

The Church at Smyrna

2: 8-11

DIG: What problems is this church facing? How can they be both rich and poverty stricken at the same time? What is the crown of life promised to them? What is the meaning of the second death? Why is Jesus known as the First and the Last? What does this passage teach you about suffering?

REFLECT: Do you ever fear pain and hardship? Are you wondering if your struggles will ever end? Do you feel anxious about what tragedies or trials may be just around the corner, ready to shatter the comfort of your relatively stable and predictable life? Do you believe that Yeshua knows every detail of your circumstance? When asked if she believed in God, Cassie Bernall said, "Yes." What would you say?

Regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, social status, age, or religion, all of us share the language of suffering. We may not be able to relate to another culture's music, taste in food or humor, yet we all understand pain. In that sense we are all united by the experiences of hardship, heartache, affliction, sadness and grief.

For believers, the language of suffering has a unique and profound dialect, often misunderstood by foreigners to the faith. We believe that all suffering has a specific purpose in ADONAI's sovereign plan. The apostle Paul said it this way: **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him . . . to be conformed, literally pressed under great pressure, to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:28a-29a). Suffering** speaks to the soul like nothing else. This isn't intended to say that persecution is a thing of beauty or that the wicked are in fact good (Psalm 73). More accurately, believers know that in spite of their pain, the Lord can reverse the intended outcome and bring about blessing.

Suffering and hardship often seem unbearable, but they have a way of purifying God's people. Maybe that is why we're never far from life's trials. When the tsunami of hardship rushes at us, we must stand firm on the foundation of Yeshua Messiah rather than being washed away with despair and hopelessness.

Throughout its history, it has been a paradoxical truth that the more believers have been persecuted, the greater has been their purity and strength. For decades, the atheistic communist governments in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe suppressed **churches**. Today believers continue to be persecuted in Muslim countries. They are forbidden to openly proclaim their **faith**. Many are imprisoned and some martyred. Yet **the Church** has not only survived, it has flourished.

The Bible links the persecution of believers with their spiritual strength. **Consider it pure joy, my brothers, wrote James, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).** In addition, the apostle **Peter** encouraged **suffering** believers with the truth that **after you have suffered a little while, the Messiah Himself will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast (First Peter 5:10).** Our faith is forged through the furnace of adversity.

The church in Smyrna displayed the power and purity that comes from successfully enduring **persecution**. It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the **Church**. Well, persecution had purified and purged this **church** from sin and affirmed the faith of its members. It became an inspiration to believers everywhere. Hypocrites do not stay to face persecution, because false believers do not want to experience the pain. Trials and **persecution** strengthen and refine true **faith**, but expose and destroy false **faith**.

Scripture makes it perfectly clear that persecution and trials are an inevitable and essential part of a life of **faith (Acts 14:22; Second Timothy 3:12)**. The example of that **church** instructs all others on how to properly respond to persecution when the time comes.⁵³ **Job** said: **Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him (Job 13:15), the church in Smyrna** lived those words out.

1. The description of Christ: As you read the letters to **the churches**, notice the way **the Messiah** describes **Himself** at the beginning of each letter. It will be a clue to the theme of the letter and what each **church** needed to understand in order to receive the ultimate victory over its struggles. To this **church** **He** described **Himself** as **the first and the last, who died and came to life again (2:8c)**. His very title emphasized **His** victory over death. **Yeshua** understood the hardships they faced because **He Himself** was dead and now is alive. **He** had passed through **suffering** and **death** and **He** was assuring the believers **in Smyrna** that **He** would take them through as well. Earlier, **Jesus** said to a distraught

Martha after learning of the **death** of her brother Lazarus: **Your brother will rise again. I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in Me will never die** (John 11:23-26). Jesus' resurrection proves that there is life beyond the grave, and by His own **death** and resurrection, **He** proves that we can be there with Him.⁵⁴ **The Lord** has conquered **death** (John 14:19), and later in the book these believers at **Smyrna** would learn that **there would be no more death or mourning or crying or pain in the New Jerusalem, for the old order of things would pass away** (21:4). **He was the first and the last**. This would have been tremendously encouraging **to the church at Smyrna** facing **death**.

If **Messiah** were only **God**, we might perceive **Him** as aloof, separated from our human experiences of **suffering** and unable to understand or relate to our desperate plight. If **Christ** were only a man, **His death** would have been nothing more than just another martyrdom of a good man. **He** would have been a weak victim of human tragedy, unable to conquer death and powerless to triumph over the grave. But because **He is the first** (existing before anything) **and the last** (who will live for eternity) fully **God** and fully man, we can know that **He shares in** our pain and not merely *stares at* our **suffering**. The writer to the Hebrews said it like this: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need** (Hebrews 4:14-16).

2. The city: The name of the city came from one of its most important commercial products, means *myrrh*. The root of this word means *bitterness*. *Myrrh* is an ingredient in perfume (**Psalm 45:8**), it was used as one of the holy anointing oils of the priesthood (**Ex 30:23**), it was used for the purification of women (**Esther 2:12**) and an embalming spice for the dead (**Jn 19:39**). It was brought as a gift to the baby **Yeshua**, by one of the Magi, indicating that **He** was born to die (**Mt 2:11**). But there is a very interesting thing about *myrrh*, it has to be **crushed** to produce its fragrance. It was always a sign of bitterness and sorrow. The very name of the city smacks of **death** and crushing oppression (**2:8b**).

It was a large and wealthy city that was the archrival of Ephesus. In fact, it was constantly competing with Ephesus for title, "First city of Asia." In **John's** day it was a thriving city with a famous stadium, library and a diverse population of perhaps half-million people. It enjoyed great natural advantages, including an excellent harbor at the end of a well protected gulf. It was thus the natural outlet for the trade of the rich valley of the Hermus regions and beyond.⁵⁵ The Romans called it the beauty of Asia, and when you drive into **Smyrna**, even today, you can see why. There is a sloping hill that goes up to a plateau right behind this beautiful seaport city. This city had a long-standing loyalty to Rome even before it became a mighty empire. It was one of the first cities to engage in worship of the Roman emperor and it won the honor of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. In **John's** time, they continued to honor Cesar as lord of all. As a result, **Smyrna** was deeply involved in emperor worship.

There was also a very large population of secular **Jews** in **Smyrna** that opposed **the church** there. **They** had considerable influence over the civil authorities in **Smyrna**, so much so, that **they** acted more like Romans than **Jews** of faith. **They** did, in fact, work actively and purposefully against the cause of **Christ**. Though the secular **Jews** in the Roman Empire were legally excused from sacrificing to the emperor, those who believed in **Messiah** enjoyed no such exemption after the synagogues threw them out. Therefore, believers in **Smyrna** faced **persecution** from both secular **Jews** and Gentiles. On the one hand, the Gentiles devoted themselves to emperor worship. On the other hand **the** secular **Jews** were devoted to attempting to fulfill the Torah in their own strength. This mixture of Roman patriots and **Jewish** zealots put those believers between a rock and a hard place.

3. The church: To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: (2:8a). In the midst of their **suffering**, **Messiah** came to this **church** with a message of hope. **The Master's** timely message reminded them that **God** gives strength to those who **suffer** and rewards those who endure. The benefits of **perseverance** hold true in this life, but also in the life to come. When and by whom it was founded, we do not know. We assume that it was the fruit of Rabbi Sha'ul's missionary work in Asia that was centered in Ephesus (**Acts 19:10**). At the time of **John's** writing, the believers there had endured the fires of pain and the **suffering** of **persecution**, and their sorrows would soon increase. Their future looked bleak. However, **the church** was healthy for the letter contains no word of criticism.⁵⁶ They weren't **suffering** hardship because they did anything wrong. On the contrary, in spite of their poverty due to **persecution**, they were spiritually rich. The city of **Smyrna** was dedicated to Cesar, but **the** believers in **Smyrna** were dedicated to **Christ**.

4. The commendation: Imagine yourself sitting among the gathering of the Lord's people in **Smyrna** on a cold morning before sunrise. A little lamp-lit room houses what was left of a small group of beaten and harassed believers. The once-lively crowd now displays obvious gaps where people once sat. Some have fallen away under persecution. Others have seemingly vanished into thin air - arrested, exiled, or executed. Some risked their lives just to meet that morning to pray, sing hymns, and to read the Scriptures. All of you are outcasts, desperate for a word of encouragement from the messenger sitting in your midst. In the dim light the scroll is unrolled and, in quiet confidence, the word from **Yeshua** is read to them: **I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich (2:9a)**. He knew first hand the kind of **suffering** and pain they endured as rejected outcasts. The word **afflictions** always means *pressure from outside*. This is like going to your job or community and facing people who care little about your **God** or, for that matter, little about you personally. The apostle Paul said it this way: **We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed (Second Corinthians 4:8 NASB)**. Remember what **Smyrna** means? **Crushed** so that the aroma will come out. Those believers **in Smyrna** were being **crushed** by the culture there. They were being killed and persecuted, actually shunned by the culture there. They were fired from their jobs or couldn't get jobs; people would not buy their products that they sold. They had their properties confiscated. So they were poor financially because of their stand for **Jesus, yet, Messiah** tells them in this letter, they were **rich** in the things that would last for eternity. **Jesus Christ** became **poor** that we could be spiritually **rich**. **James** reminds us that **God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promises to those who love Him (James 2:5)**.

Secondly, **Christ** said: **I know the slander of those who say they are Jews but are not (2:9b)**. Here, a literal understanding of this verse points to the fact that these were Gentiles who pretended to be **Jews**. Nowhere in the New Covenant are unbelieving **Jews** called non-**Jews**, although **Romans 2:28-29** is sometimes mistakenly used as evidence to the contrary. This same expression . . . **those who claim to be apostles but are not** is found in **Revelation 2:2**. **Those** in **Revelation 2:2** were **not apostles** and **those** here were **not Jews**. In the first century the Jewish religion was highly regarded and many Gentiles preferred a short-cut, reaping the advantage of Jewish identification without the burden of adherence to the Torah. Paul had already encountered such as **those** in Galatia (**Gal 6:12-13**). A true **Jew** would recognize **God, yet** these Gentiles, who pretended to be **Jews**, were so enmeshed in the political life of **Smyrna** that they honored Cesar as lord of all. Although they were outwardly part of the local synagogue, they cared little for what **ADONAI** wrote or thought.

Sixty (Polycarp died in 155) years after this letter was written, those Gentiles joined with other citizens of **Smyrna** to form a mob and burned Polycarp, who was the pastor of **the church** there, alive. He was eighty-six years old. As a young man he was discipled by the apostle **John**, and little did he know that sixty years later **God** would call upon him to fulfill the message to that band of believers: **Be faithful, even to the point of death**. This is what those Gentiles who led the mob, cried out with uncontrollable wrath as the flames engulfed Polycarp, "This is the teacher of Asia. The father of **the church**. The destroyer of our *gods*, who teaches many not to offer sacrifice, nor to worship them."

Without exception this phenomenon of Gentiles imagining that they were **Jews** when they were not has led to strange doctrines and practices. Such Gentiles were not accepted by **Jews** as Jewish; nor as this verse shows, were they accepted by Christians as Christian. Isolated and self defensive, they can easily become prideful, neither obeying the Torah nor showing brotherly love to **Yeshua's** true followers. It is easy to see why **Jesus** does not regard them as harmlessly neutral but pegs them as **a synagogue of Satan (2:9c)**.⁵⁷

5. The concern: Although they suffered physical hardship and poverty, the believers at **Smyrna** clung to their vast spiritual wealth. Fittingly, this **church**, along with those in Philadelphia, received no rebuke in its letter from **the Lord**.

6. The command: Brace yourself for more **suffering** to come. **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer**, even if it took harsher forms of imprisonment and capital punishment, as it often did. **He** would be there through their trials, saying: **Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me (Hebrews 13:5b-6)**. The word **suffer** here is in the present tense, so their time of **suffering** would be intense but short. **I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you (2:10a)**. In the ancient world prisons were a place where the accused awaited execution.⁵⁸ It would be a divine **test** to distinguish true believers from false believers.⁵⁹ **And you will suffer persecution for ten days (2:10b)**. The **ten days** are symbolic of **ten** Roman emperors who persecuted the **Church** from AD 96 to 305: Domitian (96), Trajan (98-117), Hadrian (117-138), Antonius Pius (138-161), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Septimus Severus (193-211), Maximun (235-238), Decius (249-251), Valarian (251-260), and Diocletian (284-305). Diocletian is considered the worst emperor in Rome's history and the greatest enemy of those of **faith**. He led a violent attempt to destroy the Bible from the face of the earth. Under his leadership many Roman cities had public burnings of the Bible.⁶⁰

Jesus said: **Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Mt 11:28)**. The word to give **rest** means *to refresh or revive*, as from labor or a long journey. **The Messiah** promises spiritual **rest** to everyone who comes to **Him** in repentance and humble faith. **He** will never leave us or forsake us, **He** will be with us forever. We have nothing to fear. **Christ** does not *get rid of* the trouble; **He** is with us *through* the trouble.

7. The counsel: Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (2:10c). **The crown of life** is not a promise of a special reward for martyrs. **God** has promised this **crown** to all those who remain faithful to **Him** when under persecution. **Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12)**. The figure of **the crown** is not borrowed from royalty, but from the festivity of athletic games that were held in the large arena **in Smyrna**. Contestants there strove to receive an earthly **crown** that would **not last**, but Rabbi Sha'ul reminds the believers **in Smyrna**, that even though they suffered physical **death**, they would receive **a crown that will last forever, eternal life (First Corinthians 9:25)**.⁶¹

Does your **faith** in the resurrection have an impact on your everyday life? You may not be called upon to die or go to prison for your **faith**. Still, every day we face different kinds of "death." There is a kind of **death** involved when we face the choice of holding on to or letting go of a comfort in our life that tends to weaken our **faith** or lead us into temptation. There is also the **death** that comes when physical illness takes away not only our health but our confidence or independence as well.

Whenever we face the stripping away of such things, is our response fear or anger? **Yeshua** understands. Remember, **He** has walked that path before us and calls us to let **Him** walk with us now. **He** longs to lead us through difficulties, great or small. As we cling to **Messiah** and allow **Him** to bring life out of these little deaths, we will find our confidence in **Him** erasing our fears. Our **faith** in the resurrection, put into practice in this way, will prepare us for eternal life with **Him**. Like the victorious believers in **Smyrna**, we will **not be hurt at all by the second death**.⁶²

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the seven churches. There was a clear chain of command regarding those messages to **the seven churches**. The glorified **Messiah** gave the message, the angel to each group of believers guarded and assured the arrival of the message, **John** wrote the message, then **the Spirit** spoke the message to listening ears and open hearts.⁶³ **He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second**

death (2:11). This is the first mention of the phrase **second death** in the Bible, but the concept of future judgment for unbelievers is clear in the TaNaKh. It is associated with the destination of the unsaved after their bodily resurrection (**Daniel 12:2**). Those who overcome - true believers in **Yeshua** - will not be hurt by **the second death** (**Daniel 12:3; Rev 20:6**). Unbelievers, however, will **suffer** a **second death after** they are thrown into the lake of fire in their resurrection bodies (see **Fp - The Lake of Fire is the Second Death**).

The promise of eternal life (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**) with no possibility of experiencing eternal **death** and damnation was meant to instill concrete hope in the Smyranean believers. No matter how severe the **persecution** would grow and no matter what **the church at Smyrna** had to endure, **His** promises would give them strength to persevere. And we need to remember that the same promises remain true for us today.

On April 20th, 1999, Cassie Bernall was sitting in the library of Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, when two white neo-Nazi racists burst in and began shooting everyone in sight. Cassie stood up and began to pray. One of the killers pointed a shotgun in Cassie's face and asked her, "Do you believe in **God**?" Cassie stood face to face with her killer and said "Yes". One of the killers then said to her, "Why?" and then immediately shot her in the face, without giving her a chance to answer.

Cassie died a true martyr for her **faith**. She could have begged for her life, in hopes that her killers would take pity on her and maybe spare her. But she refused to do that. Cassie did not give her killer the satisfaction of seeing her beg and plead for her life. She knew where she would be going and was **faithful, even to the point of death**. Cassie proved that she loved **Yeshua** so much, that she was willing to die for her **faith** in **Him**. Today, many say they love **Jesus**, but if asked to prove their **faith** like Cassie or the believers **in Smyrna** did, many would back down, cry, and beg for their lives. Cassie entered the Columbine High School library to study during lunch. She left a martyr.

*Lord, in your humanity, you have experienced **suffering** and **death**. Let me not feel abandoned when I face the same. Instead, help me to take hold of **Your** hand and walk with **You** into the next life.⁶⁴ In the name of **the First and the Last, who died and came to life again**, amen. **He is faithful**.*

The persecuted believers at Smyrna are a picture of the Church during the Age of Roman persecution from AD 96 to 305. During the second and third centuries this persecution age saw thousands of believers brought into the amphitheaters of Rome to be fed to hungry lions while multitudes of spectators cheered. Many were crucified. Others were covered with animal skins and tortured to death by wild dogs. It was not unheard of for them to be covered with tar and set on fire to serve as human torches. They were also boiled in oil and burned at the stake, as was Polycarp in the city of **Smyrna** itself in AD 156. One historian has estimated that during this period, five million believers were martyred for the testimony of **Jesus Christ**.

This period was probably the greatest time of persecution **the Church** has ever known. Satan unleashed a violent attack on it during that time in an effort to obliterate it. For it became evident to him that the faithful preaching of the Gospel during the Apostolic Age had become a serious threat to his worldwide godless empire. But he was unsuccessful and **God** was victorious. The Gospel was preached around the world.

Satan, however, learned a valuable lesson. The more he persecuted **the Church**, the more it overcame the one condemning characteristic of the apostolic age, that of having left its first love. Not one word of condemnation was spoken to this body of believers. Consequently, this age ended with the easing of persecution. Then Satan used what turned out to be one of his most effective weapons, making the world enticing enough that the Body of **Christ** would fall in love with it.⁶⁵ We will see this next tactic in our travels as we next visit **the church** up the road in Pergamum.