

## The Smyrna Church

**Text: Revelation 2:8-11** And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; 9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. 10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. 11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

**Matthew 5:10-12** Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. 12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

**Introduction:** *The seven churches and their primary themes:*

- ❖ **Ephesus:** Loss of first love, neglecting spiritual fervor
- ❖ **Smyrna:** *Facing intense persecution, enduring hardship*
- ❖ **Pergamum:** Tolerance of false teachings and worldly compromise
- ❖ **Thyatira:** Acceptance of false prophets and immoral practices
- ❖ **Sardis:** Spiritual apathy and lack of genuine faith
- ❖ **Philadelphia:** Remaining faithful and steadfast despite opposition
- ❖ **Laodicea:** Lukewarmness, self-sufficiency, and lack of spiritual zeal

**John's message from Jesus to the churches is still relevant today & teaches us some important things:**

- (1) *Churches operate with the continual oversight of Christ & are being judged by their teaching!*
- (2) *A church's outward appearance may be far different from what God sees!*
- (3) *Success, in God's eyes, is not measured by a church's bank account or by the size of its membership!*
- (4) *Beware, the church has false teachers and false doctrine. We should prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit for guidance lest we become indoctrinated with wrong teaching and become deceived into a false hope of salvation. Note: many innocent members are under the influence of false teaching/prophets!*
- (5) *Even after salvation, God's light in us can go out, if we fail to serve God according to the gospel!*
- (6) *We must guard against losing our first love. Without it nothing else we do will matter to God!*

*In this sermon I want to minister, with God's help, on CHRIST'S MESSAGE to the CHURCH at SMYRNA.*

### **Historic Smyrna**

Smyrna was located about 30 miles north of Ephesus along the Roman Road (1½ days walking distance). The population during the time of the apostles in the New Testament was estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000 people. Smyrna was a port city and a flourishing commercial center, and was known as the "Flower of Asia" for its beauty.

The modern name of Smyrna is Izmir, and it is the third largest city in Turkey with a population of around 3 million people.

Smyrna was known as the "*poor church that was rich*". Jesus told the church in Smyrna that he knew what they had been through and what they faced in the future. He reminded them that He was the first and the last, and would be with them no matter what they faced ahead!

### **I. The Shortest Message of Christ to the seven churches was to Smyrna:**

- Two verses long (if you don't count the introduction and the general admonishment to all the churches in the last verse of our text)
- *Only 78 words* directed to the members of the Smyrna Church.

## II. Although the Shortest, the Most Comforting & Reassuring Message of Christ to the 7 churches:

- *I know thy works*, and *tribulation*, and *poverty*, (but *thou art rich*)
- *I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*
- *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer:* behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days:
- *be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

## III. The church at Smyrna was under attack from all sides

**Spiritual Persecution - (inward attack on its doctrinal beliefs/foundational teaching)**

**Physical Persecution – (outwardly)**

- The Jews from within – Pressure to Change the Apostle’s Foundational Doctrines
- The Romans from without – Caesar demanded that their worship be directed to him!
- Satan - the real agent behind it all - An unseen multi-frontal attack against the church!
- Present Tribulation – Harsh Poverty - Harsh Persecution and Imprisonment
- Future Tribulation -- 10 years symbolized a long period of tribulation ahead for them in the future

## IV. Christian Persecution at Smyrna -- *Christians were not very welcome in Smyrna.*

**(1) Internal Persecution - Jewish False Teachers** - Harsh attacks against Church Doctrine by False Jewish Teachers. They challenged the leadership and the foundational teaching of doctrinal issues and wanted to bring in false doctrine such as circumcision!

*\*\*Apostle Paul’s battle with false teachers – Galatians 1:6-9 & 5:12* I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. **5:12** I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

Jesus also identifies the enemy of the church as the “*synagogue of Satan*,” and specifically within that group are people calling themselves Jews but are not. He also gives a prophecy that the devil will throw some of them into prison and that they will be face tribulation (affliction, distress, oppression) for ten days.

IF A CHURCH DOES NOT STAND FIRM IN SOUND BIBLICAL TEACHING, IT CAN NOT PLEASE CHRIST AND IS IN DANGER LOSING ITS PLACE IN HIS KINGDOM! (see the warnings of Christ to the other churches in Revelation).

### **(2) Outward Persecution – Roman Empire** (ref.: <https://lineagejourney.com/read/smyrna-the-persecuted-church>)

Most historians believe that Polycarp was the leading bishop or minister of the church of Smyrna. The message to Smyrna covers the period of time when the Church went through tremendous persecution under the successive Roman Emperors.

When Polycarp was forced to offer incense to the Emperor as a sign of loyalty and fidelity he refused. He was then sentenced to death and was burned at the stake on Mount Pagus around 155 A.D.

*Polycarp’s martyrdom was a small taste of the kind of persecution and suffering the church endured. **The Smyranean period of church history extends from about 100 A.D. to 350 A.D. (200 years of persecution)** It was during this time that the church suffered the most brutal persecution under the Roman Emperors. Men like Marcus Aurelius, Vespasian, Diocletian, and Domitian were both sadistic and relentless in their pursuit of Christians.*

Many Christians were forced to meet in secret during this period of history. Many were burned at the stake or thrown to the wild beasts in arenas across the empire.

**It was an era of pain and bitterness but it was also an era of both spiritual purity and power.**

Though persecuted the church kept her garments pure and spotless. She was pressed down to the grinding wheel of the oppressor but she did not allow her faith to be broken. Though crushed she emanated the sweet fragrance of Jesus' love for the Father and His truth.

**Of all the periods of persecution, the worst of all took place over a period of ten years under Emperor Diocletian. This lasted from 303 A.D. to 313 A.D. until Constantine took the Imperial throne.**

**Diocletianic or Great Persecution** (reference: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletianic\\_Persecution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletianic_Persecution))

The Diocletianic or Great Persecution was the last and most severe persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire.<sup>[1]</sup> In 303, the emperors Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius issued a series of edicts rescinding Christians' legal rights and demanding that they comply with traditional religious practices. Later edicts targeted the clergy and demanded universal sacrifice, ordering all inhabitants to sacrifice to the gods. The persecution varied in intensity across the empire—weakest in Gaul and Britain, where only the first edict was applied, and strongest in the Eastern provinces. Persecutory laws were nullified by different emperors (Galerius with the Edict of Serdica in 311) at different times, but Constantine and Licinius' Edict of Milan in 313 has traditionally marked the end of the persecution.

## V. Persecution in our Modern Churches

**Matthew 5:11-12** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

### 1. Christian Persecution today – (ref.: Open Doors' World Watch Persecution List (opendoors.com))

- *More than 365 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination*
- *4,998 Christians murdered*
- *14,766 Churches and Christian properties attacked*
- *1 in 7 Christians are persecuted worldwide (14%)*
- *1 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Africa (20%)*
- *2 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Asia (40%)*
- *The Worse Countries on the 2024 Persecution List*

<u>Country</u>	<u>Estimated Christian Population</u> (ref.: <a href="https://www.opendoors.com">opendoors.com</a> )
(1) North Korea	400,000 (being discovered as a follower of Jesus is effectively a death sentence)
(2) Somalia	100's
(3) Libya	35,100
(4) Eritrea	1,739,000
(5) Yemen	?? small number
(6) Nigeria	102,988,000
(11) India	71,120,000
(19) China	96,700,000 (at least 10,000 churches were closed in 2023)
(37) Mexico	126,876,000 (Mexico has about 150 active criminal gangs and cartels operating)

### 2. Persecution in America

**Matthew 5:11-12.** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

**II Timothy 3:12** Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

*"...you don't have to be lunchmeat for a hungry lion or lit up as a torch in Nero's palace before it's fair to claim that you're facing persecution as a Christian. (ref.: WILLIAM WOLFE*

**Article: The Persecution of Christians in America: It's Already Here** (ref: [standingforfreedom.com](http://standingforfreedom.com))

*Despite what some may claim, Christians are being persecuted in America.*

*That might be hard to hear, but it's true. Even though the United States is, arguably, the freest nation on the planet, and offers the First Amendment protection that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," Christians still face already-and-increasing persecution here between our shining seas.*

*We need to recognize this and prepare for it to get worse.*

*When making such a factual statement as "Christians are persecuted in America," you will inevitably be met by a chorus of "actually" men and women trying to disagree. This Internet-active crowd apparently refuses to call anything "persecution" until heads are rolling, stakes are burning, and the lions are digesting the remains of the faithful.*

### **What the "No They Aren't" Crowd Gets Wrong**

*First, the true meaning of the word "**persecution**." The definition of persecution includes "hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs." So no, we aren't being fed to the lions just yet. But there is no conceivable doubt that Christians are facing "hostility and ill-treatment" for their faith in America. So, definitionally, the persecution deniers are missing the point.*

*Even worse, they are wrong from a biblical understanding of the word. Jesus clearly taught that persecution can, and will, take on many forms that don't result in death. In **Matthew 5:11-12** Jesus reminds His followers, "**Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**"*

*Reviled, persecuted, and spoken against evilly — Jesus is referring here to varying degrees of persecution that His followers will face, just as the prophets of old faced varying degrees of persecution. His words came true (of course). We see in the New Testament that some believers were killed, like Stephen, and some were shunned or suffered in other ways.*

### **What counts as persecution then? Any number of different things.**

- it could be being slandered or mocked for your faith.
- looked down on because you are Pentecostal and not in a main stream denominational church
- whispered about behind your back or being isolated because you are different from society
- pressured to accept lifestyles that are against sound biblical teaching
- being passed over for a promotion at your work because you do not follow in their social circle
- Christian Persecution is anything and everything from suffering social ostracization to getting put on trains and taken to death camps.

### **Modern Examples of Christian Persecution in America:**

- For years, private Christian business owners have been dragged to court, targeted for destruction by the LGBTQ+ movement.
- The IRS has been caught targeting Christian non-profits.
- Don't forget about how, under the Obama Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) relentlessly prosecuted the Christian charity **Little Sisters of the Poor** over their religious beliefs against paying to provide for abortifacient contraceptives. It took almost a decade for the Little Sisters to finally prevail at the Supreme Court.
- Jack Phillips, the baker, has been harassed for over a decade, bombarded with requests to make the most profane cakes, and dragged in and out of court simply for trying to run his business as a Christian (persecution that continues despite his having prevailed at the Supreme Court).
- Barronelle Stutzman, a florist, was eventually forced into retirement because she also refused to compromise on her traditional Christian faith commitments and participate in the celebration of sin.
- Coach Joe Kennedy was fired for exercising his First Amendment rights to pray to God in public. It took him almost seven years to fight to undo this unjust persecution, prevailing only when the Supreme

Court ruled that “a government entity sought to punish an individual for engaging in a brief, quiet, personal religious observance doubly protected by the Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment...the Constitution neither mandates nor tolerates that kind of discrimination.”

- Owners of Hobby Lobby ordered to provide four potentially life-terminating drugs in their health insurance plan. On June 30, 2014, the Supreme Court ruled that they did not have to violate their faith or pay severe fines.
- Chick-Fil-A vs. the city of Austin, TX - the company was denied the right to open a restaurant at Austin municipal airport because of their history on anti-LGBTQ actions. The TEXAS SUPREME COURT RULED UNANIMOUSLY in their favor!

**Legally we might call this “discrimination,” but make no mistake, it is also persecution: persecution against Christians because of their faith in Jesus Christ as King and their refusal to compromise on the basic teachings of the Bible.**

*The scales are tipping closer to “Say Caesar is God” than most people realize.*

*It’s a battlefield across America right now and the spiritual warfare is pitched. Our country is no longer some quiet, peaceful pasture where the secularists have their corner and we have ours. They are coming for us at every turn — in the schools, in commerce, in the public square — and they will use every means of power they can to silence us or lock us up. –*

***\*\*END OF ARTICLE -- The Persecution of Christians in America: It’s Already Here \*\****

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**CLOSING: Some remarks on the similarities between Church Persecution and Church Prosperity**  
**LET US BEWARE!**

- (1) Persecution and Prosperity seasons both scatter church members. Churches decline in number!
- (2) In both seasons, it is costly to stand for God –
  - In seasons of Persecution, you may lose worldly possessions and possibly even your life
  - In seasons of Prosperity, Christians must isolate themselves from an unrestrained and pleasure mad world around them. (*i.e. Abraham -- Sodom & Gomorrah*) If not, they may be swept up in the current of a backslidden season and lose their immortal soul,
- (3) Both seasons tempt the Church to compromise
- (4) In both seasons, Church Leaders are at the front lines of the battle – the enemy has them in his sights and seeks to destroy them so he can get to the rest of the flock
- (5) Both seasons test the Believer’s Faith in God
- (6) In both seasons Believers need extreme edification and encouragement to continue until the end!
- (7) God’s Faithfulness shines through in both seasons. HE IS A FAITHFUL GOD IN ALL SEASONS!

**II Timothy 4:16-18** *At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*