

## Revelation 2:6-11 — The Church of Smyrna — Be Faithful Until Death, and I Will Give You the Crown of Life

### Revision: The Divine Outline of the Book of Revelation

#### Revelation 1:19 NKJV

**Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.**

v 19 **Write the things:** This second command to write gives us a structure to understand the Book of Revelation. John is commanded to **write** regarding the past, present, and future (looking from John's perspective).

v 19 **The things which you have seen:** This means that Jesus wanted John to write the things he had just **seen** in his vision of the glorious, heavenly Jesus — Chapter 1

v 19 **The things which are:** This means that Jesus wanted John to write about the things of his present day, the things regarding the *seven churches which are in Asia* — Chapters 2 and 3.

v 19 **The things which will take place after this:** This means that Jesus wanted John to write about the things that would happen after the things regarding the *seven churches*, the things of the last days — chapters 4-22.

We are now in the second section of the Book of Revelation, which deals with “the things which are” (Revelation 1:19 - quickly go through overview).

### The Letter to the Church of Ephesus (continued)

#### Revelation 2:1-7 — *The Loveless Church*

“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: <sup>2</sup> “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; <sup>3</sup> and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary. <sup>4</sup> Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. <sup>6</sup> But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

<sup>7</sup> “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” ’

Revision from last week. If we fall away from Christ, our First Love, by allowing other things to become more important than Him, we need to listen to and act upon what Jesus tells us in verse 5.

Revelation 2:5 NKJV

**Remember** therefore from where you have fallen; **repent** and **do the first works**,

**It's a three step process:**

1. **Remember.**
2. **Repent.**
3. **Do again what you did at first.**

1. **Remember therefore from where you have fallen:** The first step in restoration for the Ephesian church is for them to **remember**. They need to **remember from where you have fallen**. This means remembering *where they used to be in their love for the Lord and for one another*.
2. **Repent:** To have a change of heart and mind that leads to a change of behaviour. We turn away from sin and to God, agreeing with God that His ways are right.
3. **Do the First Works:** What are the first works?
  - Remember how you used to spend time in His Word?
  - Remember how you used to pray?
  - Remember the joy in getting together with other Christians?
  - Remember how excited you were about telling others about Jesus?

Now we will pick it up in verse 6 where we left off last week.

## **God Hates the Nicolaitans**

**Revelation 2:6 NKJV**

**But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate:** The *doctrine of the Nicolaitans* is also condemned in Revelation 2:15, and in that passage it is related to *immorality and idolatry*. The early church fathers also confirm this.

Irenaeus (writing in the late second century) described what he knew of the Nicolaitans: "The Nicolaitanes are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrifice to idols." (*Against Heresies*, book 1, chapter 26. From the *Ante Nicene Fathers Volume 1*, page 352)

Another view is based on the meaning of the word. "Nicos" meaning "conquest" and "laity" meaning "people of the church," the Nicolaitans could be those who came on the scene, saying, "I will tell you who to marry, where to live, and what to do because I am your spiritual leader."

But what did Paul the apostle say? He said, "We do not seek to have dominion over you, but we are fellow workers for your joy" (see 2 Corinthians 1:24). I've seen churches that do this, where the leaders tell people what to do in their everyday lives. It's wrong. It's just a form of control.

Most likely, the Nicolaitans were people who used and controlled people, encouraging them to live immoral and sinful lives, so they could get rich and live indulgent lives. That pretty similar to what the false teachers do today.

v 6 **Which I also hate:** These are powerful words, in that they came from our Saviour who is so rich in love. Whoever exactly the Nicolaitans were, and whatever exactly they did and taught, we learn something from Jesus' opinion of them. We learn that the God of love hates sin, and wants His people to also hate sin.

**Revelation 2:7a NKJV**

**“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

v 7 **He who has an ear:** This qualifies everyone—or at least everyone who *will listen*. This letter was not only written to the church at Ephesus in the Apostle John's day. It is written to us, and to all Christians throughout the centuries.

v 7 **Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches:** Each one of these seven letters apply to all churches. We must hear what the Spirit says **to the churches**—not just to *one church*. These letters—each of them—were meant to speak to *you*, if you will only have an **ear to hear what the Spirit says**.

## The Promise or Reward for Overcoming

**Revelation 2:7b NKJV**

**To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” ’**

v 7 **To him who overcomes:** what does it mean to be an overcomer? How do we overcome?

1 John 5:3-5 NKJV

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that **has overcome** the world—**our faith**. <sup>5</sup> Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This passage shows us that we don't overcome by working harder or putting more effort into things, but rather simply by trusting God and depending on Him.

v 7 **To him who overcomes:** Jesus made this promise **to him who overcomes**—but what does this overcomer overcome? We usually think of overcoming in dramatic terms of overcoming sin and in spiritual warfare, *but here Jesus seems to speak of overcoming of their coldness of heart and lack of love marked by leaving their first love.*

v 7 **I will give to eat from the tree of life:** The promise for these overcomers was a return to Eden, a restoration, and eternal life.

This reminds us of the garden of Eden, where at first, Adam and Eve had access to the tree of life, which would have given eternal life if they had eaten from it. Instead, Adam and Eve choose to eat from the other tree, the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil which brought death. God then had to kick them out of the Garden of Eden because it seems that if they had then eaten of the tree of life while in their sinful state, they would have lived forever in their sinful state. God didn't want this so He kicked them out.

Genesis 3:22 NKJV

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"—<sup>23</sup> therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. <sup>24</sup> So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

But here, Jesus is inviting them back into His presence and enjoy eternal life. Revelation tells us the the tree of life is now in Heaven.

Revelation 22:1-3 NKJV

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. <sup>2</sup> In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him.

v 7 **In the midst of the Paradise of God:** Originally, the word **Paradise** meant "a garden of delight." Eventually, it came to mean "the place where God lives." Where God is, that is **Paradise!** Paradise is now also another name for heaven. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, today you will be with me in paradise, meaning heaven.

What did the Ephesians lack? Love — the fruit of the Spirit. What would they get if they changed their ways, if they remembered, repented and returned? The fruit of the tree of life, symbolic of the fruit of the Spirit: love. It's a beautiful picture, the eternal motivation or reward for the Ephesian church perfectly answered their greatest need — their lack of fruit or love.

## The History of the Famous City of Ephesus

Now, some background on the city of Ephesus before we move to the next church.

Firstly, Ephesus was a famous city in the ancient world, with an equally famous church. Paul ministered in Ephesus for three years (Acts 19:1, Acts 10, Acts 20:31). Aquilla and Priscilla, with Apollos served there (Acts 18:24–28). Paul's close associate Timothy (1 Timothy 1:3) worked in Ephesus. According to strong and consistent historic tradition, the Apostle John also ministered there. So it had a long history of good teaching, of good doctrine.

Secondly, Ephesus was also world-famous as a religious, cultural, and economic centre of the region then known as Asia. Ephesus had the notable temple of Diana, a fertility goddess worshipped with immoral sex. This tremendous temple to Diana (Temple of Artemis) in Ephesus was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was supported by 127 pillars, each pillar 60 feet tall, and it was adorned with great sculptures.

"The Temple of Artemis was also a major treasury and bank of the ancient world, where merchants, kings, and even cities made deposits, and where their money could be kept safe under the protection of deity." (Longenecker in his commentary on Acts)

“Ephesus was a stronghold of Satan. Here many evil things both superstitious and satanic were practised. Books containing formula for sorcery and other ungodly and forbidden arts were plentiful in that city.” (Gaebelein in his commentary on Acts)

This should give you a little background knowledge when you read the book of Ephesians, the book of Acts, and the letter to the Church of Ephesus.

Remember also that prophetically, the Church of Ephesus describes the church overall from 33AD to about 100 AD, which overall was characterised by good doctrine but a lack of love. The Church of Ephesus is usually described as the loveless church.

## **Smyrna — The Persecuted Church**

Now we move to the next church that Jesus writes to, Smyrna. Overall the Church of Smyrna is usually described as the persecuted church.

### **Ephesus — the loveless church (A.D. 33 - A.D. 100)**

### **Smyrna — the persecuted church (A.D. 100 - A.D. 312)**

It's beneficial for us to get some background on the city of Smyrna before we read the letter to the Church of Smyrna.

1. Smyrna was a large, extremely beautiful, and proud city. It was a centre of learning and culture and it claimed to be the 'Glory of Asia.' ” (Barclay)

2. Smyrna was a *rich* city. “Smyrna was a great trade city which, like Ephesus, had its own harbour.

3. The name Smyrna comes from the word myrrh. Myrrh is an aromatic resin used to embalm dead bodies. It is obtained by repeatedly wounding a small thorn bush to get the sap. It makes a great picture this church — *the more they were wounded or persecuted, the more of the fragrance of Christ was produced or released.*

4. It is known from history that Smyrna was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor. On one famous street in Smyrna, called the “Golden Street,” stood magnificent temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and a great temple to Zeus—but the worship of those pagan gods was dying out. The real focus was on the worship of the Roman Emperor.

Here's how Emperor worship all started. In 196 b.c. **Smyrna** built the first temple to *Dea Roma*—the goddess of Rome, the spiritual symbol of the Roman Empire. Once the “spirit” of Rome was worshipped, it wasn't much of a step to worship the dead Emperors of Rome. Then it was only another small step to worship the living Emperors, and then to demand such worship as an evidence of political allegiance and civic pride. Then, 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.

**The Roman Emperor Domitian (a.d. 81–96) was the first to demand worship under the title “Lord” from the people of the Roman Empire as a test of political loyalty.** According to ancient church history, it was under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision.

Here is quote from Barclay which describes what the citizens had to do: “Emperor worship had begin as spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, the final step was taken and *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. 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 that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not even formally conform.”

Keeping this in mind, let’s read the letter to the Church of Smyrna

### **Revelation 2:8-11 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: <sup>9</sup> ‘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. <sup>10</sup> 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.**

**<sup>11</sup> ‘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.’ ”**

## **Jesus Describes Himself to the Church at Smyrna**

### **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:**

v 8 **The First and the Last:** Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:11, 1:17) to speak of His eternal character, power and control over everything. Remember that **The First and the Last** are titles that belong only to the Lord, Jehovah, according to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12.

v 8 **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. We have no reason to fear death as a Christian.

The association with death—and the victory of resurrection—is throughout this letter. It’s interesting that the name *Smyrna* comes from the word *myrrh*, a sweet-smelling perfume used in embalming dead bodies. The fragrance is only released when it is crushed. This is how it should be with us as Christians. *The more we are crushed, the more we grow to be like Christ as our faith and character grow.*

### **Revelation 2:9 NKJV**

**<sup>9</sup> ‘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.**

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. Remember that Jesus is our Great High Priest who can sympathise with us because He has suffered in the same ways we suffer.

v 9 **Works**: despite the persecution and poverty, they were serving the Lord faithfully.

v 9 **Tribulation**: remember the compulsory emperor worship we talked about before. The Christians refused to call Caesar Lord and so were persecuted, many to death, because of their obedience and faithfulness to Christ.

v 9 **Poverty**: This would seem strange, because, according to history, Smyrna was a very rich and prosperous city. Yet the Christians there were dirt poor. “The word used for ‘poverty’ is the word for abject poverty. They were not just poor, but destitute. Why? Because the Christians of Smyrna were robbed and fired from jobs in persecution for the gospel. Early Christians *joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven* (Hebrews 10:34). This kind of economic persecution is a common form of persecution against Christians even today.

v 9 **I know the blasphemy**: Jesus knew the abuse these Christians endured at the hands of “religious” men, **those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan...** Historically, we are told there was a large community of Jews in Smyrna who were hostile towards the Christians. This verse tells us that a *true* Jew is one who trusts God and believes in Jesus Christ because it calls these Jews “a synagogue of Satan.”

Philippians 3:2-3 NLT

Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. <sup>3</sup> **For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised.** We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort,

Jews may be Jews ethnically—which still has its place before God—but they are not Jews spiritually before God. Another way of saying this is that the unbelieving Jews were physical descendants of Abraham (the nation of Israel), but not spiritual descendants, because they were not walking by faith.

It’s interesting that the Christians were not only persecuted by the world, that is by unbelievers, but also by religious people, Jewish people who read the Old Testament and claimed to know God, but were totally deceived. They followed in the footsteps of Paul, who, before he became a Christian, was dedicated to eliminating Christianity. Often, Christians have been persecuted by those who claim to know God, either Jews or other Christians.

As an application, just because someone knows the bible well, it doesn’t mean they know God. Unless a person is born again, their bible knowledge doesn’t profit them because the spiritual truth contained in the bible can only be spiritually discerned (be understood by someone who is born again).

1 Corinthians 2:13-14 NKJV

<sup>13</sup> These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. <sup>14</sup> But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Notice who our teacher is... The Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit will teach us **all** things and bring to remembrance all things that I said to you. Remember that we need to be walking in the Spirit if we are going to hear from the Spirit. This requires humility and repentance. Also, I love the fact that, even though my memory is terrible, the Holy Spirit consistently brings to remembrance previously read verses and truths as I prepare studies and talk to people. This is why it's so important to read through the whole bible, because if you don't, or haven't, then the Holy Spirit can't bring it to remembrance.

v 9 **I know... I know:** In midst of this kind of affliction, it is easy to think God has forgotten—but Jesus knows. Jesus tells them twice that He knows what is going on. I love the verse in in:

Isaiah 63:9 NKJ

In all their affliction He was afflicted...

Isaiah 63:9 NLT

In all their suffering he also suffered,

Jesus walks with us. He knows. He understands. Now, What does Jesus think about the church in Smyrna?

v 9 **But you are Rich:** Every outward circumstance said that the Christians in Smyrna were poor, even destitute, but Jesus saw through the outward circumstances to see that they were really **rich**. Now, 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.***

v 9 **And poverty (but you are rich):** The contrast between material poverty and spiritual riches of the Christians in Smyrna reminds us that there is nothing inherently spiritual in being rich. So much for the prosperity Gospel. But, on the other hand, there is also nothing inherently spiritual in poverty. Someone said, "There is nothing wrong with having money; the trouble is that money so easily "has" us.

## **Application: The Dangers of Living in a Materialistic World**

This is something that I have observed frequently in today's materialistic western world, and sometimes in my own life as well. Often, material riches are acquired and maintained at the *expense* of true spiritual riches. A story is told of the glory days of the Renaissance Papacy, when a man walked with the Pope and marvelled at the splendours and riches of the Vatican. The Pope told him, "We no longer have to say what Peter told the lame man: '*Silver and gold have I none.*'" His companion replied, "But neither can you say, '*rise up and walk.*'"



The time spent pursuing riches and money is time not spent with God. You might end up financially well off, but lacking in your walk with God. It's not a good place to be.

### **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.**

## **God's Instructions to the Church of Smyrna.**

v 10 **Do not fear**: Literally, this is better translated "stop being afraid." The Christians in Smyrna suffered under persecution, and they were afraid. Sometimes we think that Christians who endure persecution are almost super-human, and we sometimes don't appreciate the depths of **fear** they struggle with. There were **things which** they were **about to suffer**, and Jesus wanted them ready to stand against **those things**.

v 10 **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**). We will talk more about what the 10 days could mean later.

v 10 **The devil**: According to Jesus, the persecution about to come against the Christians of Smyrna was from **the devil**. This makes sense because it is Satan who is out to destroy the church and Christians individually. At the same time the persecution was measured and limited by God. Surely, **the devil** wanted to imprison them for a longer time, to persecute them more, but God limited the **tribulation to ten days**.

It's important to understand that in those days, being thrown **into prison** was severe persecution. Why? Because in that day, **prison** was never used to rehabilitate someone, and rarely used to punish someone. Normally, you were thrown **into prison** as you awaited trial and execution.

A quote from Barclay helps us to understand what things were like: "For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna above all places, 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."

v 10 **You will have tribulation ten days**: Commentators on the Book of Revelation have long debated the meaning of these **ten days**. Here are the most likely meanings:

1. Some think that Jesus really meant **ten years** of persecution. "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." (Clarke)

2. In the years A.D. 100 through A.D. 313, there were ten Roman emperors who correspond to the ten days spoken of here. They launched such massive attacks against the believers that between five and seven million Christians were killed during their rule.

3. Others say that **ten days** is simply an expression of speech: “The expression *ten days* is not to be taken literally; it is the normal Greek expression for a short time.” (Barclay)

4. However, there is no compelling reason to believe it means anything other than **ten days** of severe persecution, with an emphasis on the idea that it is a *limited* time.

I personally see it as a reference to the ten waves of persecution over the years until 312 A.D.

v 9 **That you may be tested:** If this attack came from **the devil**, then why couldn't these Christians in Smyrna just rebuke Satan, and stop the attack? Because God had a purpose in their suffering, and so He allowed it. You may ask, “why does God allow suffering?” The Bible gives us at least three clear reasons:

### ***1. God uses suffering to purify His people***

1 Peter 1:6–7 NLT

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. <sup>7</sup> These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

### ***2. God uses suffering to make us like Jesus***

Romans 8:17 NLT

And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

### ***3. God uses suffering to makes us truly witnesses of Him***

You may have heard this quote before, “**In all ages, the blood of the martyrs has been seed for the church.**” It's only when we suffer that people can see who we really are, based on how we respond to persecution, trials and temptations. It's when we suffer that the love of God truly shines through.

Now consider how different Jesus message to the Church of Smyrna is to the typical modern message in many of todays churches. Here is a quote:

“The saints at Smyrna had not been given a pep-talk on ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People.’ They had no testimony on ‘How Faith Made Me Mayor of Smyrna.’ They were not promised deliverance from tribulation, poverty and reviling. In fact, they were told that the worst was yet to come.” (Havner)

I believe that the same is true today. I don't think things are going to get better before the Rapture, rather worse. This world will get more and more evil and it will be harder and harder to be a Christian as we lose more and more freedoms and rights that relate to worshipping and obeying God.

v 10 **may be tested**: God allowed this attack 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. Remember that our treasure is in earthen vessels — it's Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Now what were the results of the testing? They passed the test. Only this church, along with the church of Philadelphia, has no evil spoken against it — there is nothing to correct, no rebuke.

## Application — That you may be tested

God is also interested in testing us. *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 in today's western culture avoid persecution of any kind by conforming so much to the world that they are no longer *distinctively* Christians. This wasn't the case with the Christians in Smyrna. They were **tested** and they passed the test. Will we be fully obedient, without compromise, faithful to the end, no matter what the cost, and pass the test?

v 10 **Be faithful until death**, is literally “become faithful until death.”

v 10 **and I will give you the crown of life**: Jesus leaves them with the promise of the **crown of life**. James also wrote about the crown of life:

James 1:12 NKJV

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

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, a crown made of gold. This is not the crown mentioned here. The other kind of **crown**, which is referred to here, is the *stephanos*. It was worn on several different occasions. It is usually made of leaves woven together. There were different occasions when a *stephanos* would be given.

Firstly, The *stephanos* type of crown is given as a trophy to a winning athlete. It's like Jesus looks at the Christians of Smyrna, and says to them: “You are My winners. You deserve a trophy.”

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

Also, 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

So Jesus promised the believers in the Church of Smyrna a special **crown**—the **crown of life**. This crown will never fade away, its glory will never diminish. So stand strong and endure the tests, the temptations, because if we do we will be rewarded, we will be given the crown of life.

## 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.” ’**

v 11 **He who has an ear:** Though 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. Yet we face a different kind of persecution — the temptation of materialism and lust.

I would like to give an example of one of the martyrs of the time, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, disciple of John the Apostle. He was a remarkable example of both the persecution and the courage of early Christians. It comes from David Guzik's Commentary on Revelation.

*The year after Polycarp returned from Rome, 155 A.D., a great persecution came upon the Christians of Smyrna. His congregation urged him to leave the city until the threat blew over. So, believing that God wanted him to be around a few more years, Polycarp left the city and hid out on a farm belonging to some Christian friends. One day on the farm, as he prayed in his room, Polycarp had a vision of his pillow engulfed in flames. He knew what God said to him, and calmly told his companions, “I see that I must be burnt at the stake.”*

*Meanwhile, the chief of police issued a warrant for his arrest. They seized one of Polycarp's servants and tortured him until he told them where his master was. Towards evening, the police chief and a band of soldiers came to the old farmhouse. When the soldiers found him, they were embarrassed to see that they had come to arrest such an old, frail man. They reluctantly put him on a donkey and walked him back to the city of Smyrna.*

*On the way to the city, the police chief and other government officials tried to persuade Polycarp to offer a pinch of incense before a statue of Caesar and simply say “Caesar is Lord.” That's all he had to do, and he would be off the hook. They pleaded with him to do it, and escape the dreadful penalties. At first Polycarp was silent, but then he calmly gave them his firm answer: no. The police chief was now angry. Annoyed with the old man, he pushed him out of his carriage and onto the hard ground. Polycarp, bruised but resolute, got up and walked the rest of the way to the arena.*

*The horrid games at the arena had already begun in earnest and a large, bloodthirsty mob gathered to see Christians tortured and killed. One Christian named Quintis boldly proclaimed himself a follower of Jesus and said he was willing to be martyred, but when he saw the vicious animals in the arena, he lost courage and agreed to burn the pinch of incense to Caesar as Lord. Another young man named Germanicus didn't back down. He marched out and faced the lions and died an agonising death for his Lord Jesus. Ten other Christians gave their lives that day, but the mob was unsatisfied. They cried out, “Away with the atheists who do not worship our gods!” To them, Christians were atheists because they did not recognise the traditional gods of Rome and Greece. Finally, the crowd started chanting “Bring out Polycarp.”*

*When Polycarp brought his tired body into the arena, he and the other Christians heard a voice from heaven. It said, “Be strong, Polycarp, play the man.” As he stood before the proconsul, they tried one more time to get him to renounce Jesus. The proconsul told Polycarp to agree with the crowd and shout out “Away with the atheists!” Polycarp*

*looked sternly at the bloodthirsty mob, waved his hand towards them and said, "Away with those atheists!" The proconsul persisted. "Take the oath and revile Christ and I'll set you free!" Polycarp answered, "For eighty-six years I've served Jesus; how dare I now revile my King?" The proconsul finally gave up, and announced to the crowd the crime of the accused: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian."*

*The crowd shouted, "Let the lions loose!" but the animals had already been put away. The crowd then demanded that Polycarp be burnt. The old man remembered the dream about the burning pillow, and took courage in God. He said to his executioners, "It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will."*

*They arranged a great pile of wood and set up a pole in the middle. As they tied Polycarp to the pole, he prayed: "I thank You that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ." After he prayed and gave thanks to God, they set the wood ablaze. A great wall of flame shot up to the sky, but it never touched Polycarp. God set a hedge of protection between him and the fire. Seeing that he would not burn, the executioner, in a furious rage, stabbed the old man with a long spear. Immediately, streams of blood gushed from his body and seemed to extinguish the fire. When this happened, witnesses said they saw a dove fly up from the smoke into heaven. At the very same moment, a church leader in Rome named Iraenus, said he heard God say to him, "Polycarp is dead." God called his servant home.*

Remember that the day of martyrs is definitely not past. All over the world, Christians face persecution, especially in Asia, Eastern Europe, and in the Muslim world. Some people estimate that more Christians have suffered and died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in all previous centuries combined. We need to continue to pray for those who are being persecuted. One day it might be our turn.

## **The Promise of a Reward**

### **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." '**

v 11 **He who overcomes:** How do we overcome? We follow and stick close by Jesus, who is the ultimate overcomer. As Jesus said:

### **John 16:33 NKJV**

In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

v 11 **Shall not be hurt by the second death:** The **second death** is hell, the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14 and 21:8). Unbelievers will be judged at the great white throne judgement at the end of the 1000 year rule and reign of Christ on earth and be sent to the Lake of Fire.

Here is an awesome promise to finish on. Jesus has defeated death for us. ***Death for Christians is nothing more than an entrance into eternal life, a doorway to the presence of God. We have nothing to fear, because Jesus is near. He's waiting for us on the other side.***

1 Corinthians 15:53-58 NLT

<sup>53</sup> For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.

<sup>54</sup> Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.

<sup>55</sup> O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

<sup>56</sup> For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. <sup>57</sup> But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>58</sup> So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.