

*Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

**THE SUFFERING CHURCH  
Revelation 2:8-11**

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever just had a really bad day where nothing seems to go right? I would like to read an article I cut out of the paper a while back. It is titled: **“From our Things Could Be Worse Department.”**

So you think you’re having a bad day?

- The average cost of rehabilitating a seal after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska was \$80,000. At a special ceremony, two of the most expensively saved animals were released back into the wild amid cheers and applause from onlookers. A minute later, in full view, they were both eaten by a killer whale.

So you think you’re having a bad day?

- A woman came home to find her husband in the kitchen, shaking frantically with what looked like a wire running from his waist toward the electric kettle. Intending to jolt him away from the deadly current, she whacked him with a handy plank of wood by the back door, breaking his arm in two places. Until that moment he had been happily listening to his I-pod.

So you think you’re having a bad day?

- Two animal rights protesters were protesting at the cruelty of sending pigs to a slaughterhouse in Bonn, Germany. Suddenly the pigs, all 2,000 of them escaped through a broken fence and stampeded, trampling the two hapless protesters.

So you think you’re having a bad day?

- Iraqi terrorist Khay Rahnajet didn’t pay enough postage on a letter bomb. It came back with “return to sender” stamped on it. Forgetting it was the bomb, he opened it. He was 38.

I hope that you are not having a bad day. In our passage this morning we move on to the second message to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

This morning we move on to examine the letter written to the suffering church in Smyrna. They were having more than just a bad day. They were going through some rather difficult times.

Remember that these churches mentioned here in Revelation 2-3 are seven literal churches in the seven postal districts of Asia Minor and that the Apostle John who records these messages had previously ministered to these churches before he was exiled on the Island of Patmos.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

Remember that we are examining these seven messages to these seven literal churches so that we might better understand the characteristics that Christ desires His churches to have.

**So this morning we will examine 5 aspects of the message to the Church in Smyrna so that we might understand the characteristics that Christ desires His church to possess.**

**I. The First Aspect of this message is The Commission to Write to the Church in Smyrna.**

This commission is recorded for us in **Revelation 2:8**. John writes, “*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write.*”

Just as in the previous message, there are two features in this commission.

The first feature of the commission is that it is written to an angel. Remember that the term angel can literally be rendered “messenger” as in Luke 7:24 or James 2:5.

So the letter is written to the messenger in the church at Smyrna. Remember that this messenger is likely the message giver and is best identified as the pastor of the church in Smyrna.

Why is this letter directed to the pastor? The letter is directed to the pastor because not just because he is responsible for the spiritual condition of the church, but primarily because he is the one who can communicate this message to the congregation.

The second feature of the commission is that it is written to a specific church in a specific city. In this case it is directed to the church in the city of Smyrna.

It is necessary that we have a good understanding of what the city of Smyrna was like. So what was Smyrna like?

### **The City:**

Smyrna was a city of significance. For most people it would be on the best places to live list population up to 200,000. How was Smyrna significant as a city?

- ***First it was a city of Geographical Significance.***

It was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus near the bottom of the gulf of the Aegean Sea in the province of Ionia.

Smyrna had a very wealthy commercial seaport with a magnificent harbor not plagued by the problems of Ephesus. This smaller inner port had a narrow entrance, which was of value during times of war.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

Smyrna was also located at the end of a road, which served the Hermas River Valley and thus facilitated trade through Smyrna's port.

It's geography made Smyrna a city of beauty, safety and of good economy.

- ***Second, Smyrna was a city of Historical Significance:***

Smyrna is said to have been inhabited as early as 3000 BC. The first Greek settlement dates back to 1000 BC.

In 627 BC, it was destroyed by the Lydians and lay in ruins until 290 BC when two of Alexander the Great's successors had the city rebuilt.

Smyrna came into contact with Rome because of its harbor and became a staunch ally of Rome. In fact the citizens of Smyrna were infatuated with Rome and in 195 BC, they built a temple in which the Roman Emperor was worshiped.

This city of historical significance has suffered many earthquakes and fires through the years and remains today as the Turkish city of Izmir.

- ***Third, Smyrna was a city of Cultural Significance:***

The city of Smyrna was known for its extreme beauty. Its claim to be the chief city of Asia was contested only by Ephesus and Pergamum, but in beauty Smyrna was easily first.

The city was well designed with excellently paved streets and was surrounded by groves.

One street called, "the street of Gold" was likened to a golden necklace with jewels on it. The jewels symbolized the beautiful temple buildings in order along a sloping hill called "the pagos."

Smyrna was also known as a center for learning, especially in science and medicine, and boasted to be the birthplace of Homer.

- ***Fourth, Smyrna was a city of Economic Significance:***

Smyrna was a large prosperous city of about 200,000 residents. Trade was facilitated by its great harbor, which served as an outlet for the Hermas River Valley.

It was also a free city, which meant that it was self-governing and self-sufficient. It boasted of a great stadium, library, public theatre and it epitomized social sophistication for its day.

- ***Fifth, Smyrna was a city of Religious Significance:***

Smyrna was well known as an enthusiastic center for Caesar worship. In fact this would pose an extreme danger to anyone who became a Christian.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

The acropolis on Mount Pagos was known as the crown of Smyrna. The temple of Cybele sat on one side while a temple to Zeus sat on the other side. In between were temples for Apollo, Asclepia, Aphrodite, and Emperor Tiberius.

Certainly, Smyrna was a city of geographical, historical, cultural, economic and religious significance, but what about the church in Smyrna?

### **The Church:**

It is interesting that there is no record of the founding of the Christian church in the city of Smyrna.

In fact, Smyrna is only mentioned here in the Bible.

Most believe that it was likely founded as a result of Paul's Ephesian ministry either by Paul, himself or by his converts.

Certainly this fits with **Acts 19:10**, which states that, "*all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord both Jews and Greeks.*"

At the end of the first century, life was very dangerous for believers in Smyrna. Since the city was such a strong ally to Rome, and a major center of Emperor worship, many Christians were persecuted.

Under the Emperor Domitian, it became a capital offense to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor. As a result many Christians faced persecution and even execution.

It is interesting that the Greek term for Smyrna is the same word for myrrh, a resinous gum used as an agent for embalming.

Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church in Smyrna.

Maybe you are going through a time of suffering or trial. If so then this letter from Christ to the suffering church in Smyrna just might be an encouragement to you.

### **II. The Second Aspect of This Message is The Correspondent of the letter to the Church in Smyrna!**

The correspondent of this letter is identified in **Revelation 2:8** which reads, "*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this...*"

Here in **Revelation 2:8**, we not only see the commission to John to write the letter to the church in Smyrna, but we also see the identification of the real author of this message.

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Who is the real author of this message to the church in Smyrna? It is none other than Christ, Himself as is the case in each of these seven letters.

But notice that Christ is identified differently in each of these messages. How is Christ identified to the suffering church in Smyrna?

First, Christ, the correspondent of this letter is identified as our Eternal God!

Christ identifies Himself as “*the first and the last.*” This title is used in John’s vision of Christ in **Revelation 1:17** and will be used of Christ again toward the end of the book in **Revelation 22:13**.

This was an Old Testament title for God especially highlighted in the book of Isaiah. **Isaiah 44:6** says, “*Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and the last, And there is no God besides Me.*”

Clearly this is a title for God. Jesus identifies Himself as God very God and there is no God besides Him. He is the one who is eternal. He is the one who is infinite in relation to time.

He always has been, He is and He always will be. He is both creator and consummator, the absolute Lord of all history and eternity.

Just as John was comforted by this attribute of Christ as he received the vision of Christ in **Revelation 1:17**, so the suffering saints in Smyrna could be comforted upon hearing these words of Christ.

He is eternal God! Because, Christ is eternal, we too can have comfort and assurance in Him regardless of the trials, persecutions or suffering that we may face.

Second, Christ, the correspondent of this letter is identified as our Resurrected Savior!

He goes on in verse 8 to say, “*who was dead, and has come to life...*” Once again this description of Christ is taken from the vision of Christ in **Revelation 1:17-18**.

To what does this picture of Christ refer? This very clearly refers to Christ’s death and resurrection.

Christ as eternal God took on the form of a bondservant. He took on humanity, God in human flesh. He lived a sinless perfect life on this earth, suffered, died and rose again.

The emphasis here is definitely upon the resurrection. He is the eternally living Savior. He is the victor over sin and death.

This title would be an encouragement to those in Smyrna who were suffering extreme persecution because they would be reminded of Christ’s suffering and death.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

He was the one who was slandered, falsely accused, whipped, brutally beaten, and hung upon a Roman cross. Christ could sympathize with their suffering.

But more importantly they would be reminded of His victory over sin and death through His resurrection and thus their future hope of being resurrected into a glorified body to forever be with the Lord.

Certainly this picture of Christ the correspondent of this letter can bring us comfort and peace when we face difficult times.

We can be comforted in the fact that Christ is our eternal God and there is no other. He is in perfect control.

We can be comforted in the fact that Christ is our Resurrected Savior who can sympathize with our suffering.

### **III. The Third Aspect of This Message is The Commendation Given to the Church in Smyrna!**

We see the commendation given in verse 9 where Christ says, *“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”*

In this commendation to the church in Smyrna, we are reminded of Christ’s omniscience. He knows everything, every little detail that there is to know about His church. Nothing escapes the vision of the Lord. He sees all! He knows all!

What did Christ know about the church in Smyrna that He then commends them for.

First, He tells them that He knows their tribulation. He says in verse 9, “I know your tribulation.”

The term tribulation [THLIPSIS] literally means “pressure” or “affliction.” This pressure or affliction is a pressure that presses in and burdens the spirit.

In the New Testament it is used of the calamities of war, the distress of women in childbirth, and of persecution.

The church in Smyrna received this type of pressure or affliction from all sides.

First and foremost, there would have been pressure from the government in Smyrna, which would have forced emperor worship upon every citizen with the threat of death for disobedience.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

Those believers in Smyrna who refused to worship the emperor were persecuted for their faith in Christ.

The afflictions that these believers faced were immense. They faced various kinds of punishments for their faith in Christ.

These included imprisonment, racking (which is being torn limb from limb), searing, boiling, burning, scourging, stoning, and hanging.

Many were lacerated with red-hot pincers, and some were thrown upon the horns of wild bulls.

Others were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and then mauled by dogs and still others were dressed in shirts made with stiff wax, fixed to trees and set on fire.

The most striking and well-known example was that of Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna, who many believe was the recipient of this letter, would some 60 years later be burned at the stake for his faith in Christ.

His famous last words were, “Eighty-six years have I served Him and He never did me any harm; how then can I blaspheme my King and My Savior?”

Christ was commending the believers in Smyrna for their faithfulness to Him while enduring severe persecution, even unto death. He knew their tribulation.

Like the believers in Smyrna we need to follow James exhortation in **James 1:2-3** to, “*consider it all joy when we encounter various trials knowing that the testing of our faith produces endurance.*”

We may face a variety of difficulties in our lives. It may be the death of a loved one; the loss of employment, physical suffering or verbal criticisms.

But one thing is for sure we must strive to face these difficulties just as the church in Smyrna faced persecution. We must be faithful and joyful knowing that God is growing us through the process.

He knows our afflictions! He can sympathize with us because He too has suffered. He is in complete control of our circumstances! And will certainly work it out for His glory!

As Paul says in **Romans 8:28**, “*And we know that God causes all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*”

But, Christ knew more than the tribulation that the believer’s in Smyrna faced.

Second, He tells them that He knows their poverty. He says in verse 9, “I know your poverty (but you are rich),”

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

There are two terms in the Greek that speak of being poor or in poverty. The term here is not describing one who struggles to meet their needs.

Rather, the term poverty [PTOCHOS] speaks of one who has nothing at all. It describes a poor beggar who is completely destitute.

The believers in Smyrna were driven to absolute poverty because of their faithfulness to Christ. In Smyrna being a Christian brought economic implications.

Those who were employed by others often lost their jobs and their means to support their families because of their Christianity.

And those who were self-employed often lost their customers and in turn were not able to support their families.

Many believers were disinherited by their family and were ostracized from the community for their loyalty to Christ.

Yet Christ told them they were rich. How were they rich if they were reduced to a state of complete destitution?

They were rich spiritually and eternally. They may be physically lacking, yet they were spiritually wealthy. They had remained faithful and loyal to Christ despite their circumstances.

When we get to the message to the church in Laodicea, we will see the exact opposite situation, those who were physically wealthy, but spiritually bankrupt.

I think that most of us have a hard time identifying with the situation in Smyrna because we are not poverty stricken.

We are a privileged people! We live in one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest country in the world.

In my Bible class at school, we have been consistently going through a mission focus in which we examine the state of Christianity in the world.

In so doing, we examine various aspects of these other nations. And all too frequently we see countries whose average income per person is below \$400 a year.

The average American exceeds that amount in one week and many exceed it in just one day. Yet we grumble and complain about our situations.

But, how should we respond to the situation in which we find ourselves?



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Like the believers in Smyrna we must follow the example of the Apostle Paul who says in **Philippians 4:11**, “*Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.*”

We must strive to be joyfully content in our circumstances seeking to bring honor and glory to Christ regardless of the circumstances that we face knowing that “*God will supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*”

Christ knew more than the tribulation and poverty that the believer’s in Smyrna faced.

Third, He tells them that He knows the blasphemy that they faced.

In addition to pressure from the government and poverty from the economic community, Christ also is aware of persecution that those in the church at Smyrna faced from the religious establishment.

He says in verse 9, “*And the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*”

Christ declares that those who say they are of God, but attack Christians, are really of Satan.

To blaspheme a Christian amounted to blaspheming Christ, just as persecuting a Christian was equivalent to persecuting Christ (cf. Acts 9:4-5).

Those who claimed to be Jews were indeed actual physical descendants of Abraham, but were not of the spiritual family of God, rather they were a synagogue of Satan.

These unbelieving Jews led the charge against Christians. In fact there were 5 major slanders usually made against the Christians of the early church.

- 1) Because Christians partook of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, they were called cannibals.
- 2) Because they gathered together for a common meal of fellowship, they were accused of gathering together for orgies of lust.
- 3) Because Christianity at times resulted in split families, they were accused of being anti-family.
- 4) Because Christians worshiped without images, they were called atheists.
- 5) Because Christians would not say that Caesar is Lord, they were accused of being rebels and disloyal.

The believers in Smyrna not only faced physical pressure and tribulation, but they also faced these false verbal accusations. Christ was well aware of the blasphemy they encountered.

Like the believers in Smyrna, we must rejoice in light of whatever insults or blasphemies we face from the unbelieving world.

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Just as Christ instructs in the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5:10-12**, “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*”

Once again we must strive to rejoice regardless of our circumstances, regardless of what comes our way.

Christ’s letter to the church in Smyrna does not end here. However it is fortunate for them, because unlike the vast majority of these messages. Christ does not condemn the church in Smyrna.

What a blessing it would be if we could respond to our circumstances like the church in Smyrna so that Christ has nothing but good to say about our church.

### **IV. The Fourth Aspect of This Message is The Counsel Given to the Church in Smyrna!**

While the church in Smyrna was not in need of any correction, they were in need of some counsel. They were in need of some continued encouragement.

How did Christ counsel the believers in Smyrna?

He says in verse 10, “*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*”

Christ’s counsel to the church in Smyrna is two-fold:

#### First, Christ Exhorts them: Do Not Fear!

After commending them for faithfully enduring persecution, Christ warned the believers in Smyrna that they would face further persecution even leading unto death.

Christ warned them of their continued suffering. Some would be imprisoned, tested and face further affliction.

There is disagreement over what is meant by the 10 days of tribulation, but it makes sense that at some point in the future that the believers in Smyrna just might suffer tribulation for ten literal days.

The instruction given was not to fear man and not to fear the suffering that they were encountering.

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

They were not to fear what they were about to suffer because the source of this persecution is the devil. He is ultimately behind it.

Just as **Ephesians 6:12** highlights, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

Knowing that Christ had conquered sin and death! Knowing that Christ once and for all defeated Satan at the cross, the believers in Smyrna could take comfort in knowing that God was in ultimate control regardless of the suffering that they may face.

Likewise, we can joyfully endure whatever suffering we may face because God is in control and has something better for us in eternity.

We simply need to keep our focus on Christ and living in such a way that is pleasing to Him. Living in such away as Dale has said in the past, that we have our spiritual headlights on.

We need to be focusing on our future in glory rather than fearing the tribulation that we encounter now.

Christ not only exhorted the church in Smyrna not to fear, but he also encouraged them.

### Second, Christ Encourages them: Be Faithful!

They were given the assignment of being faithful! How long were they to remain faithful to God and His plan and purposes? Until death!

As Christ was faithful unto death so were these believers in Smyrna to be faithful as well.

This makes me think of my oldest son Jacob. A few years ago he was really into the Marines.

We were waiting for a table at Red Lobster and got to talking to a guy who was a marine. He asked Jacob, “Hey do you know what Semper Fi means?” Jacob responded, “Always Faithful!”

This should be the attitude of the Christian regardless of what we face Christ counsels us to be Always Faithful! Even unto death.

What will be the end result of those who persevere in faithfulness?

Christ says, *“I will give you the crown of life.”* This crown that Christ speaks of here is a victor’s crown at an athletic event and symbolizes eternal life.

The believers in Smyrna were facing a temporary physical tribulation and even death, however in contrast to their temporary plight, they are offered an eternal reward. They are being promised as true believers in Christ a reward of eternal life.

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Hopefully we can heed the counsel of Christ here in Revelation 2:10 and remember not to fear man or the suffering that we may encounter and remember to always be faithful looking forward to eternity with Christ.

Christ concludes His message to the church in Smyrna just as He does in each of these letters by offering a challenge to the overcomer.

### **V. The Fifth Aspect of This Message is The Challenge to the Overcomer in Smyrna!**

Remember that the overcomer is a reference to the true believer in Christ (cf. John 5:4-5).

What is promised to the true believers in Christ? Jesus says in verse 11, “He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

Though persecuted believers may suffer the first death physical death, they will never experience the second death, which is not annihilation, but conscious, eternal damnation in hell.

The Greek construction translated “shall not” is the strongest possible negation that the Greek language can express. “May it never be!!!”

The persecuted, suffering yet faithful church in Smyrna stands for all time as an example of those who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (cf. Luke 18:15).

Because they loyally confessed Christ before men, He will confess them before the Father (cf. Matthew 10:32).

What an encouragement this church is for those of us facing times of suffering and difficulty today.

May we when faced with affliction and suffering respond as the church in Smyrna did remembering the words of Peter in **1 Peter 1:6-8**, that *“even though now for a little while, if necessary, we have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of our faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

The church in Smyrna reminds me a righteous man by the name of Job, who had a really bad day. In one day, he lost nearly everything he had. His cattle, his camels, his sheep, his servants and all ten of his children.

He responded in faithfulness to God. What was his response, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

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Rather than blame God, may He give us the grace to always be faithful regardless of the circumstances, the trials or difficulty that we face.