

SMYRNA: SUFFERING SAINTS
Rev 2:8-11 (17 February 2002)
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr.

The Winter Olympic Games are in full swing. As most folks know, the games originated in ancient Greece. What is not as well known is the fact that the first festivals consisted of various contests in athletics, poetry, and music. These contests were held every four years at Olympia in honor of Zeus. Today, we think of the Olympic Games as an international athletic competition. Such a competition was first held at Athens in 1896.

In the New Testament, there is a Greek word—στέφανος (*stephanos*)—which means “wreath” or “crown.” Frequently, the allusion is to the prize of athletic victory, the wreath or laurel that was given to the triumphant athlete. Our modern equivalent is the gold medal. It is interesting to note that in the early days of Christianity there is the common Christian image of the martyr as an athlete who wins his or her “crown” in the arena. In Rev 2:10, the risen Christ promises a “crown of life” to those in Smyrna who overcome. But . . . I am getting ahead of myself.

The seven cities who were the recipients of the Book of Revelation formed a natural postal route from Ephesus up the coast to Smyrna and Pergamum, and from there inland by the imperial road to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. This is the route contemplated in the Apostle John’s vision, even though it is impossible to prove that the Book of Revelation actually circulated in this fashion.

In any case, the first three cities—Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum—were the three greatest cities in the Roman province of Asia, and—not surprisingly—they were rivals for power and prestige. Smyrna (modern Izmir) was a large port city located forty miles north of Ephesus with a population in New Testament times of about 200,000. Smyrna was a proud and beautiful city. On its coins, it made the claim to being the “first city of Asia in size and beauty.”

Some three to four hundred years after Smyrna had been destroyed, the city was rebuilt in 290 B.C. as a model city. It boasted a famous stadium, library, and the largest public theater in Asia. It claimed to be the birthplace of the great epic poet Homer. A famous thoroughfare called the “Street of Gold” curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor) like a necklace on the statue of a goddess. At either end was a temple, one to a local variety of Cybele and the other to Zeus. The acropolis on Mt. Pagus was called the “crown of Smyrna.”

The city sustained a special relationship to Rome and the imperial cult. During the period when Rome was engaged in a struggle for supremacy against the Carthaginian Empire (roughly 265-146 B.C.), Smyrna had placed itself squarely on the side of the Romans; and in 195 B.C., it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of the goddess Roma (*Dea Roma*). Later, in 23 B.C., Smyrna won permission—over ten other Asian cities—to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. *This strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to Christianity made it extremely difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna.*

Now, we are ready to read the risen Christ's message to the church in Smyrna as we have it in Rev 2:8-11.

^{Rev 2:8}“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

⁹“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (NRSV).

Jesus' message to Smyrna highlights contrasts: the one who is “first and last,” who was dead but came to life, speaks to those who are poor yet rich, who are persecuted by those who claim to be Jews but are not, and who will, like Jesus, find life in death.

The Smyrneans faced the perils of persecution and poverty. Their persecution was—in the words of one Bible scholar—“the burden that crushes,” and their poverty was *not* the poverty of those who have little, but was the poverty of those who have nothing at all. In the antagonistic environment of Smyrna, it would have been hard for the Christian to make a living, and so many were economically destitute. It is also likely that they were the victims of mob violence and looting (cf. Heb 10:34). But their poverty was only a material poverty; spiritually they were rich. The Apostle James, in Jas 2:5, wrote to a similar group of people and said that “God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith.”

There was yet another peril the Smyranean Christians faced—the slanderous accusations of hostile Jews. This slander most likely refers to “informers,” or in modern lingo what we would call “snitches,” “tattle-tells,” “squealers,” “whistle-blowers.” Roman officials normally depended on informers as accusers before they would prosecute a case, and we have historical reports of Jews collaborating with Romans and Gentiles to oppress Christians. The specific accusations of Jews before government authorities were probably that Christians were: (1) Trouble-makers—they were upsetting the peace of the *status quo*. The Jews were angered by the success of the Christians in evangelizing God-fearers and even some within Judaism. (2) Heretics—the Christians were not a Jewish sect at all, but a bunch of blasphemers who worshipped a crucified criminal. (3) Traitors—the Christians refused to pay homage to Caesar as Lord. In a city like Smyrna with its strong ties to Rome, it would be a fairly simple matter to incite the authorities to action.

Such Jews were not real Jews. We should understand this in the sense of Rom 2:28-29, where the Apostle Paul states that “a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly . . . [but] . . . a person is a Jew who is one inwardly.” Like the Jews of John 8:31-47 who claimed to be descendants of Abraham but were, in fact, “from their father the devil,” the hostile Jews of Smyrna were, in fact, “a synagogue of Satan.” Regardless of their national descent, such Jews had become—by their bitter opposition to Christ and His church—a synagogue carrying out the work of Satan.

Now, having established what the biblical text *does* say, I need to explain what it does *not* say. “Synagogue of Satan” is strong language (and some of you will remember when the Ayatollah Khomeini stirred up the people of Iran by calling America “the great Satan”), and such words have proved all too easy to exploit in the later history of the church. As we have seen, *these words were originally a protest against a dominant Jewish community oppressing a Christian minority*. However, the language has been recycled in the interests of later so-called “Christian” regimes to persecute Jewish minorities, and it continues to play a prominent role in the propaganda of violent Aryan supremacists in the United States today. Contemporary white supremacists aligned with the Christian Identity Movement claim that people of color are mud people and Jews are the literal offspring of Satan and Eve. There is, however, a growing “moderate” faction which claims that while the Jews are satanic, they are not Satan’s literal descendants. The extreme white supremacists keep themselves heavily armed as they await their Armageddon against the Jewish-controlled government of the United States, after which they plan to establish a new Jerusalem here. *All I have time to say in this lesson is that such reasoning and rhetoric are in complete contradiction of scripture*. It is wrong to recycle biblical denunciations in racist ways. The issue was not then, and is not now, a matter of *race*; but a matter of *religion*. It is a matter of whether or not a person believes in Jesus as God’s Messiah and God’s Son. In the Book of Revelation, the triumphant and transcendent Lamb of God—Jesus Christ—is praised because “You [Jesus Christ] were slaughtered and by Your blood You ransomed for God saints from *every tribe and language and people and nation*” (5:9; cf. 7:9; 14:6). A gospel that is not good enough for everyone is not good enough for anyone!

Verse 10 envisions official persecution on the local level that will likely end in execution. The Smyrnan Christians were exhorted to “be faithful even to the point of death,” and they were encouraged by the promises of “the crown of life” (v. 10) and safety from “the second death” (v. 11). Like Daniel and his friends who underwent a ten-day test (Dan 1:8-17), the Christians in Smyrna were to be “tested” for ten days so that God might ultimately exalt them to fulfill His purposes in history. “The second death” was a Jewish rabbinic phrase for the annihilation of the wicked in the next world.

The reward for faithfulness is “the crown of life,” which means the crown that is life itself. In addition to being a prize for athletic achievements, the crown was also a symbol of honor awarded for civil service or for military accomplishments. Furthermore, the crown may be an allusion to Smyrna’s physical appearance, suggested by the circle of colonnaded buildings on the crest of Mt. Pagus called “the crown of Smyrna.” There is something else that I find fascinating about the imagery of “the crown.” In the New Testament, the Greek word *παρουσία* (*parousia*) often refers to the coming of Christ; or as we tend to say, the Second Coming of Christ. But this word was also the official term for the coming of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province. At the official visit of a human ruler, it was the custom to present him a crown as a token of allegiance. *Unlike earthly sovereigns who expected to receive a crown at their coming, Christ will Himself give a crown to those who have continued faithful to the end*. When Christ comes, instead of demanding a crown from His people, He will deliver a crown to His people!

In A.D. 156, the Jews of Smyrna were responsible for one of the most famous martyrdoms in history. It was a festival day, and the cry went up to seize Polycarp the

Christian bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp was given the choice—worship Caesar or die. The Jews led the shouts of the mob: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.” Again, he was given the choice—sacrifice to Caesar or be burned. He gave his immortal answer: “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Although it was the Sabbath day, the Jews gathered fuel for the fire. As the flames licked his body, he prayed his great prayer: “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 the martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ.” And so Polycarp received the crown of life.

Live to die or die to live—those were the choices facing the Christians in ancient Smyrna. And these are the same two choices facing us today. The question, then, is this: *What is Jesus worth to you?* It is my prayer that we will listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and that we will always be faithful—even to the point of receiving the crown of life.

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