

Shadows Of Christ & His Bride

Lesson #29

Smyrna: The Persecuted & Crowned Church

August 7, 2024

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: ⁹I 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. ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹"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.

The Smyrna era covered 100 AD - 313 AD. This church was hated, outlawed and persecuted. 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."

Force #1 Emperor Worship in Smyrna

- First city in Asia to erect a temple to goddess of Rome in 195 BC
- In 26 AD, city authorized to build temple to Tiberius Caesar
 - Became a center for emperor worship
- During the reign of Domitian from 81-96 AD, emperor worship became compulsory.
- Smyrna was noted for its persecution and martyrdom of Christians.

Historians tell us in Smyrna there were mass executions of Christians who refused to bow their knee to Caesar who was proclaimed as a god and was to be worshiped as deity. As a demonstration of your loyalty to Domitian as a citizen of Rome, it was required that you burn a pinch of incense to Caesar and say, "Caesar is lord."

Then you would receive a certificate from the priests that said, "We the representatives of the emperor have seen you sacrificing." The priests would then sign the certificate and date it. You could return to worshiping the god of your choice. Without this certificate, persecution, imprisonment and suffering were sure to befall you at any time.

Emperor Worship: Consequence for Not Participating:

1. Anyone refusing to burn his pinch of incense was rendered an outlaw.
2. A Christian's refusal to offer sacrifices to Caesar prevented him from engaging in business and earning a living in Smyrna. Christians quickly became utterly destitute. [ptocheia]
3. Christians were seen as atheists: they did not believe in or worship the gods of Rome.
4. They were seen as traitors who were committing treason because they would not acknowledge the emperor as lord.

A great deal of pressure and persecution came upon this church because of their unwillingness to say "Caesar is Lord."

Christians could not compromise and give any man the name of their Messiah - *He alone was their Lord*. For a person to enter the church in Smyrna was to lay down their life.

Throughout the centuries, God has preserved His Word and raised up men and women for the task

Martyr: Witness First Recorded Martyrdom In Post-New Testament Church History

Polycarp [69-156 AD] A direct disciple of John. Charged with being a Christian

- member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped.

Polycarp led the church at Smyrna for about 60 years.

He set the precedent for how Christian martyrs are to die.

It was the time of the public games. The city was crowded and the crowds were excited.

Suddenly the shout went up, "Away with the atheists, let Polycarp be searched for."

At age 86, he learned Roman officials were coming to arrest him. No doubt Polycarp could have escaped but already he had a dream in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire and he had awakened to tell his disciples, "I must be burned alive."

His whereabouts were betrayed to the persecutors by a little slave girl who collapsed under torture and they came to arrest him. Not even the soldier captain wished to see Polycarp die.

On the brief journey to the city he pled with the old man,

"What harm is it to say Caesar is lord and to sacrifice and save your life?"

But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

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

At his trial, the Roman Governor called upon Polycarp to recant his faith in Christ, to which he famously replied, "These eighty and six years have I served my Lord and He never did me any harm, and I cannot deny my Lord and Master now. I bless Thee for deigning me worthy of this day and this hour that I may be among Thy martyrs and drink the cup of my Lord Jesus Christ."

Further Plea: But on his persisting again and saying, 'Swear by the genius of Caesar,' he answered, 'If thou supposest vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as thou sayest, and feignest that thou art ignorant who I am, hear thou plainly, I am a Christian.

But if thou wouldest learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing.'

Then he said to him again, 'I will cause thee to be consumed by fire unless thou recant.'

But Polycarp said; the "fires of the stake last but a moment, whereas the fires of hell last for an eternity. Thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt.'

So the crowds came flocking with their sticks from the workshops, from the baths and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in the clamor and bringing wood for the fire. They endeavored to prevent the remains of the martyr from being delivered to Christian friends for burial.

As they prepared the stake, the Roman Soldiers tried to secure Polycarp with rope or nails. Refusing, Polycarp told them, "He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails."

He prayed aloud, the fire was lit, and his flesh was consumed.

The chronicler of this martyrdom said it was "not as burning flesh but as bread baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace."

Taking strength from his faith in Christ, he remained faithful to Christ through his life and through his death. So amazing was his peace in this death that word spread far and wide. Polycarp's martyrdom attracted non-Christians to Christ, inspired Christians of his day, and continues to inspire us today.

Walvoord: The Faithfulness of Polycarp to the end seems to have characterized this church in Smyrna in its entire testimony and resulted in this church's continuous faithful witness for God after many others of the early churches had long lost their fervor.

Force #2 Rev. 2:9b I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a Synagogue of Satan.

Christ knows the persecutors. Smyrna's large population of influential, apostate Jews who didn't practice their faith, hated the Christians. They did everything they could to hurt the church in Smyrna. A large Jewish population poisoned the minds of the people against the Christians. Jesus identifies them...those who slander you; say they're Jews, but they are not. They are a synagogue of Satan; it is NOT the synagogue of God.

➤ Group of hostile, religious Jews who claim they are the seed of Abraham, God's people.

➤ Physically, this is true. Spiritually: under the control & power of Satan.

John 8:44a Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do...

Who I A Jew? Who Are the People of God?

Romans 2:28-29 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹ But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Persecution is a cruel and unfair way to treat people because of their religion, race or political beliefs. Persecution in the early church was due to the stiff opposition to the Gospel of Christ. Christians were persecuted to stop the propagation of the Gospel.

- Stephen, a deacon in the days of the apostles, was stoned to death by the religious Jews, many of whom were the priests and scribes who did not want to lose their reputation and relevance in society.
- Saul was one who supervised the killing of Stephen.

The disciples experienced terrible persecution in the early church.

Many were detained in prison, beaten mercilessly and some died.

They survived this and were able to pass Christianity to the next generation.

Early persecution of the Church was brought on by Jews, not the Romans

Acts 13:44-45 The next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spoke against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.

Acts 14:2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brothers.

Acts 17:13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the Word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people.

Acts 18:5-6 [Paul] testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they opposed him, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads; I am clean; from now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Rev. 2:9b I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

When Satan Runs The Synagogue

- Satan is mentioned 5 times as being against the church!

Note: There was a viably strong Jewish community in Smyrna which

viewed Christianity as a heretical offshoot of Judaism. It needed to be crushed.

MacArthur Unbelieving Jews, those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. commonly accused Christians of:

- Cannibalism

People in the Roman Empire believed Christians were cannibals because they had heard about "the Last Supper," or "the breaking of bread." Rumors began that Christians ate little babies. Later, that reason was used as a pretense for persecuting Christians

- Immorality: based on a perversion of the holy kiss with which believers greeted each other; cf. Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26
- Breaking up homes: when one spouse became a Christian and the other did not, it often caused conflict; Luke 12:51-53
- Atheism: Because Christians rejected the pagan pantheon of deities
- Political disloyalty and rebellion:

Christians refused to offer the required sacrifices to the emperor.

Hoping to destroy the Christian faith, some of Smyrna's wealthy, influential Jews reported these blasphemous, false allegations to the Romans.

The Counsel and Admonition > Prophecy > Announcing a Persecution of Ten Days

Rev. 2:10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.

[impending persecution) Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.

Note: The promise is for more suffering; Not relief. Jesus gives hope to His church:

Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Note: There is no mention of complaining among them > Christ-like

I Peter 2:20-21 For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. ²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

Jesus endured it willingly & looked beyond the suffering to God's purpose and will.

I Peter 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind.

No matter how small or how severe, the One who has overcome death says, "fear nothing." Their will was in line with that of Jesus, "*obedient unto death*." [Phil. 2:8]

Concerning the Future and Testing

1. Attributed to the Devil- It is a continuation of the serpent's battle with the Lord Jesus Christ and those who belong to Him.

Gen. 3:15 enmity between her Seed & your seed

Satan's goal is to destroy God's plan and purposes. He attacks salvation by confusing the Gospel. He wants to destroy the regenerate by robbing them of their abundant life.

Human means and men are those we see persecuting the church of Jesus Christ, but behind the scenes is the old arch enemy, the prince of the power of the air.

Never fear! He shall be bound; he is a defeated foe.

Rom. 16:20 The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.

2. Length of Trial - Face Prison, Severe Testing & Even Death for Ten Days.

The church would be crushed by the iron heel of pagan Rome.

View of Ten Days:

1. From 100 to 313, history records 10 separate attempts by 10 separate Roman emperors to exterminate and eradicate Christianity from the Roman Empire.

During the rule of these 10 Caesars, it is estimated 5 million believers were killed by the Romans as well as by Jews that rejected their Messiah.

➤ From Nero in 64 AD - Diocletian in 303 AD

2. History reports the most severe persecution during this period was the one launched by the emperor Diocletian. It began in 303, and ended exactly 10 years later, in 313, with the promulgation of the Edict of Milan by the emperor Constantine, which made Christianity the official religion of the Empire.

Christians during those 213 years were martyred, butchered, burned for Jesus Christ. Their bodies were torn apart on racks. Their fingernails were pulled off. They were hung by their thumbs, often for days. They were wrapped in animal skins and thrown out for bulls to gore and to pitch around. They were covered with tar and set alight in the gardens to light the festivities of the pagans. They, like the myrrh they represent, would be cut, bruised, wounded, crushed for Christ - but from that process of tribulation there would be a savor, and a fragrant smell that would ascend unto God.

Hall Of Fame For Faithfulness: Hebrews 11:36-38: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

³⁸ (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Heb. 11:35b Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. [See #25 Attain Out Resurrection]

Length of their trial is short in comparison with their eternal rewards.

Comfort: Present Sufferings end with this life.

Blessings & reward continue through eternity.

Consider: It has been allowed by God for His purpose and for a predetermined amount of time. The purifying fires of affliction caused the lamp of testimony to burn more brilliantly.

No matter what challenges we confront, we can take comfort in knowing that God has prepared incredible blessings for those who suffer hardship because of their love for Him. The apostle Paul encouraged us by example to preserve through trials: We patiently endure.

II Cor. 4:7-10; 16-18 But we have this treasure in clay jars,

so that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

⁹ Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;

¹⁰ always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison ¹⁸ because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. [See also II Cor. 6:4-7; II Cor. 11:23-27]

With the laser-focused determination of an Olympian athlete, Paul set his sights on the goal of finishing the race and winning the heavenly prize. [Phil. 3:12-14; I Cor. 9:24-25]

Rev. 2:10b be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

The crown of life is an award from God that will be awarded to those who,
because of their love for Him, faithfully endured trials and tests on earth.

James 1:12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. In the original Greek, the word rendered "crown" in James 1:12 denotes a prize.

This crown describes a garland or wreath of laurel foliage that, in ancient times, was placed upon the head of a victorious athlete as an emblem of honor and triumph in a contest.

Note: The reward is not eternal life. [John 1:11-12; 3:16; I John 5:11-12]

Eternal life is a gift through faith or personal belief in Jesus Christ

This is a special reward for endurance under persecution.

It does not signify any royal position or authority over others.

The crown of life is reserved for believers who leave behind the safety and shelter of Christian infancy in search of spiritual maturity [I John 2:12-14].

They discover that the battlefields of this life are training grounds as they "press on toward the goal to win the prize" [Phil. 3:12-14].

Future crown-bearers know this life is only temporary [I Cor. 7:31] and, therefore, choose to pursue the will of God and endure suffering for Christ [I John 2:17].

Rev. 3:11 Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

I John 2:8 And now, little children, ABIDE IN HIM; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at his coming.

Ps. 55:22 Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you;
He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.

Isa. 41:10 Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you,

I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

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Several of the seven letters of Rev. 2-3 have puzzling statements that can be wrongly interpreted to mean the non-overcomers will be eternally condemned.

Rev. 2:11 The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

- 1st Death physical death of the body
- 2nd Death Unbelievers be cast into the Lake of Fire after Great White Throne

Rev. 2:11 The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

- Some commentators err in taking this verse to mean,
"Believers who do not overcome shall be hurt by the second death."
- Some commentators also err by reading it this way:
"All true believers overcome in life and therefore will not be hurt by the 2nd death."

Problem: Both views have Jesus offering escape from the Lake of Fire for faithful obedience to Christ.

Consider the: castaway, disqualified, carnal, shipwrecked, those who suffer loss?
They are believers who did not overcome; they are overwhelmed.

TRUTH: Our escape from the Lake of Fire [2nd death] is NOT BASED on us and our performance.

The Bible is CLEAR that every born-again believer will have eternal life and not experience the 2nd death which is for unbelievers only. John 3:16

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Rev. 20:15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Rev. 2:11 The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

This cannot imply that non-overcomers will be eternally condemned and cast into the Lake of Fire. A non-overcomer is a believer who has not overcome; he is overwhelmed.

Rev. 2:10 Be faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life.

To overcome in this passage means to remain faithful to the Lord even if it meant death. Here our Lord was simply reminding them that though some would die for Him, the second death could never touch them.

The use of this negative promise, "will not be hurt ..." is a literary device known as litotes. This is a rhetorical device used to affirm the positive by a negation.

If someone says to me, "His request presented me with no small problem," I know exactly what he means. The person who made the request of him had presented him a BIG problem! In the phrase "no small problem" we have a very common figure of speech. Its technical name is "litotes" [lie'-tuh-tease'). Litotes occurs when an affirmative idea is expressed by the negation of its opposite. In the sentence we started with, the affirmative idea is that the problem is very large. The phrase "no small problem" negates the opposite idea.

In our two-volume commentary on the NT, Bob Vacendak explains Rev 2:11 in this way:

Litotes is an assertion that understates the reality being referred to.

A Biblical example is Heb 6:10: "God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name," meaning God will definitely remember all your hard work. When Jesus says, He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death, He is making an understatement.

He is saying that the faithful Christian will be more than amply repaid for whatever sacrifice he may make for Christ's sake, and that his eternal experience will be so far beyond the reach of the second death that it cannot be imagined.

The suffering believers in Smyrna could rest in this glorious promise given to them from the Lord Himself (The Grace New Testament Commentary, Vol. 2, "Revelation," p. 1262).

What is the positive idea which it understates? Fortunately, the context helps us.

Rev. 2:10 "Be faithful until death [overcome], and I will give you the crown of life."

The Smyrnan Christians are challenged to face possible martyrdom with courage and fidelity to God. Their reward for doing so will be a superlative experience of life in the world to come. So to speak, they will be "crowned" with the enjoyment of life "more abundant"

In this light, Rev. 2:11 can be seen as truly an understatement. The overcomer will be more than amply repaid for whatever sacrifice he may make for Christ's sake. His experience will be truly wonderful—far, far beyond the reach—the touch—of the second death.

In a masterly understatement, the Lord Jesus says in effect:

"The first death may 'hurt' you briefly, the second not at all!"

Consider: "Hurt" is the Greek *adikeó* = "to injure, act unjustly towards, harm."

Is there a way in which a believer can be said to be hurt or harmed by the second death?

Unbelievers who persecute believers and who seek to get them to recant or renounce their faith in Christ are in some ways the personification of the second death and are not only acting out of their spiritual death against the believer, but are themselves, headed for the second death. So, when a believer fails to overcome the trial and recants because of the pain of the persecution, would he not then be hurt or harmed by the second death because he would then have lost his reward?

Consider My Belief: I believe the admonition to Ephesus is the first step in our journey to spiritual maturity. If I do not repent and do the first works, I will not progress in my spiritual growth. Therefore, the remaining promises to those who overcome will not be for me. I will NOT lose my justification, but I will arrive at the Judgment Seat of Christ as the person in I Cor. 3:15: He himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Because I failed to repent of departing from my first love and walked through life devoid of hearing my Shepherd's voice, I did not produce any spiritual maturity worthy of reward.

I will have an entrance into His Kingdom, but I will forfeit so much.

Nelson Study Bible: Eating of the tree of life is a promise of special intimacy with the Lord, a promise of renewing the fellowship enjoyed before the fall.

Man was cast out of God's Garden of Paradise.

The privileged access once denied Adam will be enjoyed by the one who overcomes.

I Thess. 2:12 That ye would walk worthy of God,
who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory

