

## SMYRNA

Some members of our congregation have been to Smyrna, I believe. It is the only one of the seven cities of Revelation still in existence on its original site. Today it is called Izmir.

Smyrna was located thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, on the shores of the Aegean Sea. Its famous harbor had a mouth so narrow that it could be closed off in time of war, thus protecting the city from attack by sea. The population in John's day was about two hundred thousand, making it the second most prominent city in Asia. (Well, there was some difference of opinion about that.) Smyrna was called "The Glory of Asia," and most of its citizens felt that was a deep truth, not just Chamber of Commerce propaganda. Though second to Ephesus in size, Smyrna considered itself first in glory, beauty, and prominence. There were reasons for that.

Smyrna, the birthplace of Homer, was indeed beautiful and prosperous. The sunsets were glorious. The harbor at Ephesus kept silting up, which eventually killed Ephesus – and thus preserved it to become one of the most outstanding archaeological sites in the world today. In John's day, this problem was already sending more and more of the shipping to Smyrna. It was not yet clear at the time of John's writing, but Ephesus would decline and Smyrna would become the foremost city in Asia.

As some of you may have noticed, John uses the introductory first chapter of Revelation to give various descriptive phrases in honor of Christ's identity and position: *"From him who is, who was, and who is to come .... From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth .... His eyes flamed like fire; his feet were like burnished bronze .... In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword .... I am the living One; I was dead and now I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of death and Hades."* There are more, but that is a pretty fair sample. John does not list them in some wooden fashion; he weaves them into his opening remarks. Then, as he addresses the seven churches individually, he picks one of these descriptive phrases to begin his message to each particular church. And the phrase he chooses will be the theme of his message to that church. He has the audacity to suggest, "The thing

about Jesus Christ – the part of His nature – that you need to focus on most is ...” and then he gives just one of the phrases for that congregation to take especially to heart.

So the first thing we watch for, the first thing we want to know, when we read one of the seven letters to the seven churches is: Which phrase will John use for this church – what will be the major theme of this letter? Do you remember from the Scripture reading the phrase he has chosen for Smyrna? *“These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life again.”* It echoes verses seventeen and eighteen in the first chapter: *“Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one; I was dead and now I am alive for evermore.”*

What is this letter going to be about? Short-term gratification? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die? Not very likely! More like: “Today we may die, but tomorrow we are raised to new life.” This is going to be about hope greater and more powerful than this world. This is going to be about following the Resurrected One. This is going to be about losing our fear, about being unafraid in this world, about not being terrorized by threats of failure or poverty or any form of death in this world. This is going to be about the triumph and victory of the Eternal Christ, and all who will follow Him into LIFE. Wouldn't that be your guess, if John has chosen this particular phrase to begin this particular letter? If that is your guess, you guessed right.

Smyrna was founded in 1200 B.C. That is two hundred years before King David, and back in the days of the judges of Israel. In the sixth century B.C., Alyattes, king of Lydia, conquered Smyrna and dispersed the inhabitants into tiny villages throughout the area, where they could be no threat to his rule. For almost four hundred years, Smyrna was in eclipse. Alexander the Great wanted to rebuild it, but the task fell to his successor, Lysimachus, who rebuilt the city around 300 B.C. on the slopes of Mount Pagus, about two miles south of its former site. It had wide and spacious streets. Its major street (called “the street of gold”) began at the harbor, curved around Mount Pagus, and ran on to the foothills away from the sea. At the harbor end stood the temple of Cybele. At the other end was a temple to Zeus. In between were temples to Apollo, Askelepios, Aphrodite. Mount Pagus rose five hundred feet above the harbor, commanding a marvelous view. The acropolis on top of Mount Pagus was considered the crown or garland – “the victor's wreath” – of Smyrna.

Smyrna boasted a grand stadium for athletic events, one of the best libraries in Asia, and the largest public theater in all Asia. In short, Smyrna was not quite as large as Ephesus, but she was superior in culture, class, style, and community spirit. (Would you rather live in Los Angeles, or Newport Beach? I better be careful ... )

Smyrna had been destroyed, yet she had come back to life. It was remarkable, and Smyrna ended up with the nickname “the city that was dead, yet lived.” John uses this theme, adds a few dimensions, and turns it into the central message to the congregation living there.

Smyrna was not only beautiful and prosperous, she was extremely patriotic. Three hundred years earlier (265-146 B.C.), when Rome was fighting for its life against the Carthaginian empire, Smyrna had sided with Rome. She was the first city in Asia to declare allegiance to Rome, and she built a temple to Roma, the goddess of Rome. That was in 195 B.C., almost one hundred years before Julius Caesar. In 26 A.D., when the whole world wanted to be friends with Rome, eleven cities competed for the privilege of erecting a temple in honor of Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna won the honors. Rome considered Smyrna the most noble and worthy of the cities of Asia. Cicero called Smyrna “the most faithful of our allies.” Roman nobility came to visit and vacation there. After 70 A.D., when Jerusalem was destroyed, Smyrna was a favorite place for Jewish settlement, and the Jewish community there was large and influential.

So the scene is set. Smyrna is beautiful, prosperous, highly patriotic, and of esteemed reputation. Its citizens are proud of their city, and they feel fortunate to live there. When John writes The Revelation, Smyrna is one of the choice places to live in the entire Roman Empire.

Among the seven letters to the seven churches, no church gets higher praise. No fault is found with the church at Smyrna. No warning is uttered. To Ephesus, the Spirit says, “Return to the way you used to be. Go back to your first love.” To Smyrna, the Spirit says, “Stay the way you are. You have only to remain faithful and you will receive the crown (or garland) of life.” A garland, by the way, far greater than the one for which Smyrna was famous.

We have, then, an ideal church in an ideal city. There is only one catch: They do not match at all! The congregation at Smyrna is rich in the spiritual realm and doing very well indeed – so far as the Lord is concerned. But they are in an exceedingly difficult place so far as the

world is concerned. Smyrna is a very unpleasant place for Christians. And we were just about to conclude that this is the obvious first choice for the church most like ours, where we can live in a lovely area, be rich and prosperous, have all the values and purposes of the community around us – and all the values and purposes of our Lord – all at the same time.

*“I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!”* The Christians at Smyrna live in a beautiful and prosperous city, but they themselves are in dire straits. “Afflictions” would be better translated as “pressure.” *“I know the terrible pressure that you are under.”*

Rome had not been happy with Christians since 64 A.D., when Nero blamed the Christians for starting the great fire (though he himself had set it). And Smyrna was thoroughly and enthusiastically Roman. So there were economic sanctions: It was hard to get a job in Smyrna if you were a Christian. Many merchants would not sell to you. You were in danger of being arrested at any time as an enemy of the state. If you owned a shop or a business and became a Christian, angry citizens might plunder your shop or home or confiscate your property, and the authorities would just look the other way. If you complained, punishment was more likely to come down on you than on your persecutors.

*“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”* This is the first mention of Satan in the Book of Revelation. The Jewish community in Smyrna, as we mentioned, was large and well-established. Many of them were legal citizens of Smyrna. The church and the synagogue were at loggerheads at this time in history. Irate Jewish citizens would sometimes turn the names of Christians over to the authorities. Once such a complaint was made, the Christians would be arrested, punished, banished, or killed. John knew that no true Jew would do this. *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”* But every religion has adherents who do not live by the faith they claim. Like Paul before him, John dreamt of the day when Christians and Jews would be reconciled. This theme rings clearly throughout the Book of Revelation. But at this moment in history, the Jews had prominence and power enough to get Christians into terrible trouble if they chose to. John did not condemn Judaism; he said that the Jews who did this were not true Jews.

The legal charges that were being made against Christians were on six counts:

- Cannibalism – from a misunderstanding of the Lord’s Supper.
- Lust and immorality – from a misunderstanding of the Agape Feast (communion), and the affection between Christians.
- Breaking up homes – one Christian convert in a family was potentially a severe problem, and it has remained so down through history.
- Atheism – because Christians were speaking out against idolatry and other practices and beliefs common to accepted religions of the time.
- Treason – because Christians refused to acknowledge the Roman Emperor as a god.
- Incendiarism – because Nero had blamed the Christians for the great fire in Rome.

So the Christians at Smyrna are under great pressure, and sanctions against them make it very difficult to earn a livelihood. But John’s letter assures them that they are doing great. They should go on doing exactly as they have been doing. Things will get worse, of course, but they must not be afraid of the sufferings to come. They must remain faithful, even unto death. A wonderful, reassuring, and encouraging letter! I wonder if we would think so if we found ourselves in their situation. Probably so. Historically speaking, Revelation has always spoken most powerfully to people in trouble. Maybe you think that leaves us out. I do not.

John is not kidding, of course, and the Christians at Smyrna are not feeling sorry for themselves. Living for Christ is the greatest thing they have ever known or heard about. Though they look small and helpless on the outside, they see themselves as part of a Kingdom and a TRUTH far greater and more important than Smyrna or Rome. Indeed, they end up having a great impact on their city and, despite their circumstances and situation, more and more people join them. A few generations later, Smyrna will become a great Christian center in Asia.

W.R. Maltby reminds us that Christ promised three things to His followers:

They would be in constant trouble.  
They would be fearless.  
They would be absurdly happy.

Some of us keep wanting to pick two out of the three. But it is a total package. If we leave out one, we lose the other two.

The early Christians tried to be exemplary citizens. They were very seldom guilty of the crimes for which they died. But times had changed since Paul had advised a blanket cooperation with civil authorities. (Romans 13:1) There was a point they would not go beyond in claiming allegiance to the state or cooperation with the political powers of their time. Perhaps the structures and systems of our time are sufficiently redeemed to take modern Christians off this hook, but I confess to a certain uneasiness on this matter. I wonder if any of you sometimes feel it too. Do you ever wonder, as I wonder, if the Christian church has missed a turn somewhere back down the road, or maybe just talked itself into an easier, softer way? I know; people can get killed trying to change the world's ways. And they do not even have to go that far; they can get into terrible trouble just trying to take the Christian Life to heart. Being busy living the Christian Life, we do not always have time to go along with all the ways of the society around us. Is that not what happens whenever and wherever Christ's people are sincerely faithful? That is precisely what makes me uneasy. How much trouble – how much fear of poverty or threat of death – would it take to make us start softening our commitment and backing away from our allegiance to our Savior?

I am not accusing any of you of having an easy life. I have been around long enough to know better than that. But the Way of Christ often *does* appear to be nebulous, easy, unfocused, and undemanding among many of Christ's named followers in our time. Thankfully, I do know many individual exceptions. But why is it so "individual"? Is it that we do not recognize a common enemy – like Rome? Or is it that we do not recognize a common Lord – like Jesus Christ?

As predicted, things did get worse for the Christians at Smyrna. I will tell only one story:

Once each year, every Roman citizen was required to burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar. Having done so, that person was free to worship any god in any way that he pleased. Having burned the incense, the person was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty. In all likelihood, that certificate was “the mark of the beast” that Revelation dramatizes later in the book. The certificate read as follows: “We the representatives of the Emperor, Serenos and Hermas, have seen you sacrificing.” And it gave the date. That was it. No big deal. Politically speaking, it was simply a loyalty oath. No problem. Religiously speaking, the Christians said, “NO WAY! We do not recognize Caesar as our god – never mind equal to Christ.” Sacred words had taken root and were now too strong within them: *“You shall have no other gods before me.” “You cannot serve two Masters.”*

The edict was enforced with varying degrees of enthusiasm in different regions and cities of the Empire. As you might guess, no city was more zealous than Smyrna in enforcing the edict. So the Christians in Smyrna were under serious pressure unless they conformed to the attitudes and atmosphere around them.

Years after Revelation was written, a man named Polycarp became the Christian bishop of Smyrna. One Sabbath Day after the games in the stadium were finished, a hue and cry went up against Polycarp. The crowd dragged him into the stadium. “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods – the one who teaches many to not offer sacrifice or worship.” What it all boiled down to, eventually, was this: “Polycarp, if you do not burn incense to the Emperor, we are going to burn *you!*”

Polycarp answered, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

So the crowd went out and gathered wood, built a big pyre, and put Polycarp on top of it. They waited to see if this would change his mind. “It is well,” said Polycarp. “I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will.”

So they lit the bonfires and, as the flames leapt high, Polycarp was heard to say, “I thank thee that thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of witnesses, in the cup of thy Christ.” He knew, didn’t he? *“Those who are victorious cannot be harmed by the second death.”*

Being much younger when I first heard this story, I thought it a very hard and bad way to die. Since then it has occurred to me that many of us die in far worse and harder circumstances, and for far more foolish reasons. Are you – am I – afraid of poverty, persecution, death, or dying? Does “fear” control our behavior, our choices, our attitudes? Does “fear” keep us from living with all-out devotion for our Lord?

Chip loaned me a book the other day called *Grandfather* by Tom Brown, Jr. Tom’s grandfather was born in the 1880s – a Lipan Apache. The book tells some of the teachings his grandfather passed on to his grandsons, and how and where he got them. Chapter ten tells of his going into Death Valley in the summertime to see if he could become one with the desert. A few quotes:

“The goal of getting there, no matter where there was, became more important than the pain, even more important than death.” (page 178)

“His quest to find answers, his search for the truth, ultimately led him to the near edge of death. Even though he knew that he was going to ultimately die, he did not care, for all he wanted was to find what he was looking for. If the search cost him his life, then he would not have died in vain.” (page 179)

“Grandfather always believed that if his life quests were not worth giving up his life for, then the quest itself was not worthwhile. All too many people go through life dedicated to nothing that they would die for, and to him, that was not really living at all.... His seeking many times would lead him to the edge of death, but it was at this edge that the most profound lessons would be learned. Many times this was the only way they could be learned.” (page 182)

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Some of you may be interested in a couple of the Smyrna letter’s finer points:

- The persecution is to last ten days. John speaks the language of numbers, and ten is the number of political power. The persecution will be severe, and it will last while the political power of Rome has its day. But ten cannot last. That is part of the temporal meaning of ten – it will end. The power will fall and the persecution will end. You cannot fight the power of ten with physical force – it is too strong. But you *can* outlast

it. The power of ten is huge but temporary. Of course, when *we* have the power of ten, that is also temporary.

- The crown of life is really a victory wreath (*stephanos*, not *diadema*). The victory wreath is given to the athlete who wins the games. It does not make the athlete the king of the nation. Remember that the acropolis on Mount Pagus was known as “the victor’s wreath” of Smyrna? John’s letter is saying: “The victory wreath of LIFE that Christ gives us is far better than any honors the city of Smyrna has ever known or heard of.”

- For Ephesus, the main message was: “Return to your first love.” What is the major message to Smyrna? “Be faithful ’til death.” Go on doing what you are already doing. Hang in. *Persevere*. This is a word we never expect to hear. Over the years, I have learned that it is one of the most difficult answers we ever get to prayer. And it is the guidance we most easily miss. We know we are not perfect; we expect to be corrected; we long for excitement and new challenges. If the coach doesn’t tell us to do something new, we wonder if maybe he doesn’t know his business – and we are quite likely to go looking for a new coach.

Sometimes the Spirit says, “If you will just keep doing what you are doing – keep it steady, hang in – I can do marvelous things with the effort you are now making. You are on track, or close enough, and it just takes time for it to grow and develop. The newness is already embodied in your present efforts; it just needs time to take effect. Please do not keep digging up the seeds to see if they are growing. Keep doing what you are doing.”

But when God says, “Stay faithful – keep on keeping on,” we think we haven’t heard anything. It doesn’t rattle the brain waves with new visions. Conversion, by definition, means we were heading in the wrong direction. It may be devastating in some ways, but it is also very exciting to be born anew. Everything changes dramatically – values, loyalties, direction, allegiance, awareness, identity, purpose. So then what does God do for encores? Fifteen or twenty or thirty years later, all the new disciplines have become our WAY of Life. So we go to God and say, “How come You don’t talk to me anymore in the exciting, miracle-working ways You did in the old days? Have I been abandoned? Don’t You love me anymore?” And God says, “Keep doing what you are doing. Please – for a human, you are being very faithful. We are accomplishing more than you realize. Hang in. Stay faithful!” And because we haven’t heard anything new, we think that nothing has happened.

So how do we make it register when God says, “Keep doing what you are doing”? You have to be very quiet – and very practiced, patient, and unhurried – to hear and feel the deep encouragement of the message to “Keep on doing what you are already doing.” Go on supporting your family, loving your children, cherishing your spouse, putting in an honest day’s labor. “Stay faithful, and I will give you the crown of life.” Our usual reply is, “But where are the dragons? I want to slay dragons!” And sometimes we rush off to do something “important” – and ruin what God has been building and was about to bring to fruition.

Don’t just do something – stand there! Stay faithful. No grandstanding. Jesus is the hero. John is careful how he writes – be careful how you read. We do not *win* the crown of life. Who do you think we are?! This is a very big crown, and way beyond our powers. *Jesus* wins the crown – and gives it to us because He loves us. Jesus is the hero. We are the support team. We are in for the long haul – one day at a time. Let Him figure it out and bring it all together, in His own good time. If you are Smyrna, that is the message. It is beautiful, but most humans miss it or mess it up.

That is enough of Smyrna. Time to get back to our church. Only, it is interesting that Smyrna is the only church among the seven that is called “faithful.” Smyrna is rich in the Spirit. Smyrna receives the highest commendation from the Lord. And Smyrna is very possibly the last church among the seven that any of us would willingly choose to be part of. Or maybe not. What do you think?