

# DEAR CHURCH,

## Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation

### Bible Fellowship Discussion Guide

#### To the Church in Smyrna - Revelation 2:8-11

##### Open It

1. What were some of your biggest fears as a child?
2. What is the most hurtful thing anyone has ever done to you because of something you stood for?

##### Explore It

1. Who was addressing John? What church was the subject of this letter? (2:8)
2. What kind of contrast did Jesus draw? (2:9)
3. What did Jesus say to comfort the Christians in Smyrna? (2:10)
4. What prophetic warning did Christ give to the church in Smyrna? (2:10)
5. How long would the church in Smyrna suffer? (2:10)
6. What challenge did Christ give His audience? (2:10)
7. What reward was promised the Christians at Smyrna if they hung on? (2:10)
8. Who else did Jesus say could benefit from the message to the church at Smyrna? (2:11)
9. What final promise was made to "him who overcomes"? (2:11)

##### Get It

1. What is significant about the title Christ gave Himself ("the First and the Last, who died and came to life again")?
2. How can a person in poverty be considered rich?
3. In your view, which is worse—physical or verbal persecution? Why?
4. If you had been in Smyrna about to suffer for your faith, how comforted would you feel with this revelation from Christ?
5. What kinds of persecution do Christians face today in the US?, in other parts of the world?
6. What kinds of persecution do you think would most tempt you to deny Christ?
7. What kinds of persecution have you faced for your faith?
8. How can the eternal promises of God give us courage and strength in the face of attacks on our stand for Christ?

##### Apply It

1. What are some ways you can express your thanks to God today for the riches you enjoy?
2. What steps can you take today to build your courage against persecution?
3. How can you show faithfulness to Christ in the week ahead?



## **Brief Commentary on Revelation 2:8-11**

*By Matthew Henry*

Our Lord Jesus is the First, for by him were all things made; he was before all things, with God, and is God himself. He is the Last, for he will be the Judge of all. As this First and Last, who was dead and is alive, is the believer's Brother and Friend, he must be rich in the deepest poverty, honourable amidst the lowest abasement, and happy under the heaviest tribulation, like the church of Smyrna. Many who are rich as to this world, are poor as to the next; and some who are poor outwardly, are inwardly rich; rich in faith, in good works, rich in privileges, rich in gifts, rich in hope. Where there is spiritual plenty, outward poverty may be well borne; and when God's people are made poor as to this life, for the sake of Christ and a good conscience, he makes all up to them in spiritual riches.

Christ arms against coming troubles. Fear none of these things; not only forbid slavish fear, but subdue it, furnishing the soul with strength and courage. It should be to try them, not to destroy them. Observe, the sureness of the reward; "I will give thee:" they shall have the reward from Christ's own hand. Also, how suitable it is; "a crown of life:" the life worn out in his service, or laid down in his cause, shall be rewarded with a much better life, which shall be eternal. The second death is unspeakably worse than the first death, both in the agonies of it, and as it is eternal death: it is indeed awful to die, and to be always dying. If a man is kept from the second death and wrath to come, he may patiently endure whatever he meets with in this world.

# Extensive Background on Revelation 2:8-11

By Enduring Word Commentary - *David Guzik*

## Jesus' letter to the church at Smyrna.

### 1. (8a) The character of the city of Smyrna.

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

a. Smyrna: This was a large, beautiful, and proud city. It was a center of learning and culture, and was proud of its standing as a city. “Smyrna was an outstandingly beautiful city. It claimed to be the ‘Glory of Asia.’” (Barclay)

b. Smyrna: This was a rich city. “Smyrna was a great trade city... Smyrna stood at the end of the road which served the valley of the river Hermus, and all the trade of that valley flowed into its markets and found an outlet through its harbor. It had a specially rich trade in wines. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a city of wealth and commercial greatness.” (Barclay)

c. Smyrna: We also know from history that it was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor. On one famous street in Smyrna, called the “Golden Street,” stood magnificent temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and a great temple to Zeus – but the worship of those pagan gods was dying out. The real focus was on the worship of the Roman Emperor.

i. In 196 b.c. Smyrna built the first temple to Dea Roma – the goddess of Rome, the spiritual symbol of the Roman Empire. Once the “spirit” of Rome was worshipped, it wasn’t much of a step to worship the dead Emperors of Rome. Then it was only another small step to worship the living Emperors, and then to demand such worship as a evidence of political allegiance and civic pride.

ii. In a.d. 23 Smyrna won the privilege (over 11 other cities) to build the first temple to worship the Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna was a leading city in the Roman cult of Emperor worship.

iii. The Roman Emperor Domitian (a.d. 81-96) was the first to demand worship under the title “Lord” from the people of the Roman Empire as a test of political loyalty. According to ancient church history, it was under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision.

iv. “Emperor worship had begun as spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, the final step was taken and Caesar worship became compulsory. Once a year the Roman citizen must burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar; and having done so, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty.” (Barclay)

v. "All that the Christians had to do was to burn that pinch of incense, say, 'Caesar is Lord,' receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not even formally conform." (Barclay)

## **2. (8b) Jesus describes Himself to the church at Smyrna.**

'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:

a. The First and the Last: Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:11, 1:17) to speak of His eternal character. The First and the Last are titles that belong only to the LORD, Yahweh, according to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12.

b. Who was dead, and came to life: Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:18) to remind the Christians in Smyrna that they served the risen Lord, victorious over death. Death could not hold Jesus, and it cannot hold His people.

i. The association with death – and the victory of resurrection – is throughout this letter. The name Smyrna comes from the word myrrh, a sweet-smelling perfume used in embalming dead bodies.

## **3. (9) What Jesus knows about the Christians in Smyrna.**

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

a. I know your works: Jesus knew the works of the church in Ephesus also (Revelation 2:2). In Smyrna, Jesus also knew their works, tribulation, and poverty. He knows these hardships both in the sense that He saw what happened to them, and in the sense that He knew their hardships by His personal experience.

i. Poverty: According to history, Smyrna was a prosperous city. Yet the Christians there were poor. "The word used for 'poverty' is the word for abject poverty. They were not just poor." (Walvoord)

ii. The Christians of Smyrna knew poverty because they were robbed and fired from jobs in persecution for the gospel. Early Christians joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven (Hebrews 10:34). This kind of economic persecution was one important reason why Christians were poor in Smyrna. Even today, this is a common form of persecution against Christians.

b. I know the blasphemy: Jesus knew the abuse these Christians endured at the hands of "religious" men, those who say they are Jews and are not.

i. Historically, we are told there was a large and hostile community of Jews in Smyrna, but this tells us that a true Jew is one who trusts God and believes in Jesus Christ ([Philippians 3:3](#)). Others may be Jews ethnically – which still has its place before God – but they are not Jews spiritually before God.

c. I know... I know: In midst of this kind of affliction, it is easy to think God has forgotten – but Jesus knows.

#### **4. (9) What Jesus thinks about the church in Smyrna.**

But you are rich.

a. Rich: Every outward circumstance said that the Christians in Smyrna were poor, even destitute, but Jesus saw through the circumstances to see that they were really rich. “Sweet smelling Smyrna, the poorest but purest of the seven.” (Trapp)

b. Rich: This is what Jesus thought of them, and if Jesus considered them rich, then they were rich. Our estimation of ourselves is far less important than God’s estimation of us.

i. In contrast, the Christians at Laodicea thought they were rich, but they were really poor ([Revelation 3:17](#)). Laodicea was a poor rich church. Smyrna was a rich poor church. Better to be a rich poor church than a poor rich church.

c. And poverty (but you are rich): The contrast between material poverty and spiritual riches of the Christians in Smyrna reminds us that there is nothing inherently spiritual in being rich. Nevertheless, there is also nothing inherently spiritual in poverty.

i. Material riches are an obstacle to the Kingdom of God, an obstacle that some do not overcome ([Mark 10:23-25](#)). There is nothing wrong with having money; the trouble is that money so easily “has” us.

ii. Often, material riches are acquired and maintained at the expense of true spiritual riches. A story is told of the glory days of the Renaissance Papacy, when a man walked with the Pope and marveled at the splendors and riches of the Vatican. The Pope told him, “We no longer have to say what Peter told the lame man: ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” His companion replied, “But neither can you say, ‘rise up and walk.’”

d. Rich: The church at Smyrna was also rich in leadership. One of the pastors of that church was named Polycarp. He was one of the Apostle John’s disciples and served at Smyrna until a.d. 155 when he died heroically as a martyr.

## **5. (10) What Jesus wants the Christians in Smyrna to do.**

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

a. Do not fear: Literally, this is better translated “stop being afraid.” The Christians in Smyrna suffered under persecution, and they were afraid. Sometimes we think that Christians who endure persecution are almost super-human, and we sometimes don’t appreciate the depths of fear they struggle with. There were things which they were about to suffer, and Jesus wanted them ready to stand against those things.

b. The devil is about to throw some of you into prison: Here, Jesus described the nature of the persecution that would come against the Christians in Smyrna. Apparently, they would be imprisoned, and for a specific period of time (you will have tribulation ten days).

i. According to Jesus, the persecution about to come against the Christians of Smyrna was from the devil. At the same time it was measured and limited by God. Surely, the devil wanted to imprison them for a longer time, but God limited the tribulation to ten days.

ii. Being thrown into prison was severe persecution. In that day, prison was never used to rehabilitate someone, and rarely used to punish someone. Normally, you were thrown into prison as you awaited trial and execution.

iii. “For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna above all places, for a man to enter the Christian Church was literally to take his life in his hands. In Smyrna the church was a place for heroes.” (Barclay)

iv. “This ‘tribulation’ does not mean the common trials to which all flesh is heir. Some dear souls think they are bearing their cross every time they have a headache. The tribulation mentioned here is trouble they would not have had if they had not been Christians.” (Havner)

c. You will have tribulation ten days: Commentators on the Book of Revelation have long debated the meaning of these ten days.

i. Some think that Jesus really meant ten years of persecution. “As the days in this book are what is commonly called prophetic days, each answering to a year, the ten years of tribulation may denote ten years of persecution; and this was precisely the duration of the persecution under Diocletian, during which all the Asiatic Churches were grievously afflicted.” (Clarke)

ii. Others think that Jesus really meant persecution over the reign of ten Roman Emperors. “The first under Nero, a.d. 54; the second under Domitian, a.d. 81; the third under Trajan, a.d. 98; the fourth under Adrian [Hadrian], a.d. 117; the fifth under Septimus Severus, a.d. 193; the sixth under Maximin, a.d. 235; the seventh under Decius, a.d. 249; the eighth under Valerian, a.d. 254; the ninth under Aurelian, a.d. 270; the tenth under Diocletian, a.d. 284.” (White, cited in Walvoord)

iii. Still others take strange and confusing approaches: “Others observe, that in ten days are two hundred and forty hours, which make up the number of years from 85, when the second persecution began, (under which John at this time was) to 325, when all the persecutions ceased.” (Poole)

iv. Others say that ten days is simply an expression of speech: “The expression ten days is not to be taken literally; it is the normal Greek expression for a short time.” (Barclay)

v. However, there is no compelling reason to believe it means anything other than ten days of severe persecution, with an emphasis on the idea that it is a limited time.

d. That you may be tested: If this attack came from the devil, then why couldn't these Christians in Smyrna just rebuke Satan, and stop the attack? Because God had a purpose in their suffering, and so He allowed it. God uses suffering to purify (1 Peter 1:6-7), to make us like Jesus (Romans 8:17), and to make us truly witnesses of Him. In all ages, the blood of the martyrs has been seed for the church.

i. “The saints at Smyrna had not been given a pep-talk on ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People.’ They had no testimony on ‘How Faith Made Me Mayor of Smyrna.’ They were not promised deliverance from tribulation, poverty and reviling. In fact, the worst was yet to come.” (Havner)

ii. Most specifically in this case, God allowed this attack so that they may be tested, in the sense of being proven. Through their suffering, God displayed the true riches of the church in Smyrna to everyone, including themselves – even though He knew they were rich already.

iii. The Christians in Smyrna would be tested, but they passed the test. This church, compared to the other six, has no evil spoken against it. Only this church among the seven survives today, and it has survived through centuries of Roman and Muslim persecution.

iv. That you may be tested: God is also interested in testing us. We may not have the same opportunity to suffer for Jesus that the Christians in Smyrna had, but we can have their same heart. We may never be in a place to die a martyr's death, but we can all live a martyr's life. Sadly, many Christians avoid persecution of any kind by conforming so much to the world that they are no longer distinctively Christians. This wasn't the case with the Christians in Smyrna. They were tested and they passed the test.

e. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life: What Jesus said to this church is important, but what He didn't say is also important. Jesus didn't have a single word of rebuke or correction for the Christians in Smyrna. All He had was the promise of a crown – and the encouragement to be faithful until death, which is literally “become faithful until death.” (Walvoord)

i. There are two different words for crown in the ancient Greek language. One described the kind of crown a king would wear, a crown of royalty. The other kind of crown – the stephanos, used here – is given as a trophy to a winning athlete. Jesus looks at the Christians of Smyrna, and says to them: “You are My winners. You deserve a trophy.”

ii. The stephanos was also the crown worn at marriages and special celebrations. The picture is of Jesus and His bride, each wearing their crowns.

iii. The promise of a crown was especially meaningful for the Christians of Smyrna.

- The city of Smyrna had a “crown” of beautiful buildings at the top of Mt. Pagos.

- In Smyrna, worshippers of pagan gods wore crowns.

- In that culture, good citizens and winning athletes received crowns.

iv. Jesus promised a special crown – the crown of life. A champion athlete received a crown of leaves, which would soon get brown and die. Jesus' champions receive the crown of life.

v. “A crown without cares, corivals, envy, end. Kings' crowns are so weighty with cares, that oft they make their heads ache. Not so with this crown; the joys whereof are without measure or mixture.” (Trapp)

## **6. (11a) A general exhortation to all whom will hear.**

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

a. He who has an ear: Though the Spirit has something to say to us through every one of the churches, this letter to the Christians in Smyrna may apply least of all to modern, western Christians. To this point, we simply don't face the kind of persecution the Christians in Smyrna experienced. Polycarp was a remarkable example of both the persecution and the courage of early Christians.



i. The year after Polycarp returned from Rome, a great persecution came upon the Christians of Smyrna. His congregation urged him to leave the city until the threat blew over. So, believing that God wanted him to be around a few more years, Polycarp left the city and hid out on a farm belonging to some Christian friends. One day on the farm, as he prayed in his room, Polycarp had a vision of his pillow engulfed in flames. He knew what God said to him, and calmly told his companions, "I see that I must be burnt at the stake."

ii. Meanwhile, the chief of police issued a warrant for his arrest. They seized one of Polycarp's servants and tortured him until he told them where his master was. Towards evening, the police chief and a band of soldiers came to the old farmhouse. When the soldiers found him, they were embarrassed to see that they had come to arrest such an old, frail man. They reluctantly put him on a donkey and walked him back to the city of Smyrna.

iii. On the way to the city, the police chief and other government officials tried to persuade Polycarp to offer a pinch of incense before a statue of Caesar and simply say "Caesar is Lord." That's all he had to do, and he would be off the hook. They pleaded with him to do it, and escape the dreadful penalties. At first Polycarp was silent, but then he calmly gave them his firm answer: no. The police chief was now angry. Annoyed with the old man, he pushed him out of his carriage and onto the hard ground. Polycarp, bruised but resolute, got up and walked the rest of the way to the arena.

iv. The horrid games at the arena had already begun in earnest and a large, bloodthirsty mob gathered to see Christians tortured and killed. One Christian named Quintis boldly proclaimed himself a follower of Jesus and said he was willing to be martyred, but when he saw the vicious animals in the arena, he lost courage and agreed to burn the pinch of incense to Caesar as Lord. Another young man named Germanicus didn't back down. He marched out and faced the lions and died an agonizing death for his Lord Jesus. Ten other Christians gave their lives that day, but the mob was unsatisfied. They cried out, "Away with the atheists who do not worship our gods!" To them, Christians were atheists because they did not recognize the traditional gods of Rome and Greece. Finally, the crowd started chanting "Bring out Polycarp."

v. When Polycarp brought his tired body into the arena, he and the other Christians heard a voice from heaven. It said, "Be strong, Polycarp, play the man." As he stood before the proconsul, they tried one more time to get him to renounce Jesus. The proconsul told Polycarp to agree with the crowd and shout out "Away with the atheists!" Polycarp looked sternly at the bloodthirsty mob, waved his hand towards them and said, "Away with those atheists!" The proconsul persisted. "Take the oath and revile Christ and I'll set you free!" Polycarp answered, "For eighty-six years I've served Jesus; how dare I now revile my King?" The proconsul finally gave up, and announced to the crowd the crime of the accused: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian."

vi. The crowd shouted, "Let the lions loose!" but the animals had already been put away. The crowd then demanded that Polycarp be burnt. The old man remembered the dream about the burning pillow, and took courage in God. He said to his executioners, "It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will."

vii. They arranged a great pile of wood and set up a pole in the middle. As they tied Polycarp to the pole, he prayed: "I thank You that You have 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 Your Christ." After he prayed and gave thanks to God, they set the wood ablaze. A great wall of flame shot up to the sky, but it never touched Polycarp. God set a hedge of protection between him and the fire. Seeing that he would not burn, the executioner, in a furious rage, stabbed the old man with a long spear. Immediately, streams of blood gushed from his body and seemed to extinguish the fire. When this happened, witnesses said they saw a dove fly up from the smoke into heaven. At the very same moment, a church leader in Rome named Iraenus, said he heard God say to him, "Polycarp is dead." God called his servant home.

b. Nevertheless, the day of martyrs is definitely not past. All over the world, Christians face persecution, especially in Asia, Eastern Europe, and in the Muslim world. Some people estimate that more Christians have suffered and died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in all previous centuries combined.

i. A May 1994 news item illustrates this: The gruesome martyrdom of a pastor in central India led to several hundred conversions to Christianity. A former Hindu who had changed his name to Paul James was murdered by a crowd of extremists as he spoke in a field prior to a Feb. 20 church service in the Phulabani district.

"Jesus, forgive them," eyewitnesses said James called out as his assailants cut off his hands and legs, and severed his torso. The attackers also decapitated James, an outspoken believer who had planted 27 churches. The murder has drawn heavy media attention in the area, which is charged with Hindu-Muslim tensions. Some, but not all, of James' assailants reportedly have been caught.

The attackers' hatred and violence have left many Indians wanting to emulate the love shown by the victim, said K. Anand Paul, head of Gospel to the Unreached Millions. "The gospel is spreading because of persecution," said Paul, who has been beaten seven times and kidnapped once by fanatical religious groups. "We are risking our lives to do this. People need to pray for us." (National and International Religion Report, May 2, 1994)

## 7. (11b) The promise of a reward.

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

a. He who overcomes: This was a promise for overcomers. This promise is for those who overcome the threat of persecution, and the presence of persecution.

i. We might say that we overcome by our close association with Jesus, who is the ultimate overcomer. As Jesus said, In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

b. Shall not be hurt by the second death: Those who overcome in Jesus will never be hurt by the second death. The second death is hell, the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14 and 21:8). Though Satan threatened and attacked their life, Jesus promises His overcomers that death is conquered for them.

i. “The second death was a Jewish rabbinic expression for the total extinction of the utterly wicked.” (Barclay)

ii. “All men died, but all are not killed with death... Oh, it is a woeful thing to be killed with death.” (Trapp)