

# Experience Christ's Comfort: The Church at Smyrna

## LHC: Message Fifteen (980607AM)

### Week 15: Experience Christ's Comfort

(Revelation 2:8–11 — The Church at Smyrna)

This week as we approach the end of days, you can find hope as you experience Christ's comfort!

#### SUNDAY: Be Ready to Listen

*“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.”*

—Revelation 2:11

In our journey through the Book of Books we have seen Jesus in so many wondrous ways! For instance, we've seen that Jesus has a voice *“as the sound of many waters”* (Revelation 1:15). But did you know that He also speaks in a *“still small voice”* (1 Kings 19:12b)? Have you heard Him as He has spoken from the pages of His Book? Through His Word, He speaks to all who have the spiritual ears to hear Him. Are your ears tuned in to Jesus?

Last week we saw that the Ephesian period, dating directly from the apostles (A.D. 30–60), was a time of warmth and love and labor for Christ. In Ephesus the true believers had an abundant life (Revelation 2:7), an overflowing life (John 7:38), and an extraordinary life (John 10:10). Defection, however, began by the gradual cooling of the love of some, the false professions of others, and the incoming of undue exaltations of the clergy and church offices.

This week we will now study the second period of church history, the Smyrna period (A.D. 60–303). These saints lived during an era of martyrdom, which kept them basically pure due to the persecution they suffered. As true believers they had an indestructible life (Revelation 2:11).

The saints in Smyrna were faithful unto death, which was a sweet savor unto God. Unless Christ returns soon, we all must face the inevitability of our own death. We can learn how to die in a godly manner from these models: Jacob died trusting the promises of God (Genesis 47:29); Joseph died pointing to the faithfulness of God (Genesis 50:24); David died exhorting his family to follow God (1 Kings 2:1–4); Stephen died praising God (Acts 7:59–60); Peter died reminding the saints about the Word of God (2 Peter 1:12–15); Paul died finishing the plan of God (2 Timothy 4:6–8); and our Lord Jesus Christ died pointing the way for another to come to God (Luke 23:43).

Have you planned for the spiritual aspects of your death? So many only get the funeral arrangements and their life insurance in order, yet there is so much more to plan and prepare for as a Christian. Are you ready to honor Him in life as well as in death? Are you hoping in Jesus?

**My Prayer for You This Week:** *We bow before You, Lord Jesus, our Savior. We want to discover the hope that You offer. The only thing that your children actually possess is our hope of everlasting life. Everything else can be stripped away from us—our possessions, all the prizes we have won in life, even those dearest to us. Oh Jesus, what we really possess is our hope in You! Open our eyes and hearts as You speak to us through this special letter that You wrote to the church at Smyrna. Help us to embrace You as the hope to which we cling, the hope toward which we press, and the hope which can never be taken away from us. And then, with that precious and very blessed hope in mind, help us to face the inevitability of our own death in a way that will glorify You. For we recognize that unless You come for us in the Rapture, we will all die. Oh, how we hope for Your return—come quickly, Lord Jesus! In Jesus’ precious name we pray. Amen.*

## **MONDAY: Be Ready to Trust Christ**

***“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer . . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”***

—Revelation 2:10, emphasis added

“Smyrna” is a very interesting word because it is derived from the Greek word *smurna* that is translated “myrrh.” Myrrh is an aromatic resin taken from a thorny tree, and was the chief product of this city, the seaport of Myrrh. It was taken by hacking the tree with a machete. Wherever the tree was cut, it would exude the resin. The more it was cut the more this very expensive resin would flow out. Myrrh thus became associated with suffering because this beautiful tree would be attacked and cut and scarred.

In this town where myrrh was gathered, we think of the church that was going to face the cutting edge of persecution. In fact, Jesus essentially told them, “Some of you who receive My letter are going to be put into jail. Some of you are going to be persecuted. Some of you are going to die.” Each one of these declarations was like a cut on the tree of the church there.

Today’s true church is not exempt from persecution either, because Christ has said that all who live godly will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). The more we are cut, the more we are persecuted, and the more we are facing hard times, the more Christ wants the sweet-smelling fragrance of faithfulness to exude out of our lives.

What happens when we get tested? A friend of mine says that all of us are spiritual teabags: when we get dunked up and down in hot water, whatever is inside of us comes out. This past week, if things got hot, tense, tight, and hard, what came out of your life? Was it the aroma of Christlike myrrh? Or was it something less than that?

This Smyrnan church, which represents the suffering period of church history, had a sweet-smelling fragrance unto the Lord. As we just saw, the name “Smyrna” was derived from a Greek word translated “myrrh.” Myrrh was always associated with the sufferings of Jesus’ life. At Christ’s birth, the Magi gave gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus, who was crushed for our sins. We see a notable example of that in Mark 15:23. While Christ hung on the cross He was offered a sponge filled with wine mixed with

myrrh. Because myrrh also served as an anesthetic, His crucifiers were trying to dull His senses to lessen the intense pain He was experiencing. Jesus refused it, however, because He wanted to have full sensation of the pain He suffered for us.

Suffering is an opportunity to choose whether we believe that serving Christ is far better than anything we could ever have. Are you willing to suffer for Christ? Paul said, **The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us** (Romans 8:18). If we suffer with Christ, we will also be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17b).

## **TUESDAY: Be Ready to Suffer**

*All who desire to **live godly** in Christ Jesus will **suffer persecution**.*

—2 Timothy 3:12, emphasis added

Jesus wrote a letter through the apostle John who was exiled on the Isle of Patmos, just a short distance from Ephesus. He wrote the seven letters Jesus dictated to him, and then sent them by boat to Ephesus where there was a world-renowned library and book distribution center. Those letters were copied down and distributed around the postal route (the geographical circle of the locations of the seven churches). Smyrna was the first city, about forty miles from Ephesus. Can you imagine their reaction when they read Jesus' letter telling them that someone was coming to kill them? That would have been quite a shock!

How did Smyrna get under such a wave of persecution? The problem of that day was called "Emperor Worship." In A.D. 26, during the life of Jesus Christ, an altar was built to Emperor Tiberius. He was on the throne of the Roman Empire that controlled the entire western world at that time. In the center of Smyrna a temple to Tiberius was built. On it was an inscription that said: "This is dedicated to the glorious Emperor God Tiberius."

To remain an accepted part of the Empire, each person had to declare his or her loyalty to the emperor by visiting the temple, scooping a pinch of incense, and putting it on the fire. Afterward, a certificate was given to certify that you passed. That was the one act that unified the masses of people in the Roman Empire. However, most Christians would not do this because it required them to say, "Caesar is Lord." This ritual was not enforced upon Christians until A.D. 94, when the letter to the church at Smyrna was written.

**Meet the villains.** The first was just three years old when his father died. It was little loss to the boy, for his father had been a killer, a bully, and a cheat. His mother took over the family trade and continued the boy's education. She murdered his stepfather with a dish of poisoned mushrooms. Reared in squalor, the son was molded into his parents' image. While still young, he committed his first murder—a teenaged boy who stood in his way; with callous indifference, he watched him die. He married at fifteen, had his wife killed, married again, and slew her also. To marry a third time, he murdered the husband of the woman he wanted. Because his mother annoyed him, he arranged her murder as well—at first by guile, but when that was unsuccessful, without pretense. He was an ugly man with a bull neck, beetle brows, a flat nose, and a tough mouth. He had a potbelly, spindly legs, bad skin, and an offensive odor. At age thirty-

one he was sentenced to death by flogging. He fled to a dingy basement, and cut his own throat while in the house of a slave. He gave the infant church its first taste of things to come. Who was he? His name was Nero. He was the first of the persecuting Caesars of Rome.

Nero's successor, Domitian, was on the throne thirty years later. It was A.D. 94 when he said, "If you will not take that incense and throw it on the fire, in honor of me as god, then you will be killed because all the Empire will worship me!" When Domitian commanded even the Christians to confess "Caesar is Lord," or pay the price of death, Jesus wrote them the letter recorded in Revelation 2:8–11.

The church at Smyrna was about to face the ultimate test of their lives: "*You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve*" (Matthew 4:10b). The choice before them was this: Deny Christ, and live; worship Christ—and die! If you were to face that edict today, do you know how you would respond?

### **WEDNESDAY: Be Ready to Die**

*I [Paul] am already being poured out as a drink offering, and **the time of my departure is at hand.***

—2 Timothy 4:6, emphasis added

The church at Smyrna had one of the more famous people in history at this time. He knew that the most important decision you will ever make in life is how you want to die. Under his leadership, the saints at Smyrna made a choice that they wanted to die in Jesus.

During the persecutions that followed Christ's letter, Polycarp, the last living person led to Christ by the apostle John, was martyred. "Because he preached Jesus Christ, whom the Jews had crucified, he offended the Jews in Smyrna who were blaspheming and persecuting the Christians. In Revelation 2:9, Jesus referred to these Jews as being "*a synagogue of Satan.*" That is not mere speculation because history has left us with an account of the death of Polycarp, the pastor of the church in Smyrna."<sup>1</sup> The account follows:

It was the time of the public games; the city was crowded; and the Jews excited the crowds and suddenly the shout went up throughout the Jewish community: "Away with the atheist; let Polycarp be searched for." They came to arrest him and not even the police 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 offer sacrifice to be saved? But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord. When he entered the arena . . . [the] proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" So the crowds came flocking with burning faggots from the workshops and from the baths, and the Jews, even though they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire. They were going to bind him to the stake. "Leave me as I am," he said, "for He who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will

give by the nails.” So they left him loosely bound in the flames. Think about watching your pastor being burned at the stake.

Polycarp dying for Christ was just one incident in the life of the suffering Smyrnan church.<sup>2</sup>

**Hope in Jesus when life is painful.** The message Christ gave in Revelation 2:10 is simple: *“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

It is interesting the way this is written: “Either be faithful when you are killed for your faith, or remain faithful all the way until death comes. But don’t fear; be faithful and I will crown you!”

Every word of Christ’s brief letter to the church at Smyrna was so vital to those saints, but because of the urgency of the times there was an economy of words. It was the shortest of the seven letters to the churches, having only four verses and 127 words compared to the twelve verses written to Thyatira.

Because all the letters to the churches tie together with this description of Christ, look at what Jesus said to John earlier: *“Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death”* (Revelation 1:17–18).

Now look at Revelation 2:8: *“These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.”* Do you see how Jesus identifies himself as the author? He says that He identifies with them as they go through this persecution unto death!

Jesus thus reveals himself to them as the One who is best suited to comfort them in their sorrow and to encourage them in their sufferings: *“[I] was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.”* He consoled them by reminding them that He also had passed through suffering and death, and triumphed over it.

Do you see why Jesus is the author of eternal life? He is the One who was dead, who died in our place *that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil* (Hebrews 2:14). Throughout human history the power of death has gripped people with fear. Jesus destroyed the devil to *release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (Hebrews 2:15). Jesus gave us hope!

After Jesus wrote to Smyrna, He identified Himself as the Lord of Life who conquered death. Now He gave them an approval: *“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”* (Revelation 2:9).

The martyred Christians were able to die faithfully because they lived faithfully for Christ. They were triumphant in death because they were triumphant in life. And He says to us likewise: “Be faithful unto death, and I will approve of you!”

## **THURSDAY: Be Ready for Troubles**

***“You will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”***

—Revelation 2:10c, emphasis added

Look out saints at Smyrna—trouble is coming! Christ’s warning to them is interesting. It could be that they had persecution for ten calendar days. Or it could refer to ten periods of time, or that there were ten Roman emperors who persecuted the church. Personally, I believe that all three apply.

The early church did indeed have ten great persecutions under the Roman emperors. It all began with Nero and ended with Diocletian, whose ten-year-long persecution was probably the most terrible of all. Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian were the ten principal pagan persecutors. However, there was constant, though not always general, trouble until Constantine’s edict of toleration in A.D. 313.

To the Smyrnan church, and His children in every church age, Jesus exhorted: “Be faithful!” Why? Because Christ is the One who will award the prized crowns. The faithful will be specially crowned if they are saved by grace and are triumphant in life. Here are the five prized crowns that Christ will present to His faithful ones:

1. **The crown of righteousness** is reserved for the victorious warriors who said no to sin throughout their lives. (2 Timothy 4:8)
2. **The unfading crown** is reserved for the steadfast racers who disciplined their body for Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:25–27)
3. **The crown of life** is reserved for those who were faithful unto death. (Revelation 2:10; James 1:12)
4. **The crown of honor** is reserved for those who were unselfish soul winners in life. (1 Thessalonians 2:9; cf. 3–6; Philippians 4:1)
5. **The crown of glory** is reserved for those who were examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5: 3–4)

G. C. Morgan has noted that “faithful” means “be convinced.” In Revelation 1:5 Christ refers to himself as “*the faithful witness*.” Because He is always so faithful, His children are convinced they must rest in Him, and depend on what He says. So “be convinced” of Him, and He will be your constant strength and courage!

## **FRIDAY: Seven Godly Ways to Die**

*These all **died in faith**, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*

—Hebrews 11:13, emphasis added

This week we have been learning about the church at Smyrna—the saints who experienced martyrdom for Christ’s sake. Their faithfulness unto death was such a sweet-smelling savor unto God. Unless Christ returns soon, all of us face the inevitability of death. Are you ready? Have you planned for the testimony you’d like your funeral to be?

By a few simple preparations, you can really bless your family and friends who stay behind after you’ve gone home to be with Jesus. If you have never done this, I

encourage you to take out a sheet of paper and label it: “My Home Going Celebration.” Write out a brief description of how you came to Christ, and of your hope in His salvation. Then share some of your favorite verses, songs, and hymns—and even a word to bless those you leave behind. Do this and, like Abel, you will “speak” even after you’ve died (Hebrews 11:4). To further prepare, consider once more the seven godly examples in Scripture of how to die with grace.

**Jacob looked for the Land of Promise to the end of his life.** When he was close to death, Jacob called Joseph to his side and said, “*Now if I have found favor in your sight, . . . deal kindly and truly with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers*” (Genesis 47:29–30). When Jacob was a young man, God had promised that his people would someday have a Land of Promise, but Egypt was not that land. Jacob therefore asked to be laid to rest in the actual land God was giving to his descendants. He had followed his Shepherd all the way, and trusted his Redeemer to save him from his sins (Genesis 48:15–16). Have you thanked the Lord lately for His grace that is greater than all your sins?

**Joseph died pointing to the faithfulness of God.** He told his brethren, “*I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*” (Genesis 50:24). In the ancient world, when someone was failing in health and was coming to the end of life, the family would gather around and listen to their last words. Inheritances were then divided up. Joseph died pointing his family to the Lord’s promises: “God will surely come to your aid, for He is faithful and will do what He said.”

**David died exhorting his family to follow God.** When he was about to die, David charged Solomon his son saying: “*I am about to go the way of all the earth,*” he said. “*So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go*” (1 Kings 2:2–3, NIV). David earned the right to exhort his family spiritually because he had lived a godly life. Lot, however, did not. His family laughed and mocked him, saying that he was scoffing (Genesis 19:14). To make our last moments on earth really count, it is so important that we get ready to die by *first* living for Christ.

**Stephen died praising God.** While he was being stoned, he prayed, “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*” When he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59–60, NIV). What an incredible testimony of dying faith! Stephen was radiant, worshipping, and offering his spirit into the presence of the Lord!

**Peter died reminding the saints about the Word of God.** He said, “*I will always remind you of these things, even though you . . . are firmly established in the truth you now have. . . . It is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside* (2 Peter 1:12–14, NIV). Jesus had told Peter that some day his hands would be stretched out, and he would be crucified (John 21:18). History tells us that he was crucified upside down because Peter had declared that he was not worthy to die like Jesus did.

**Paul died finishing the plan laid out for Him by God.** When death was near, he said, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord . . . will award to me on that day—and . . . to all who have longed for his appearing”* (2 Timothy 4:6–8, NIV). Paul faithfully followed the course that God had laid out for him. His last days were spent in the maximum security Mamertine Prison in Rome. He did not protest or try to get out; he placidly sat there and wrote letters, knowing that he had faithfully completed what God asked him to do, and was prepared to go to heaven.

**Christ died pointing the way for another to come to God.** Jesus told one of the criminals being crucified, *“Today you will be with Me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:43). Is Jesus *your* hope? If you died today, would you be with Him in paradise? Are you ready to die?

I frequently hear people regretfully say, “I wish I could do that over.” In Philippians 3:13–14, Paul said to forget what is behind and live for the Lord from today on. If you have not been as faithful as you need to be, start *now*. Finish the course Christ has laid out for you, and you will experience a great calm as you follow God’s will daily. This is the very best approach to being ready to go “home” any day—and not just when your “to do” list is complete. Consistently living like this is a wonderful way to die!

## **SATURDAY: Be Looking Forward to Heaven**

*It is **appointed** . . . to die once, but after this the judgment.*  
—Hebrews 9:27, emphasis added

None of us knows the exact date of our appointment with Jesus Christ to take us home to heaven, but we do know that what lies ahead is far superior to anything we could ever envision. Even now Jesus is preparing a mansion for us so that we can be with Him (John 14:2). What will it be like there?

Heaven will be a joyous and satisfying place! The joy of heaven’s inhabitants is pictured by the scenes of praise in the book of Revelation, the white-robed conquerors waving palm branches (Revelation 7:9), and the guests at a wedding supper (Revelation 19:1–9). This is buttressed by the imagery of some of Jesus’ parables where attaining heaven was compared to attending a banquet (Luke 14:15–24) or entering into the joy of one’s Master (Matthew 25:21, 23).

From the perspective of life in this world, heaven is the object of human longing and the goal of human existence. The book of Hebrews employs the imagery of quest to express this reality: *“These all died in faith, not having received what was promised. . . . For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland”* (see Hebrews 11:13–14).

In addition to being the goal of a quest, heaven is the reward for earthly toil, as in Paul’s picture of himself as having *“finished the race”* and looking forward to *“the crown of righteousness”* (2 Timothy 4:7–8). We see this imagery again in Peter’s vision of *“the chief Shepherd”* conferring *“the unfading crown of glory”* on those who have served faithfully (1 Peter 5:4). There is also the glorious picture of believers having come to *“Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God”* where thousands upon thousands of angels are in joyful assembly (Hebrews 12:22 NIV).

Images of satisfaction emerge from the pictures in Revelation of saints being guided by a divine Shepherd to springs of living water (Revelation 7:17), and having access to “*the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month*” (see Revelation 22:2).

Heaven is also portrayed as a rest after labor: those who die in the Lord *rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them* (see Revelation 14:13). Similarly, “*there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God,*” which believers strive to enter (see Hebrews 4:9–11).

As we conclude this week, I exhort you to prayerfully consider the beautiful words of the song “For All the Saints.” Be comforted as you meditate on Christ’s faithfulness to all His dear saints who are now at rest from their labors, like Polycarp and his brethren at the church of Smyrna. As you read stanzas 3–5, consider this a prayer of faith for your own life and anticipate the joy and satisfaction that lies ahead of you in heaven!

### **For All the Saints**

*For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,  
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;  
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;  
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,  
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,  
And win with them the victor’s crown of gold  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,  
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,  
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,  
Thro’ gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

—William H. How (1823–1897)

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur Jr., *The Church in Prophetic Perspective: Bible Study on Revelation 2–3* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 76–77.