

Lesson 3 Revelation 2:8 - 11

Christ and the Churches – Smyrna, the loyal church

Memory verse: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (Revelation 2:11)

Smyrna is about 40 miles north of Ephesus. The name Smyrna means “bitter” and is related to the word myrrh. The city after lying desolate for 200 years was rebuilt by Alexander the great. The city remains a functioning community today called Izmir in Turkey unlike Ephesus which is gone with its harbour silted up.

In Roman times Smyrna was quite a place. It had a harbor that actually reached in about 35 miles, one of the finest in the world. It was the loveliest of cities so that Aristides said, "The winds blow through every part of the city and make it as fresh as a grove of trees." However, they had a problem from a constant west wind. Sewage drained into the gulf and the west wind blew it back into the city rather than out to the sea. Just another one of Smyrna's aromatic attractions! Nevertheless the setting of the city was beautiful and to some it was the ideal city on the earth. It began at the 35 miles deep harbour, traversed some narrow foothills and then behind the city rose this great Pagos, a hill covered with temples and noble buildings. It became a centre of science and medicine. It was a free city, had always been on the winner's side in all the Roman civil wars. And so was given the privilege of self-governing.

We don't know how the church in Smyrna was founded. Interestingly enough it's never mentioned anywhere in the book of Acts. It was a pure church. Obviously a wonderful congregation of people but it has no profile in the New Testament. The only thing we know we know from this letter and nothing more. We can assume that it was founded during Paul's three years in Ephesus when from Ephesus the gospel went out through Asia Minor. This church was founded only being between 35 and 40 miles away from Ephesus, it might have been one of the first stops. But we know nothing about how that church specifically was founded.

Historically Domitian was the Caesar at this time. If you know anything about Roman history you know that Domitian was a murderous dictator who launched an extensive persecution against the church which reached some kind of a fever pitch in the town of Smyrna. There was a very strong emperor worship cult there. In fact, they killed people who didn't worship Caesar. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate as certainly must have been the case for the Christians obedient to Christ, was to risk discovery and the death penalty. Joining hands with the Romans to oppose Christianity was a large Jewish community and we know that the Jews repeatedly informed the Romans against the Christians and incited the local government to attack them. It was tough. It was the centre also of the worship of Cybele, the worship of Apollo, Aesculapius, Aphrodite and Zeus and they all had temples there as well as the glorious monument to the great writer Homer who apparently was born there. And nestled in this great city was this little church. But for this little church in Smyrna life was dangerous.

So you have a real historical church here that also is not unlike churches throughout the history of the church. This then helps us to understand churches today that suffer under persecution and gives us a word of instruction for all persecuted Christians and how they are to deal with that difficulty

Things to learn: 1) Persecution 2) Poverty 3) Perseverance

Discussion questions:

Q1 “Discipleship involves suffering and sacrifice.” Why were the Christians in Smyrna persecuted and what lessons can Christians draw from this church today?

Q2 How could we explain the Lord's commendation that the Smyrna church was poor and yet rich?

Q3 Will the church at Smyrna only suffer for ten days (Rev 2:10) and what is the final counsel from Jesus?