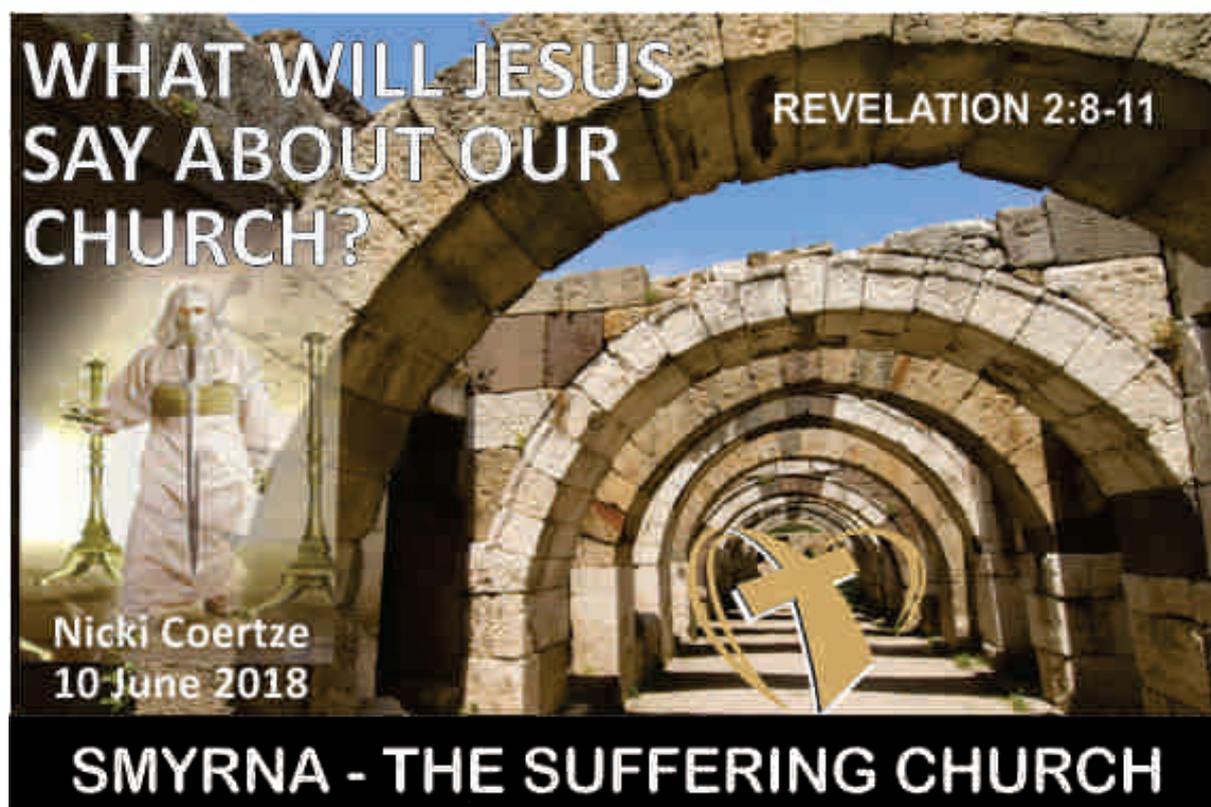


## WHAT WILL JESUS SAY ABOUT OUR CHURCH

### SMYRNA - THE SUFFERING CHURCH



#### Introduction

For three weeks we looked at the revelation of Christ as revealed to John. This vision of Christ was so awesome that John fell before His feet as though dead. I then mentioned that in chapter 2 & 3 we will see the individual characteristics applied to the 7 churches of Asia. With that in mind the rest of the churches of all ages through the book of Revelation can rest in these attributes. The Revelation of Christ according to verse 17-18 says: “<sup>17</sup> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup> and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

In today’s sermon we will see that statement applied to the church of Smyrna, which is the

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persecuted church.

As we look at the 7 churches we will notice that only the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia are not condemned for anything. Those two churches have not succumbed to the pressure of the hostility and the paganism in which they are embedded. They were lighthouses in a dark world of idolatry, paganism, and satanic philosophy.

We don't know when the church in Smyrna was founded specifically; perhaps during the three years that Paul was in Ephesus. Smyrna is 35-40 miles away from Ephesus and Paul could easily have planted this church during his stay at Ephesus. In Acts 19:10 (ESV) talks about Paul's ministry at Ephesus and says: "10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

It is never mentioned in the book of Acts. Yet, it was a remarkable church, a pure church.

We read about it in Revelation 2:8-11 (ESV) <sup>8</sup> "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

<sup>9</sup>

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

<sup>10</sup>

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

What does Jesus say about and to the church of Smyrna?

**1. He is the first and the last.**

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The introduction here: “The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.” Now remember that He was revealed as the First and the Last in chapter 1 and now He is applied as the First and the Last to the church in Smyrna. He is also the First and the Last for all churches and believers throughout the ages until Revelation 22 where He is revealed as the “Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End”.  
And so, He is the First and the Last for us.

So, Christ is introduced from the magnificent, unparalleled picture that is given of Him in chapter 1.

The First and the Last is a title given to God. If you go back to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12, you will read there that God calls Himself the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega, the eternal one, who always was and always will be, the First and the Last. This is used again in the book of Revelation with reference to Christ in the final chapter, 22:13 where He says: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”  
This is to speak of the eternity of God and the eternity of Christ. So, the letter is from the Lord of the church, from the eternal one, the eternal infinite God, already in existence when all things were created and remaining after all things are uncreated, transcending all time and all creation, the eternal God. Not only that, but who was dead, and has come to life. He died as a man for sin and now lives, risen to bring us justification.

Hebrews 7:16 (ESV) “<sup>16</sup> who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”  
Death could not hold Him. The body of Jesus died and went into the grave. The Son of God did not die, and by the power of that endless life, raised the body that did die in resurrection. Think about it. Here is Smyrna and any church or believer throughout the ages like them. They are beleaguered, poor, downtrodden, considered scum, hated, despised, feeling small and insignificant; under persecution, tribulation; facing the possibility of martyrdom, rejection from society, death and here they get a letter from the Lord without any criticism, without any condemnation. Instead He assures them that He is the eternal one who knows everything, that He died, but He rose, that ‘He is the beginning and the end’ and that their trials lie in His calendar, and that He holds the key of death and Hades. So, even if the worst happens to them, namely death, it could not hold them anymore than it held Christ. What a comfort, what an encouragement.

And as mentioned, it is as true for you and me today. Let's see what the First and the last knows about them.

## 2. He knows their tribulation.

Tribulation, persecution and suffering have been part of the church since the beginning. Even our great Saviour our Lord Jesus Christ suffered persecution and was put to death of our sake. Of all the original apostles, all but 1 died a martyr's death. Even though John died of natural causes, he suffered for Christ's sake on Patmos. Peter and Bartholomew were crucified upside down. Andrew died on an X shaped cross. Matthew died by the sword in Ethiopia. Thomas was pierced with a lance. Simon the Zealot was sawn in two. Matthias and Paul were beheaded. Phillip died by hanging.

One of the most shocking experiences for me was to visit the catacombs in Rome many years ago and to walk through the tunnels with skeletons lying in its walls, realising these were our brothers and sisters in Christ. All you need to do is to read Foxe's Book of Martyrs to know how the early Christians suffered.

In the upper room, John 16:33 (ESV) <sup>33</sup> ...In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Pauls says in 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV) <sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,"

When Peter wrote his epistle, he warned that there would come suffering in 1 Peter 2; then again in the 3rd chapter; then again in the 4th chapter; then again in the 5th chapter. He basically repeatedly said, "You're going to suuuuuuuffer." And he said, "You're going to suffer for godliness, you're going to suffer for righteousness sake." But he summed it all up in 1 Peter 5:10 (ESV) with the most beautiful words <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

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The fiercest persecution has the effect of perfecting, confirming, strengthening, and establishing the church. Persecution doesn't destroy the church, it makes it strong. James 1:1-4 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

<sup>2</sup>

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

<sup>3</sup>

for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

<sup>4</sup>

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Suffering produces perfection, so that we will be complete and lack nothing, even when it took place for them at the hands of a Caesar named Domitian. He was a murderous dictator who launched extensive persecutions against the church – blood baths. He launched them in the earliest years of the church in that very first century, and it moved throughout the Roman Empire, the Roman kingdom. And it came down with force in the city of Smyrna. All inhabitants were required to salute and proclaim that “Caesar is Lord” which Christians just could not do and “Jesus is Lord”. That could be a death sentence.

By the way the word Smyrna comes from the Greek word for Myrrh which represents mortal death. Myrrh was a sweet-smelling fragrance. Isn't it fitting that those who suffered for Christ's lives and deaths were a sweet-smelling fragrance to God. It is often in our trials that our true Christian fragrance is revealed.

### 3.□□ □ It is a poor church.

Revelation 2:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup>“I know ..... your poverty (but you are rich)”

This church is contrasted with the church of Laodicea who claimed to be rich, but Christ says they are poor. This church is poor, but Christ says they are rich.

This kind of poverty here is a Greek word that means they had nothing. It doesn't mean they were sort of a middle-class or lower-middle-class, they were the lowest of the low. That was part of the persecution. They didn't have human resources that Ephesus or Laodicea had, yet, they did not abandon their first love. They loved the Lord with zeal despite their lack. They loved the

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Lord unconditionally, not like we see today in the health, wealth and prosperity movement.

Smyrna as a city was a great city. Despite being 62 km inland, they had their own harbour linking them to the sea. Historians say that it was the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. It was called the crown of Asia Minor. Today it is a major city in Turkey called Izmir. Now what is interesting is that if you go to where Ephesus should be, you will find no city there. There is none. And you will find no church there as the Lord had removed the Golden Lampstand from the loveless church. Yet according to the best information I could find there are 250 churches in Izmir. Ephesus is gone, its harbour silted up; but Smyrna lives. And in Smyrna, there are still Christians.

Did you know that poverty should never reduce your love for God, or your commitment to the work of God, as riches is no indication of a love for God? Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter heaven. Riches often breed complacency and a trust in self and this world, especially when people do not own their riches, but their riches owns them. Let me show you what a poor church can do. Paul writes to the wealthier Corinthians and he tells them what the poorer Macedonians did for the ministry and why. He says in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (ESV) “<sup>1</sup> We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,

<sup>2</sup>

for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

<sup>3</sup>

For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord,

<sup>4</sup>

begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—

<sup>5</sup>

and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

Just like the churches in Macedonia, the church in Smyrna was poor, but rich!

**4.□□ □ It is a slandered church.**

<sup>9</sup> “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

These Christians were hated and slandered by two communities.

#### **4.1 They were slandered by the pagans.**

These poor people lived in a city of all kinds of pagan worship – which included Cybele, Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Zeus. All those deities had temples in Smyrna. Of significance though is that every year, every citizen of Smyrna had to burn incense to Caesar. Every year all inhabitants had to burn incense to Caesar on Caesar’s Altar and receive a certificate that you had done that. Without a certificate, you would be persecuted because you were violating the highest law in Smyrna. Without it you ran the risk of discovery and death. Obviously, these Christians refused to burn incense at Caesars altar, or to worship the pagan gods and this became a stigma. And we all know that when people find reason to slander you, ten other reasons get added. There is the saying that while truth battles to get its bootstraps on, the lie has gone around the world 10 times. Slander goes in at one ear and out at 100 mouths. The city of Smyrna joined hands with the Romans because they got out of the Romans what they wanted. The Romans hated Christianity, so they hated Christianity.

#### **4.2 They were slandered by the Jews.**

There was another community in Smyrna that hated Christianity, it was the Jewish community. The Jews repeatedly informed the authorities of Smyrna against Christians and incited the local government to attack them. They were under all kinds of pressure. But our Lord speaks to them in a commending way in verse 9 – look at it: <sup>9</sup> “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

What a statement about the Jews. They had always been a synagogue of God, always. They would celebrate the fact that they worship the one true living God. They had rejected, however, their Messiah; and in rejecting their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, Judaism really demonstrated that it was as Satanic as emperor worship, or the worship of any other false god, or any false religion. They hated Christ; therefore, they hated God and they hated the people of God.

Paul says in Romans 2:28-29 (ESV) “<sup>28</sup> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”  
So, not all Jews are real Jews, or true Jews.

So, there were these Christ-hating, gospel-hating Jewish people. Synagogues in the town became synagogues of Satan and came against the true believers. The hatred of the Jews for Christians is a familiar thing in the book of Acts. You see it in chapter 13 at Antioch. You see it in chapter 14 at Iconium and Lystra. You see it in Acts 17 at Thessalonica. The Jews persecuted Christians; they were brutal to them. In Smyrna, there was a significant Jewish population, and they poisoned the minds of the leaders and the people against the Christians.

## 5.1.1 Three-fold survival plan.

“<sup>10</sup> Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.”

### 5.1 Fear not!

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So, the command in verse 10: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”

Satan is like a roaring lion, seeking to attack this church. Some of them were to face imprisonment which will test them. It will obviously be on false charges whether political or religious. The reference to 10 days is difficult as it could be referring to only 10 days in prison or be symbolic for a short period. Some will die. But Christ says fear not. Like Psalm 56:11 (ESV)

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11

in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

We know that the persecution lasted for 50-60 years until Polycarp their pastor was tortured to death.

I believe they also knew the words of Christ in Matthew 5:10-12 (ESV) <sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11  
“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12  
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

### 5.2 ☐ ☐ Be faithful.

“<sup>10</sup> Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

How long must believers be faithful? Unto death. The bible is full of statements that Christians must endure, endure and endure. This is the great truth of perseverance. If you endure, you are a true believer. Matthew 24:13 (ESV) “<sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” True faith survives. True faith endures. True faith is proven by persecution. Matthew 10:22 (ESV)

“  
22

and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

True believers go through it all. They go through it triumphantly. They go through it victoriously. Christian, we need to believe it. Death will never steal your crown of life. The only thing that can

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steal your crown of life is when we refuse to endure to the end. What is the crown of life? The crown is eternal life. Faithfulness and endurance will be rewarded as God is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

### 5.3 Listen carefully.

“<sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

Listen carefully – open thine ears – luister – mamela. He who overcomes – overcomes all threats, all persecution, all hostility, all tribulation, all attacks, all deaths – all slander, will not be hurt by the second death. You may die the first death – that’s physical death. You will never experience the second death – that’s spiritual death – if you are an overcomer. Born once, die twice, born twice, die once. That means, if you are born physically and born again, you will not taste the second death.

What is the second death? Revelation 21:8 (ESV) “<sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”  
These are people outside of Christ who still live in this lifestyle by habit, by nature.

Who are the overcomers or conquerors? 1 John 5:4-5 (ESV) “<sup>4</sup> For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

If you have true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will overcome. If we are in Christ, some of us will be saved as through fire, because we are still sinners, simply saved by grace, but in Christ

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we are saved as there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And so, we meet a poor little rich church – crushed, persecuted, slandered, fragrant, victorious. In the end, martyred, imprisoned, but everlastingly victorious; eternally triumphant, willing to die once, but never to die twice. If you have ears, hear this message.

Amen!  
Soli Deo Gloria  
Logos Community Church – 10 June 2018