

## The Church at Smyrna

### Background

*Geography* - Smyrna, located on the West coast of Asia Minor, has a sheltered harbor that faces a bay whose breezes cool the city during the hot summer months and provide a pleasant climate. The harbor stimulated trade and commerce that developed the city into a commercial metropolis (pop. 250000 in Paul's day). A major highway which cut through a fertile valley ended in Smyrna.

*Politics* - Politically the city sided with the Romans early and became their faithful ally. As early as 195 BC it built a temple to *Dea Roma*, the goddess of Rome (Rome was a god). In AD 26 Smyrna dedicated a temple to Emperor Tiberius and boasted to be first in emperor worship. This boast gratified Roman administrators, who saw to it that Smyrna was lavished with Roman favor. To make the spirit of Rome tangible, the Romans presented the emperor as Rome's embodiment, and thus worship of the emperor arose. Although some of the first emperors disliked this worship, the population energized it to the point that the emperor was considered to be divine - Caesar is Lord.

*Aesthetics* - Smyrna was extolled as the city most beautiful in respect to her buildings, the general layout of the city, and her groves of trees. Her buildings boasted some of the finest architecture in the empire. On a hill above the city, sat temples and other prominent buildings, that from a distance, gave the appearance of a crown. Hence, because of her aesthetic beauty and her favored standing in the Roman Empire, she was known as the "Crown of the Empire" which when used in common speech, was "the Crown of Smyrna".

Among the groves of trees that populated the city was a type of tree whose resin produced a reddish brown or yellowish-brown aromatic gum called in Hebrew myrrh and in Greek, Smyrna. Myrrh was used to embalm bodies before burial.

*Christians and Jews* - It is not known when Christianity first came to Smyrna, however, the church consisted of both Jewish and Gentile converts, and they were poverty stricken.

The Jewish population was sizable and wealthy. They may have been the largest religious group in Smyrna as well as some of the biggest private donors to the city for the purpose of keeping the city beautiful. The Jews as a whole enjoyed a special status in the Roman empire as the only religious group not required to engage in emperor worship.

And they were the biggest slanders of the church in Smyrna.

### Commendation

Jesus is fully aware of the affliction or tribulation and poverty each Christian in Smyrna has to endure for the name of Christ. They have lost everything, and were denied the basic necessities of life — food, clothing, and shelter. They were often reduced to living in abject poverty — the life of a beggar.

Jesus tells them that they are rich—rich in spirit *because they faithfully and steadfastly proclaim that Jesus is Lord contrary to the culture around them that proclaims "Caesar is Lord."* Keeping an eternal focus is far more important than a temporal focus. An eternal focus gives you hope.

They are in this situation because of Jewish blasphemy and the resulting persecution.

*Blasphemy is dishonoring God, His name, His acts, and His representatives through profane or contemptuous speech, writing, or action.*

When the religious leaders in Matthew 12 said that Jesus and His acts were of Satan, they committed blasphemy that could never be forgiven: associating God with Satan. If the religious leaders had

interpreted the Old Testament aright, they would have recognized that Jesus was and is the Messiah for He fulfilled all of the Law and Prophets. *He, therefore, enjoyed divinity and authority equal to God, so that anyone who consciously and consistently rejected him would be guilty of blasphemy.* If anyone was associated with Satan, it was the Jewish religious leaders and anyone who followed them.

*The Jews in Smyrna, like their predecessors, refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and cursed Him and His church.* They were no longer God's people--spiritual sons of Abraham. They are "false Jews" or "false Israel". Christians are now called sons and daughters of Abraham in their place. Christians are "true Israel". The Jews (and anyone else) who rejects Jesus commits blasphemy and are cohorts of Satan.

Is it no wonder then that Jesus says that the Jews in Smyrna are the synagogue of Satan. A synagogue is the religious center of the scattered Jews. Here, the faith is taught and worship takes place. Jesus, sees that what is taught is hatred against Him, His people, and God Himself, and the persecution of the church these Jews do is an indication of who their God is--Satan. Satan is their teacher and leader, not God.

Ever since the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Jews were the first to accuse Christians of improper worship practices to the Roman authorities.

The Jews in Smyrna were especially zealous in seeing Christians suffer. They spread all manner of lies concerning Christians to the Roman authorities. Because of this, the Christians were barred from trade guilds, from doing business in Smyrna, and from employment. Hence, their poverty.

It was the Jews in Smyrna; it can be any group or an individual of influence today.

### **Continuation**

Christ says to them, *"Do not be afraid of...anything. I am with you."*

The one behind this is Satan, and he will use his cohorts, the Jews and the Romans, in an attempt to destroy the church. They must prepare themselves for spiritual warfare the likes they have never experienced before. Some of them will be arrested, perhaps given a trial, and then either imprisoned, banished or executed. Yes, some will be martyrs.

Jesus says the persecution will last ten days. The number 10 in Judaism is symbolic and means "fulness or completeness". The persecution and suffering will last as long as it produces what Christ has ordained it to produce. It will come to an end.

### **Covenant**

Not only the Christians in Smyrna, but all Christians, who overcome or persevere in the faith, who are faithful to Christ, will escape the second death--separation from God forever. Any Christian who confesses Christ as Lord to the exclusion of all other gods will be rewarded with God's presence forever. Those, however, who willfully and consciously recant their confession, will experience eternal punishment in hell.

Three dangers that all of us must acknowledge if we are to stay true to Christ:

1. Fear will be your biggest enemy
2. If fear takes control, you will desire to compromise your confession of Christ as Lord. The great temptation for the Christians in Smyrna was to deny Christ for the sake of temporal wealth and even their life.
3. When you confess another god, you exchange good for evil. You then will call anything evil, good and good, evil.