

# THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

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Revelation 2:8-11 contains a letter from Jesus Christ himself to the church at Smyrna. In the First Century A.D., Smyrna was an important port city in the Roman province of Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea in the region of today's Izmir, Turkey. It had a sizeable Jewish population during that time, and was not located far from Ephesus. Therefore, the church's beginnings would date back to the Apostle Paul's Third Missionary Journey. At that time, Paul taught daily in the school of Tyrannus in the city of Ephesus for the space of two years (Acts 19:9-10). The result was that "*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks*" (Acts 19:10). This would include Smyrna. Encouragingly, some 35 years later, this congregation was strong in the faith to the point that Christ did not rebuke them for any shortcomings in his letter to them.

## **The crown of life**

In Revelation 2:8, Jesus introduced himself to the church at Smyrna as "*the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.*" Jesus reminds them that he is eternal. He is from everlasting (Micah 5:2) and was with God from the beginning (Gen 1:26; John 1:1-3). He will live and reign in heaven forever and ever (Heb 1:8; Rev 11:15). In that way he is both first and last. Jesus also reminds them that he was dead, having been put to death for righteousness' sake, but he was resurrected and is now alive. This is connected with the fact that he will live and reign throughout eternity. This introduction of Christ in this letter applies directly to what he tells them in verses nine and ten. Like Christ, the Christians in Smyrna were suffering for righteousness' sake and some of them would soon be put to death for the faith as Jesus was. But Jesus tells them not to fear because they would be given a crown of life if they were faithful to the point of death. This promise of the crown of life (heaven) and the promise of escape from the second death (hell) is the reason we should not fear what any man will do to us (Matt 10:28; Heb 13:5-6). As God raised Christ from the dead to live forever, so we will be raised by God to live forever. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basis of our hope for eternal life in heaven (1 Pet 1:3-5). What encouraging words these are to any Christian who is suffering! But the promise to Smyrna is a conditional one. It is a promise given to him

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(continued)

that overcomes (Rev 2:11). Overcoming all temptation is the way to escape everlasting punishment and obtain the crown of life.

## **The pathway to spiritual riches**

The letter to the church in Smyrna does have something in common with the other six letters to the churches in Asia. In verse nine Jesus told them, "*I know your works.*" But Smyrna is one of only two churches (Philadelphia being the other) that are not rebuked for anything. Jesus knew all their works (as he does with everyone), but he only has good things to say about what these brethren were doing. Jesus commended them for suffering tribulation and for their spiritual richness. The church in Smyrna is a tremendous example for us. They were materially poor but not spiritually. This vividly demonstrates the fact that a congregation does not need a lot of money to be useful to God. As a contrast, the Laodiceans were materially rich, but spiritually wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked (Rev 3:17). Paul testified that the churches of Macedonia had "deep poverty" but had given themselves to the Lord to serve him (2 Cor 8:1-5). Likewise, the church at Smyrna was materially poor but spiritually rich. This congregation is also an example of partaking of the sufferings of Christ. There are two kinds of suffering. One kind is when we suffer the consequences of our own wrongdoings (1 Pet 2:20; 3:17; 4:15). The other kind of suffering is to suffer for doing well, for obeying God (1 Pet 2:19-20). These are the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet 4:12-16; 2 Cor 1:5). Christ never did anything wrong yet he suffered to the point of dying on the cross (1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:17-18). He has left us an example to follow his steps in suffering for righteousness' sake. This is how we grow spiritually to be complete in the image of Christ (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:10; Heb 2:10; Heb 5:8-9; Rom 5:3-4). This is the kind of tribulation that was suffered by the church at Smyrna at the hands of the Jews and others (Rev 2:9-10). But this is how they became spiritually rich, such that they were without spot and unrebukeable (1 Tim 6:14) and had nothing to repent of. All they received was commendation from the Lord and encouragement to be faithful unto death. We will receive the same glory from our Lord if we too follow in his footsteps.