

O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, God of angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before thee, I bless thee that thou hast granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as thou, the God without falsehood and of truth, hast prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise thee for all things. I bless thee, I glorify thee through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Child, through whom be glory to thee with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come. Amen.

So much is plain fact, but then the story drifts into legend, for it goes on to tell that the flames made a kind of tent around Polycarp and left him untouched. At length the executioner stabbed him to death to achieve what the flames could not do. "And when he did this there came out a

dove, and much blood, so that the fire was quenched, and all the crowd marvelled that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect."

What is sure is that Polycarp died, a martyr for the faith.

It can have been no easy engagement to be a Christian at Smyrna, and yet the letter to Smyrna is one of the two in which there is undiluted praise.

Smyrna - the Persecuted Church

Revelation 2:8 NKJV - "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:

Two tie-ins to their history:

1. Roman emperors could be claimed to be alive/eternal AFTER their death by the Roman senate, but they never spoke or really came back to life.

From Barclay: Such was the reverence of Smyrna for Rome that as far back as 195 B.C. it was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. And in A.D. 26, when the cities of Asia Minor were competing for the privilege of erecting a temple to the godhead of Tiberius, Smyrna was picked out for that honour, overcoming even Ephesus.

2. One of the gods they worshipped was supposed to have come back from the dead:

From Pulpit Commentary:

But just as Artemis was the great goddess of the Ephesians, so Dionysus was the great god of Smyrna. Dionysus represented the mysteriously productive and intoxicating powers of nature - powers which are exhibited most abundantly in the vine, which in the neighbourhood of Smyrna is said to have borne fruit twice in a year. He was regarded as the dispenser of joy and fertility, the disperser of sorrow and care. Hence the myth of his death and resurrection,

3. God the Father and Jesus Christ are the true Gods, not the gods of Smyrna

Isaiah 41:4-10 NKJV -

4 Who has performed and done [it], Calling the generations from the beginning? **'I, the LORD, am the first; And with the last I [am] He.'** "

5 The coastlands saw [it] and feared, The ends of the earth were afraid; They drew near and came.

6 Everyone helped his neighbor, And said to his brother, "Be of good courage!"

7 So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; He who smooths [with] the hammer [inspired] him who strikes the anvil, Saying, "It [is] ready for the soldering"; Then he fastened it with pegs, [That] it might not totter.

8 "But you, Israel, [are] My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend.

9 [You] whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest regions, And said to you, 'You [are] My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away:

10 Fear not, for I [am] with you; Be not dismayed, for I [am] your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'

From Jamison, Faucett & Brown:

the first. . . the last. . . was dead. . . is alive--The attributes of Christ most calculated to comfort the Church of Smyrna under its persecutions; resumed from [Rev 1:17, 18](#).

Revelation 1:17 KJV - And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; **I am the first and the last:**

Revelation 1:18 KJV - I [am] he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

As death was to Him but the gate to life eternal, so it is to be to them ([Rev 2:10, 11](#)).

V10 - ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

V11 - ... He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 2:9 NKJV - "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.

From Jamison, Faucett, & Brown Commentary = JF&B

From Adam Clark's Commentary = Clark

thy works, and —

JF&B= omitted in two oldest manuscripts, Vulgate, and Coptic. Supported by one oldest manuscript. DD = maybe due to not wanting to recognize works at all.

Clark= As he had spoken to the preceding Church, so he speaks to this: I know all that ye have done, and all that ye have suffered.

James 1:22-25 NKJV -

22 But **be doers** of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;

24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

25 **But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues [in it], and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.**

James 2:17, 20, 26 NKJV -

17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ...

20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? ...

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

One of the traits that the church in Smyrna had in common with the city was they were LOYAL. Smyrna was loyal to Rome, the Church was loyal to God and Christ! They were also loyal to Their word and keeping Their commandments.

tribulation —

JF&B = owing to persecution.

Clark = The tribulation here mentioned must mean persecution, either from the Jews, the heathens, or from the heretics, who, because of their flesh-pampering doctrines might have had many partisans at Smyrna.

poverty —

JF&B = owing to "the spoiling of their goods."

Clark = Stripped probably of all their temporal possessions, because of their attachment to the Gospel.

but thou art rich —

JF&B = in grace. Contrast Laodicea, rich in the world's eyes and her own, poor before God. "There are both poor rich-men, and rich poor-men in God's sight" [Trench].

Clark = Rich in faith, and heir of the kingdom of Christ.

blasphemy of them —

JF&B = blasphemous calumny of thee on the part of (or arising from) them.

Clark = There were persons there who professed Judaism, and had a synagogue in the place, and professed to worship the true God; but they had no genuine religion, and they served the devil rather than God. They applied a sacred name to an unholy thing: and this is one meaning of the word blasphemy in this book.

say they are Jews, and are not —

JF&B = Jews by national descent, but not spiritually of "the true circumcision." The Jews blaspheme Christ as "the hanged one." As elsewhere, so at Smyrna they bitterly opposed Christianity; and at Polycarp's martyrdom they joined the heathens in clamoring for his being cast to the lions; and when there was an obstacle to this, for his being burnt alive; and with their own hands they carried logs for the pile.

synagogue of Satan —

JF&B = Only once is the term "synagogue" in the New Testament used of the Christian assembly, and that by the apostle who longest maintained the union of the Church and Jewish Synagogue. As the Jews more and more opposed Christianity, and it more and more rooted itself in the Gentile world, the term "synagogue" was left altogether to the former, and Christians appropriated exclusively the honorable term "Church"; contrast an earlier time when the Jewish theocracy is called "the Church in the wilderness."

Compare Num_16:3; Num_20:4, "congregation of the Lord." Even in Jas_2:2 it is "your (not the Lord's) assembly." The Jews, who might have been "the Church of God," had now, by their opposition and unbelief, become the synagogue of Satan. So "the throne of

Satan" (Rev_2:13) represents the heathens' opposition to Christianity; "the depths of Satan" (Rev_2:24), the opposition of heretics.

Revelation 2:10 NKJV - "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.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer —

Clark = This may be addressed particularly to Polycarp, if he was at that time the bishop of this Church. He had much to suffer; and was at last burnt alive at Smyrna, about the year of our Lord 166. We have a very ancient account of his martyrdom, which has been translated by Cave, and is worthy of the reader's perusal. That account states that the Jews were particularly active in this martyrdom, and brought the fagots, etc., by which he was consumed. Such persons must indeed have been of the synagogue of Satan.

Ten days -

Clark = As the days in this book are what is commonly called prophetic days, each answering to a year, the ten years of tribulation may denote ten years of persecution; and this was precisely the duration of the persecution under Diocletian, during which all the Asiatic Churches were grievously afflicted. Others understand the expression as implying frequency and abundance, as it does in other parts of Scripture. Gen_31:7, Gen_31:41 : Thou hast changed my wages Ten Times; i.e. thou hast frequently changed my wages Num_14:22 : Those men have tempted me now these Ten Times; i.e. they have frequently and grievously tempted and sinned against me. Neh_4:12 : The Jews that dwelt by them came and said unto us Ten Times, i.e. they were frequently coming and informing us, that our adversaries intended to attack us, Job_19:3; These Ten Times have ye reproached me; i.e. ye have loaded me with continual reproaches. Dan_1:20 : In all matters of wisdom, he found them Ten Times better than all the magicians; i.e. the king frequently consulted Daniel and his companions, and found them more abundantly informed and wise than all his counsellors.

Be thou faithful unto death -

Clark - Be firm, hold fast the faith, confess Christ to the last, and at all hazards, and thou shalt have a crown of life - thou shalt be crowned with life, have an eternal happy existence, though thou suffer a temporal death. It is said of Polycarp that when brought before the judge, and commanded to abjure and blaspheme Christ, he firmly answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong, how then can I blaspheme my king who hath saved me?" He was then adjudged to the flames, and suffered cheerfully for Christ his Lord and Master.

End time fulfillment & application?

Matthew 10:17-22 NKJV -

17 "But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.

18 "You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.

19 "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;

20 "for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

21 "Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father [his] child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

22 "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Luke 21:12, 16 NKJV -

12 "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute [you], delivering [you] up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. ...

16 "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put [some] of you to death.

1 Peter 4:16 NKJV - 16 Yet if [anyone suffers] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

Revelation 2:11 NKJV - "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.**" '

Main take-aways from the message to the Church in Smyrna:

1. God sees our works!
2. God looks beyond our physical situation to determine if we are truly rich.
3. Some will be persecuted and there will be some who will lose their lives, but do not be fearful!

Additional Resources:

UCG Bible Study The Churches of Revelation: Smyrna - the Persecuted Church

<https://www.ucg.org/course/churches-revelation/churches-revelation-smyrna-persecuted-church>