

# Shadows Of Christ & His Bride

Lesson #28

Smyrna: The Persecuted Church 100 AD - 313 AD

July 31, 2024

Interesting results as we transition from the Church At Ephesus.

1. Persecution is the outgrowth of the faithful witness of the Church at Ephesus.

Christ to Smyrna: I know thy tribulation and poverty.

Christ prophesies: Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried, and you shall have tribulation 10 days.

Key: Persecution will be keen and strong when there is real separation and sanctification.

The church which suffers persecution becomes purged; then becomes pure.

Hypocrites don't stick around to be persecuted. Persecution, trials, tribulation and suffering will destroy false faith, but those same things will strength true faith.

2. Judaizer teachers crept in as the result of the Ephesian's loss of their First Love.

Christ to Smyrna: I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

Key: When we leave our first love, we begin to turn towards the commandments of men.

Compare with the parable of the tares in Matthew 13:24-25

"Another parable put He forth unto them, saying,

The Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way."

- The Good Seed Was Sown.

The Church at Ephesus sowed this good seed. She was a faithful and true witness;

held the Word of God in its purity and preached it, in its power.

- While Men Slept

Ephesus left their first love. They were lethargic in spirit and became drowsy toward Christ.

- An Enemy Sowed The Tares

There are some who vainly imagine that the tares sowed in those early days [the Judaism that crept in unawares] was of short duration. Not so.

The wheat and the tares were to grow together unto the end of the age.

Liberalism and modernism are prominent in the very heart of church life. Such are the dire results of the church which left its first love.

Key: Jesus taught throughout His earthly ministry:

1. There would be a tribulation period second to none in the history and prophecy of this world.
2. All churches throughout every age would face impending tribulation and persecution for their faith during the entire church age.

John 16:33 In the world ye shall have tribulation, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

II Tim. 3:12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

Reminder: Each of the 7 letters is written to the universal, invisible church; to each local body of Christ and to each individual believer. Our works are being reviewed and emphasized.

The Smyrna Church era covers the period from 100 AD-313 AD, a period of Rome's intense persecution of the Church. Domitian, Caesar at the time of John's writing, was a murderous dictator who launched an extensive persecution against the church which intensified in Smyrna who suffered more than the other six churches.

Rev. 2:8-11 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

Note: Promises are made to "he who overcomes."

The promise is based on each one's conditional response to the message.

#### *Idyllic City with a Satanic Undertone*

- Located 35 miles north of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia on the Aegean Sea
- Population of 100,000 in 1<sup>st</sup> Century
- Beautiful seacoast resort town with excellent harbor in Turkey today called Izmir.
- Known for its safe harbors, it controlled the trade of the rich Hermus Valley and was a great, wealthy, and important city

Note: Jesus promised a "crown of life" for faithfulness unto death. This would have great significance to a resident of Smyrna. Thirty-five miles of a deep harbor traversed narrow foothills before Smyrna came into view. Behind the city rose Mount Pagos.

In the first century Smyrna's most majestic buildings sat high up on Mount Pagos.

Around the crest of Pagos they erected a number of pagan temples which formed a

"rough circle." As you sailed into its port, you would see what poets spoke of as

"the crown of Smyrna." The city fathers called it "the pride of Asia," "The Ornament."

The "street of the gods" lined with temples to Greek and Roman gods, beautiful ornate

buildings. The most famous street, the Street of Gold began with the Temple of Zeus and ended with the Temple of Cybele. It ran across the foothills of the Pagos at an angle.

- The buildings which encircled Mt. Pagos were the crown of Smyrna.

- The Street of Gold was the necklace round the hill.

Yet behind the beautiful city lurked a great evil...

the Satanic opposition to Christ in the whole of Asia.

## Idolatrous City

The credit for the resurrection of Smyrna belonged almost entirely to Rome.

The Roman statesman Cicero called Smyrna 'one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies'. In the campaign against Mithridates in the east, things had gone badly with Rome. When the soldiers of Rome were suffering from hunger and cold, the people of Smyrna stripped off their own clothes to send to them.

Such was the reverence of Smyrna for Rome that, as far back as 195 BC, it was the first city in the world to build a temple to the goddess Roma.

- In the minds of the first century citizens of Smyrna, it was due to their allegiance to Roma and to the gods of the empire that their life as a major city had been restored.

In AD 26, when the cities of Asia Minor were competing for the privilege of erecting a temple to the godhead of Tiberius, Smyrna was picked out for that honor, overcoming even Ephesus. Smyrna came under Roman control about 27 BC.

The citizens of Smyrna wanted the city to continue to be a place where the gods would show favor upon their faithful worshipers. They worshiped many pagan gods including Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Aesculapius, Cybele, Poseidon, Demeter, and later Caesar.

- They erected temples to all of them.

In response to the blessings bestowed upon it by Rome, Smyrna developed into a major center of cultic and emperor worship - a fanatical "religion" that later, under such emperors as Nero [ruled 54-68 A.D.] and Domitian [ruled 81-96 A.D.], brought on severe persecution for the early church.

## Industrious City

Aroma of Smyrna: A constant west wind caused a problem. Sewage drained into the gulf and the west wind blew it back into the city rather than out to the sea.

➤ Operated a trade in myrrh, an aromatic, resinous substance taken from a shrub-like tree. When a wound on a tree penetrates through the bark and into the sapwood, the tree secretes a resin. Myrrh gum is such a resin. Myrrh is harvested by repeatedly wounding the trees to bleed the gum, which is waxy and coagulates quickly. After the harvest, the gum becomes hard and glossy. The gum is yellowish and may be either clear or opaque. It darkens deeply as it ages, and white streaks emerge.

- Myrrh > Gives off a good smell when crushed or bruised even to death.
- Hebrew word for myrrh = The Greek word myrrha which was translated 'Smyrna' in the Septuagint [the Greek translation of the Old Testament]

Conclude: Smyrna = myrrh = when crushed or put to death = a pleasant aroma to God

Note: Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant and allowing the sap to "bleed," the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a sweet smelling fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God and devotion until death.

None of the other 7 cities were so stained with the blood of the martyrs like Smyrna. God permitted Satan to crush them to yield the sweetness of their aroma. They were never as Christ-like as when they were suffering.

Though it had a bitter taste, the resin of the tree was used in making:

1. Perfume Ps. 45:8a All thy garments smell of myrrh...

2. Ingredient in the anointing oil of the priests

Ex. 30:23 Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, even 250 shekels, and of sweet calamus 250 shekels.

3. Gifts for the King: Matt. 2:11 Wise men brought gold, frankincense and myrrh.

➤ Myrrh foreshadowed Jesus' death because it was often used to embalm bodies

4. Calvary > hanging on the cross > they try to give Him wine mingled with myrrh to dull the pain.

5. They produced from the tree a gum that was used for embalming dead bodies.

John 19:39 And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.

What suffering our Lord Jesus experienced from His birth, to the cross, to the tomb itself.

Myrrh is used as a type of our Lord Jesus Christ in His suffering

Isaiah 60:6 They shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, He will be presented with gold and frankincense,

Note: The myrrh isn't there!

Isaiah 60:2 He will not be coming as the Suffering Servant of Jehovah; He will be coming as the Sovereign King of Kings and the Lord of Lords to judge, to reign, and to rule.

➤ Fix your eyes on Him; for just one glimpse of Him in glory will the toils of life repay.

➤ It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.

From a human perspective Smyrna would likely be the least of the 7 churches to which one would want to belong. Yet from the perspective of Christ, it is the one most affirmed and valued. The desired characteristic revealed to Smyrna is for their particular need >

➤ Stand firm in the midst of tribulation and suffering. Do not deny your Lord.

Rev. 2:8a "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

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

Scripture tells us God took this name for Himself.

Isaiah 41:4 Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning?

'I, the Lord, am the first; And with the last I am He.'"

Isaiah 43:10-11 That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He.

Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me.

<sup>11</sup> I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no savior.

Isaiah 44:6 "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:

'I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God.

Isaiah 48:12 "Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called:

I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last.

Notice: The SAME title is used to designate Jesus Christ.

Rev. 1:17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.

Rev. 2:8 These things says the First and the Last,

Rev. 22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."

Truth: Jesus Christ is none other than God Himself. Though they be one He is distinct.

He is the eternal infinite God, already in existence when all things were created and remaining after all things are destroyed. He is the first, He preexisted. He is the last, He will go on forever.

Paradox: The same One who is eternal, who was before all things and will live forever, who transcends all things was dead and has come to life.

Question: How can the eternally living God who is beyond all time, beyond all space, beyond all history die? But He did. The Lord Jesus Christ was God incarnate, entering into time, space and history for the very purpose of dying. How could the eternally living One die?

He could only die as a man. He never could die as the eternal God in whom is unending life.

But He died as man for sin and now lives by resurrection as the glorified God/Man.

Hebrews 7:16 there arises another priest: Jesus Christ, Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life.

This description speaks of His eternality to the church at Smyrna because in the midst of suffering an eternal perspective is what is needed. "In the midst of trials, let us remember that Jesus existed before time, that He rules over time and that He will reign for all time!

What we suffer here is insignificant compared to the eternal glory that awaits us there.

It was His victory over death that causes the church to be victorious in the face of death."

The first and the last speaks to Jesus as the eternal God and yet here Jesus clearly alludes to His humanity and the incredible truth that the eternal God died as a man, but He came back to life, a description of Christ's resurrection from the dead. This would be an encouraging truth to this church that faced the prospects of death for their faith, knowing that even if they died, they would live again because they were in Christ.

In comparison with His glory, all earthly distinctions are pure emptiness.

Being first in something pales into insignificance in view of His eternal glories.

Phil. 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.

Paul considered his "assets" as liabilities. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is the only asset he considers. It changed him in a way his own righteousness could never do.

Consider: Loss can be a Pivot Point in our lives if we allow it. Remember:

- Lot's wife, who would not let go of Sodom but looked back.
- The rich young ruler, who would not let go of his riches
- Achan, who would not let go of his spoils of war
- King Saul, who would not let go of his bitterness
- Judas, who would not let go of the moneybag
- King Solomon, who could not let go of his foreign wives
- Demas, who couldn't let go of the world

Apostle Paul > what I once considered an "asset," I now count as a liability.

Note: The Greek word for loss used is *zemain*. Only other place it is used is in Acts 27:10, 21.

It describes the loss and damage the ship suffered while taking Paul as a prisoner to Rome.

The cargo, which was meant to bring gain to its owner, was thrown overboard so the crew could be saved. For Paul, the "cargo" of his past life had to be thrown overboard so he might be saved and gain his spiritual life in Christ.

I Thess. 3:2-5 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

Matt. 10:39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

- Losses can actually become my Gain.

Admonition: Do not be afraid to let go of things that keep you from God.

When God takes things from your life, do not waste your time in regret.

When God allows you to escape Sodom, do not look back.

When God asks you to suffer for Him, count it all joy.

*"When fear grips the human heart, and our very life is threatened,*

*nothing can bring tranquility like faith in Him who is both the first and the last."*

Dead to Life: Oldest of the 7 cities > probably established not long after the great flood.

Smyrna had been a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B.C. Around 600 B.C. it was invaded and destroyed by the Lydians. For 400 years Smyrna did not exist; they were dead.

Around 200 B.C. Lysimachus [one of 4 generals of Alexander the Great. Ruled over Asia Minor] had it rebuilt as a planned and unified whole. It was built with streets that were broad, straight, sweeping, and beautifully paved. The rebuilt city of Smyrna boasted a famous stadium, library and the largest public theater in Asia.

The city's ability to emerge from this period of abandonment and become one of the preeminent cities of the empire gave Smyrna the title: "The City That Died Yet Lives."

The city had experienced death and had literally been brought back to life.

It is undoubtedly because of Smyrna's historical past, Christ refers to Himself as,  
"He who was dead and came to life."

In the midst of Smyrna's suffering, the vision of Christ given to them is of: Eternal God

- One who suffered, who entered death > through a baptism of blood.
- He was tested and tried, lived and died, and rose again.
- He is our Great High Priest who knows the suffering of our infirmities.

This portrait of Jesus carries a message of hope. Since many in this church died for their faith, Christ assures them of their future resurrection. They could face martyrdom in full confidence. They would be resurrected to eternal life by the One who himself was victorious over death through a resurrection.

II Cor. 4:14 knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus  
will also raise us up with Jesus and will present us with you.

I Pet. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again  
to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Acts 2:24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death,  
because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

Key: The risen Christ is one who has experienced the worst life could do to Him.

Thus, no matter what might happen to the Christians at Smyrna or to us, our Savior has gone through the worst life can bring. He feels for us in our suffering with special love and compassion and is ever present to come to our aid and comfort.

Hallelujah! He triumphed over pain, the cross, the devil, sin, and death.

He defeated all the enemies, and He offers victory and the conqueror's crown.

Encouragement: Should they die in the persecution, they'll not experience anything He hasn't experienced. Should they die, they will not be cut off from His eternal resurrection power.

Rev. 2:9a I know your works, tribulation, and poverty [but you are rich];

Tribulation = #2347 thlipsis = pressure, a literal crushing beneath a weight; squeezed  
Originally expressed sheer, physical pressure on a man

Thlipsis is a strong term which does not refer to minor inconveniences but to real hardships.

This church was hated, outlawed, and persecuted. When people heard Christians were "eating the body and the blood of the Lord," they assumed they were cannibals. Rumors began that Christians ate little babies. Later, that reason was used as a pretense for persecuting Christians. Instead of worshiping in magnificent buildings, they gathered in caves, catacombs and other hidden places. They posted sentries at the door to warn them of approaching foes. There were violent persecutions as forces tried to "crush the Christianity out of them."

According to the ancient law of England: Those who willfully refused to plead guilty, had heavy weights placed on their chests, and were pressed and crushed to death.

Note: Between 100 AD and 313 AD, the persecuted Church indeed seemed very poor.

Rev. 2:9a I know your works, tribulation, and poverty [but you are rich];

I know, oida, probably emphasizing the knowledge of experience, more so than just an observation. I know what you're going through; I know it by My own experience. I've been there, I've been poor, I had not a place to lay My head, I've been persecuted, I've been killed, I know your tribulation. I know it not because I can see it happen,  
I know it because I've been there, I feel it > The sympathetic high priest.

I know your "Poverty" = ptocheia > describes absolute poverty or complete destitution.

To grasp this word, we might compare it with another, penia.

Penia refers to one who has the necessities, but nothing superfluous.

Ptocheia describes the state of one who has nothing at all.

Note: Because of their refusal to obey the Roman laws, they were not allowed to belong to the labor guilds. They were not able to obtain decent paying jobs to support their families. Boycotted Christian shop owners went bankrupt and lived in poverty.

Ponder: Do I see suffering as an enriching experience with Christ?

The Bible's teaching regarding suffering: it enriches the Christian's life and testimony!

Charles Stanley said: 'Jesus is specially the partner of His poorer servants.

To be poor, to be destitute, is to go the way that the Master went.'

II Cor. 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. It was the way He came into this world.

1. Joseph and Mary, heavy with child, came to the inn, and an inn was a place where you were judged regarding what you had, and they were refused entrance. He was born in a stable.
2. The Lord Jesus for 30 years adorned the apron of a carpenter in His father's shop.
3. When He began His ministry, He had to ask a man for a penny.
4. He borrowed a boat in which to preach.
5. The very tomb that His cold corpse lay in after His crucifixion was not His own!
6. The moment He died, He left nothing behind Him; even His clothes were gambled for by the soldiers.
7. Yet being destitute, He possessed everything! He holds the world in His hand!

Wiersbe: The large thriving Jewish community did not have to patronize the imperial cult since their religion was accepted by Rome and they were exempt from emperor worship.

They certainly would not cooperate with the Christian faith.

So, from both Jews and Gentiles, the Christians in Smyrna received slander and suffering.



But they were rich! They lived for eternal values that would never change, riches that could never be taken away. Their suffering for Christ only increased their riches.

He then commends them for their spiritual wealth in the midst of their physical poverty and suffering, much of which was brought about by the religious Jews of Smyrna.

James 2:5 Listen, my beloved brothers: Has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to those who love Him?

1. They were rich Positionally in Christ, which was by grace.

Eph. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,

2. They were rich in their spiritual lives because they were living close to God by faith.

Note: They just leaned all the more on Jesus Christ and they never left their first love.

3. Spiritual wealth = laying up treasure in heaven that NO ONE could take away. Matt. 6:20 Though they suffered physical privation and poverty, the Christians at Smyrna clung to their immeasurable spiritual riches.

Principle: Suffering for Christ and the sake of the Gospel increases eternal riches.

4. They were rich in that God had counted them worthy to suffer for Him.

I Pet. 3:14-17 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed.

And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. <sup>15</sup> But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; <sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

<sup>17</sup> For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

I Peter 4:13-14 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

I Peter 1:6-7 In this [look back to verses 3-5] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,

a. You have a LIVING HOPE through the RESURRECTION of JESUS CHRIST.

b. INHERITANCE > Incorruptible, Undeified, Won't Fade Away, Reserved in Heaven for you

c. You are KEPT by the POWER OF GOD through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

I Pet. 1:6-7 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,

I Pet. 1:8-9 Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

<sup>9</sup> Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.