

3. The Church of Smyrna

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things says the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;” Rev. 2.8

Unlike the Church of Ephesus, Christ does not admonish the Church of Smyrna for having *“left thy first love.”* (See Chapter 2 of this series: The Church of Ephesus.) As a matter of fact, they, along with the Church of Philadelphia, receive no admonishment or rebuke, only commendation and exhortation. However, the higher the tone and spiritual life of this Church, as for any church, the more likely it is to attract dislike, and if conditions permit, even hostility and persecution. This is true today as it was then. It seems that our Lord’s chief adversary, Satan, has little mind for the lukewarm or adulterated church. He focuses his earthly forces upon the Church which brings damage to his kingdom while furthering the purity of the Kingdom of God upon the earth. Such is the case for the Church of Smyrna.



The Agora (public open space) of Smyrna

Christ addresses Himself as *“the first and the last,”* and also as the One who *“was dead, and is alive.”* The latter title comes to remind the Church that He is the *first born from the dead* (Col. 1.18) and the glorious hope of the resurrection for all those in Christ. However, it comes also with an ominous tone. It is mentioned to encourage those believers undergoing various persecutions and even death. He is the eternal Christ, and when in His human nature had tasted the bitterness of death and was risen again; He infers that many are destined to undergo persecution and even death for His name sake, but they too would be raised again as He was, and live with Him forever in the newness of His kingdom.

This letter was not only written to the historical church of Smyrna, or addressing a historical era in the Christian Church when it would undergo such persecution, but it is also addressing the Church in the earth today, and to you and me. Under proper conditions, persecution, hostility, and even death will come. And, as in the case of Smyrna, these are instigated by Satan himself, though not him alone. He works with the cooperation of the existing secular government, the secular world about us, and perverse religious systems. Let us now look into this letter as if written to the Church **today**, and receive the strength of its message, its exhortations and promises, into our lives.

“I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but you are rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” Rev. 2.9

There is no tenor of admonishment or rebuke to this Church, for He knows the strength and resolve of their spirit. They are no stranger to persecution. The Roman government and errant Jews, conspiring to work together, do all in their power to quiet the light and truth coming forth from this church. “Be quiet or we will take away your business, your home, your ability to provide,” they threaten. “Silence! Or we will fine you, or beat you, and put you into prison.” “You are anarchists, errant, and misfits from society.” “The Christ you preach is aberrant to the god we know.” “You are nothing, and your God is an antiquated myth.” “Our knowledge and

moral aptitude is superior. We know best.” Such are the rantings of the powers that have sway over their well-being.

The Roman government had their gods, their laws and regulations, and their secular life style. And they also had the worldly authority and power to enforce it upon all those under their control. And these Jews, though of Jewish origin, are not worthy of the name. They have a godless zeal for The Law, i.e., strict obedience to religious rules and regulations, “*having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.*” (2 Tim 3.5) They are in bitter opposition to Christ and to His Church. They are of the *synagogue of Satan*, who is “the adversary” of Christ.

So, on the one hand, we have the Roman government, which today may be represented by any such secular government which seeks to impose its own secular moral value system on its people with authority and power. There are many such governments in the earth today--arrogant, boastful, and controlling. Often their leader is considered their god, or their country is their god, or goddess. Or, they are godless. Though not alone, governments that subscribe to communist ideologies under a dictator are some of the worst offenders. And on the other hand, these godless Jewish zealots of Smyrna are not alone, being of the synagogue of Satan. Today, many sects of Hinduism, Muslims, and numerous smaller religious sects, comprise this synagogue. They are not independent, but under one head, Satan. They all seek to quiet the true Gospel of Christ either through their own power and willful acts of destruction, or by inciting the secular government.

For instance, in India at the present time, there is a concerted effort to promote “nationalism”--an attempt to return India as a nation to its Hindu roots. There is a rising sense to purge the land of non-Hindu elements. No week goes by without a Christian church being burnt, a pastor beaten, or new converts threatened and intimidated. This government is a blend of secular governmental powers and of particular Hindu sect. These zealots hope to have such purging complete by the year 2020-21. This threat is imminent. Satan, who is spirit, needs these earthly powers and human elements to oppose Christ in the earth. It is a trend replicated in many parts of the earth.

There are many in America who would like to have this nation return to its fundamental Christian roots. But any such movement is met with bitter opposition. **Liberal* elements in society have vehemently lashed out against **conservative* churches. [*See Endnotes] They use all forms of protest: the secular media, threatening boycotts of businesses and the promotion of individuals, vociferous ridicule of individuals, riots and threatening of riots on college campuses, and acting as a voting bloc demanding special legislations through their political representatives. There have even been bombings and shootings in some churches by extreme misfits. All of this in the name of “love,” “compassion,” and “tolerance” for any lifestyle or personal freedom regardless of how perverse or ungodly. Their cry is for “moral freedom,”--that individuals should determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life, that is, to “*eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*” This is a life without moral codes imposed by God or any religious group, especially Christians. Their voice is a brassy one, proclaiming that those who stand for the light and truth of the Gospel of Christ are intolerant, unloving, narrow-minded, bigoted, homophobic, and racist. Why? Because these believers have chosen to instead eat from a different tree, the *Tree of Life*--a narrowing way. (Mt. 7.13-14) How true are the words of Christ,

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, ‘THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.’” Jn. 15.18-25

The most tragic commentary is the vilifying and persecutions of zealous Christian churches, who are pressing into the true Gospel of Christ, by those within “Christianity” itself. It has been documented throughout the history of the Church that with each birthing of a new church, having true light, life and zeal, there is condemnation and often persecution by older, established denominationalists. And today, the liberal Christian population seeks to stifle the conservative Christian voice--sometimes using radical methods. It is written, “*For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel,*” Rm. 9.6 meaning that true Israel is not by natural generational descent through Abraham, but by *the promise* of a spiritual generation through Christ. Can it not also be equally written, “Not all ‘Christians’ are of Christ?” Can such ‘Christians’ actually be anti-Christ in their actions opposing the true purposes of Christ? With a word of caution, the apostle John wrote,

*“Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that *antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. **They went out from us, but they were not really of us;** for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”* 1 Jn. 2.18-19

*Antichrist: Either one who puts himself in place of Christ (a false Christ) or as an enemy of Christ (an opponent).

Thus, in the world today, the true Church of Christ is opposed, in varying degrees from simple harassment to death, by controlling national governments, by extremism in false religions, by the secular world media and entertainment industry, and by elements in certain archaic “Christian” denominations. To all accounts, they all feel this “true Church” must be silenced, rendered subservient to their systems, or at best, allowed to function within a closely controlled bubble. Today, even as I write, this is happening in an unprecedented way. Perhaps it is as written in Rev. 12.12, “*Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has but a short time.*” How does one respond?

“but you are rich” Rev. 2.9

We are grateful for those who work tirelessly to promote godly morality in our society, for those who become political activists, lead demonstrations, and lobby politicians for Christian values. We are thankful for those who volunteer so much of their time for charitable organizations providing for physical and emotional needs and moral guidance of the down-trodden. Many are there whose lives are in a downward spiral, caught up in self-destructing “freedoms” or opportunities made available to them by this permissive society in which we live. Countless are the opportunities to serve this generation in this manner. And, these do help us to live our Christian lives a little more peacefully and slow the growth of rampant liberalism.

There is, however, a much needed spiritual component to this zeal. It is written, “*And take the helmet of salvation, and **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***” Eph. 6.17 You see, things “*of the Spirit*” are invisible to the eye and intangible to the touch. It is of the realm of faith. In faith, “*the word of God*” is transformed beyond the literal words of the Bible. It happens as the literal written word (Gk. *rhema*) is absorbed into the heart of man; much as the promise of God, “*I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts.*” Heb. 8.10 This word then becomes the living word (Gk. *logos*) of God. Thus, meanings like richness and poverty, strength and weakness, even life and death go well beyond the natural realm and can mean the opposite in the spiritual. One may be quite poor in the natural secular arena, “*but you are rich*” in the spiritual domain.

Those of the Church of Smyrna are commended by Christ “*to be rich*” in the love and favor of God, and also **in the esteem of Christ** who is accounting them rich, abounding in spiritual substance, and in the exercise of His goodness. What a commendation! O’ to hear our Lord and Savior say He is most pleased with us, regardless of our physical state, inspected only of the character of our inward man, is beyond joy. It is written, “There are both poor rich-men, and rich poor-men in God’s sight.” [Trench] It may be further stated that there are living

dead-men and dead living-men in God's sight... (*"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."* Gal. 2,20)

So, we see and understand the difference between the realm of the flesh and the realm of the spirit. *But thou art rich*, not in this world's goods, but in a more important respect--in the grace and favor of God. In the natural, wealth and grace are not infrequently united. The favor of God can flood the soul of man in the midst of his poverty. And, there are some things which are favorable to the promotion of a right spirit toward God which are not found where there is abundant wealth. These two things, *grace* and *prosperity*, are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another, but neither does one hinge upon the other. God's grace in Christ transcends all earthly measures of wealth and abundance. However, real *grace* has been known to have been poured out abundantly in times of greatest want.

***"be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."* Rev. 2.10**

Associated with the actions of **faith** are: faithfulness, fidelity, trust, confidence, steadfastness, endurance, and patience—all behavioral qualities that describe something beyond just "belief" in Christ. Many profess belief in Christ, as a mental assent, but live a life contrary to that belief. Faith is a gift (*grace*) of God, and never something that can be produced by people. For believers, faith is a *divine persuasion*, and therefore distinct from human belief (confidence), yet involving it. The Lord continuously births faith into yielded believers so they can know what He prefers, i.e., ***the persuasion of His will***. (1 Jn. 5.4)

The Lord said, *"Nevertheless when the Son of man comes, shall he find **faith** on the earth?"* Lk. 18.8 Faithfulness, in general, to a spouse, friend, cause, belief, organization, or country, is demonstrated by a sustaining loyalty and support. It is, however, a diminishing quality in the world today. The world is becoming increasingly self-centered and self-promoting where bonds, vows, agreements, contracts, and attachments are easily broken. And in the Church, faithfulness is attacked by the same "self" focus: my needs, my situation, my wants, my way, my sense of right and wrong, ad infinitum. Personal well-being, prosperity, health, abundance, worldly attractions and distractions all serve to cloud one's faith. **The persuasion of the self-will drowns out the persuasion of His will**. But here the Lord is asking, when He comes will He find true sustaining faith in you, and in me and in the Church about us? It seems He found such faith in the Church at Smyrna--even a fidelity unto death.

Let there be a clear distinction made. The ***crown of life*** is not a kingly or royal crown, but a crown awarded to a victor--to one who has run the race. *"I fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Now there is in store for me the **crown of righteousness**, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."* 2 Tim. 4.7-8 Analogous phrases are, "The crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5.4) and "the crown of life." (Jam. 1.12 and Rev. 2.10) To the apostle Paul, this crown is instantaneous beyond death. It marks the wearer as righteous before God.



It is not a golden crown of substance showing distinction, achievement, and authority, like a title: doctor, professor, CEO, mayor, president, chief, or even bishop, pastor, or elder. It is not a crown of ambition. It is not a crown earned in struggles for earthly distinctions. Rather, it is an intangible spiritual crown. This crown is awarded in the cause of *righteousness*--having God's judicial approval. It is awarded for one's conflicts and efforts in the cause of His holiness--a reward of one's efforts to be personally holy, and to spread the principles of holiness in the world. Each verse in the following passage, with brief comments, from 1 Peter is intentionally listed independently, for each is needful of careful consideration and reflection. It is to be read most soberly.

¹³Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation (appearance) of Jesus Christ;

Be thoughtful and clear-headed, fully anticipating the divine favor of Christ, as we step across into eternity, at His return.

¹⁴As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance:

Be obedient: Christ said, "If you love me keep My commandments." Jn. 14.15

¹⁵But as He which has called you is holy, so be you holy in all manner of conversation;

Walk in holiness, separated from worldly and fleshly desires and unto the persuasion of His will.

¹⁶Because it is written, Be you holy; for I am holy.

We are His children and thus are "partakers of His divine nature;" 2 Pet. 1.4 He is the sole source of true holiness.

¹⁷And if you call on the Father, who without respect of persons judges according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear:

In the end, judgement for things done in this lifetime will come.

¹⁸For as much as you know that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;

Our salvation does not come from religion or religious traditions...

¹⁹But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

...but from the reality of the sacred blood offering of the Holy One, Jesus Christ.

²⁰Who truly was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you,

He was destined for this from the beginning of all creation, but now is manifested in reality for you.

²¹Who by Him do believe in God, that raised Him up from the dead, and gave Him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God. 1 Pet. 1.13-21

In Him alone is our hope and confidence. "...for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Acts 4.12

"That we might be partakers of his holiness" (Heb. 12.10) does not mean the very essence of God's holiness, which is an incommunicable attribute of God. But there is a communicable holiness of His, which He determined before time that His people should have. It comes from Him, from whom every good and perfect gift does. (Jam. 1.17) It is worked into the believer by the Holy Spirit, thus bearing resemblance to the divine nature. By nature alone, man is destitute of this holiness but enters it by participation with Christ. One must first partake of its seed in the new birth (regeneration); and by further participation, grow in it by His predetermined design as one feeds upon the reality of Christ, the bread of life.

A parable. One cannot be sustained in natural life by simply absorbing the pure radiant energy emitted by the sun. It cannot keep him alive but may actually harm him if exposed to it too long. We may say, "this life energy is incommunicable from the sun to man," even as God's holiness is incommunicable to man. Rather, man must partake of this pure solar energy in another form, that which is absorbed, converted in form, and stored in plants and animals. The energy in this form is communicable to man as he partakes of it in his daily meals. The communicable form of holiness God intended for man is available only in His Son, Jesus Christ. "He that has the Son has life; and he that has not the Son of God has not life." 1 Jn. 5.12 May the phrase "communion with Christ" now take on a higher, more spiritual meaning.



In the natural, the personal gain in energy in its communicable form is used to live one's life. Without it you can do nothing. And in this process of living, one also emits some of this energy as heat. It is estimated that each individual in a room emits the same amount of energy as a 100 watt lightbulb. Spiritually, the holiness in its communicable form gained from the indwelling Christ sustains our spiritual life. Without Him, we can do nothing. (Jn. 15.5) The holiness then emitted is in the form of godly *righteousness*. It expresses itself as doing those things approved by God. This righteousness cannot be measured in watts as is heat energy. It is spiritual, yet still measurable by God as one's true "works" will be evaluated...

"But let every man take heed how he builds thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build on this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he

has built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." 1 Cor. 3.10-15

As in the case of the Church of Smyrna, afflictions of all sorts may be a means hastening to this end. If one remains in the state of faithfulness, available grace seems to be heightened in times of adversity. It brings the reality of the Kingdom of God into greater focus.

"My brothers, count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." Jam. 1.2-4

Practically, and we do want it to be real, one comes into a greater aversion to sin and self-centeredness and desires to purge them away; to be weaned from the lusts of this world; and to be a participant in God's kingdom. As with Christ, who even at a young age, had an abiding sense that, *"I must be about my Father's business."* Lk. 2.49 This impartation of His holiness continues throughout and unto spiritual maturity, until that day when each receives a crown of glory, when the body will be raised incorruptible, righteousness evaluated, an inheritance received, and, *"there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* Rev. 21.4

"He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death." Rev. 2.11

The death-in-life of the unsaved is contrasted here with the life-in-death of the believer. The pains and anguish of the first death, is of little consequence to all who may escape the second death. Those who die by the second death will be eternally *hurt* by it. To be sure, the *second death* is not annihilation of the being. As believers will eternally have life in the presence of the Father and the Son, those who taste of the second death will experience its *hurt* as eternal anguish in isolation from that presence. As it is written,

"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." Rev. 20.14-15 (See also Rev. 21.8)

Eternal life is in the experiential knowledge of God. (Jn. 17.3) It is having the innate ability to be in communion with the Father and Son, Jesus Christ. The death of that spirit, or the hurt of the second death, is the paralysis of the spiritual powers by which such knowledge and fellowship is possible. It is life without any possible means or ability to draw near to God. It is the awful experience of a life which is without God. Light and life is forfeited for darkness and death. In the natural, if one was to suddenly lose his physical senses (sight, hearing, taste, feel, and smell), he would be cast into a sea of despair, isolated, without communion with the world about him. Manifold would be the anguish of eternity without communion with God. But herein are the promises of God,

"He that overcomes shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." Rev. 21.7-8

"And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it... And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defiles, neither whatever works abomination, or makes a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life." Rev. 21.22, 27 (See also Rev. 22.12-15)

The Exhortation

If there be any encouragement, if there be any exhortation to be gleaned from this letter to the angel of the Church of Smyrna, it is this:

In this lifetime, life and death are but fleeting moments. And death is sure to come. However, as the momentary sting of death closes one door, for the believer, another door immediately opens into eternal glory. There should be no fear or dread for this passage. What lies before us? Our Lord and Savior has walked the same walk and has gone before and prepared a place for us.

“⁹But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man. ¹⁰For it became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For both He that sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brothers...” Heb. 2.9-11

What confidence, what rest, what hope for rejoicing has the believing one in Christ. But for now, we patiently await the Lord’s return. With the Lord’s return there will be judgement. For all:

“¹¹And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. ¹⁴And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵And whoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” Rev. 20.11-15

And for the believer, a judgment of righteousness:

*“For **we** (believers) must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he has done, whether it be good or bad.”* 2 Cor. 5.10 (See also Rm. 14.10)

The experience of this eternal life comes with rewards for the faithful in Christ and the loss of rewards for infidelity. *“Things done in this body”* have eternal consequences. But to be sure, entrance into His presence and potential gain beyond that is a divine promise. *“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”* 2 Cor. 4.17

I believe **the greatest exhortation to the individual believer, and to the church, is faithfulness**. Not Sunday morning faithfulness but 24/7 faithfulness--ever pursuing, reaching forward for those things which are before. (Phil. 3.12-14) Many are the trials of this life. Worldly lure and temptations, infirmities, hunger, weariness, loss of loved ones, various types and degrees of persecutions and mockeries, isolation, imprisonment, and standing at death’s door are ever before us. No one is exempt from any one of these. However, as one stands in *the burning fiery furnace* he/she is not alone.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spoke, and said to his counsellors, ‘Did not we cast three men bound into the middle of the fire?’ They answered and said to the king, ‘True, O king.’ He answered and said, ‘See, I see four men loose, walking in the middle of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.’” Dan. 3.24-25



Endnotes. *Liberalism* is more than just a political view. It is a position that is open to new behavior or opinions and a willingness to discard traditional values. It feels society must change with changing times. A *liberal* attitude toward anything means more tolerance for change. Perhaps there are many things in society that need to be changed, especially in a godless society. However, for the Church, it is a very dangerous mindset. Those with liberal views believe people should have a lot of freedom in deciding for themselves how to behave and think. Included in this mentality is a forced reevaluation of some of the most basic Christian values and practices in favor of tolerance for varying lifestyles, moral behavior, and socialistic tendencies.

Conservatism holds to traditional attitudes and values and cautions about change or modernism. There is a disposition to preserve core values, or to restore traditional ones. Changing times do not dictate a change in these fundamental principles. In the Church, conservatism, as the root word *conserve* implies, resists change or modernization. Any such change is a break from foundational Biblical standards and a violation of Godly righteousness. “*For I am the LORD, I change not.*” Mal. 3.6 Not neglecting the disadvantaged, it stresses a lesser dependency upon society and greater sense of individual responsibility and contribution to society.