

Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church

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Pastor's Bible Study

A Bible Study Series
Based on the book
"Revelation Four Views" by Steve Gregg

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Part I

The Seven Letters

Revelation 1–3

Letter To Smyrna

- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - Smyrna (modern Izmir) was the second largest and reputedly the most beautiful city in Provincial Asia and is the only city of the seven that is still in existence today.
 - Smyrna was a port city with a good harbor about thirty-five miles northwest of Ephesus. The seven cities formed a natural postal route from Ephesus up the coast to Smyrna and Pergamum, and from there inland by the imperial road to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Ramsay 1904:186).
 - In any case, the first three cities (Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum) were rivals for power and prestige. Smyrna (the modern Izmir) laid claim on its coins to being the “first city of Asia in size and beauty” (Ramsay 1904:255), and it was indeed a city of great natural beauty.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - Smyrna is the only city that has continued to the present day, having the modern name Izmir. Another harbor city with a thriving export trade thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, it was renowned for its beauty and its civic pride, calling itself “the first in Asia” as well as the birthplace of Homer (disputed by other cities).
 - It maintained an excellent relationship with Rome and was one of four cities (with Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis) to host the provincial assembly. It was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma (195 b.c.), and in a.d. 26, because of its long loyalty to Rome, it beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberias. In succeeding decades it became a center of the imperial cult.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - In 600 b.c. it had been destroyed by Alyattes, king of Lydia, but when Alexander the Great came through in 334 b.c. he commissioned that it be rebuilt. This was done in 290 b.c. by Lysimachus and Antigonus, two of his successors.

- The city was rebuilt closer to the harbor, and its architecture made it one of the most pleasing cities in Asia: famous temples (the temples of Zeus and Cybele were connected by a mall that was the envy of the ancient world), a group of buildings called “the crown of Smyrna,” an acropolis on Mount Pagos, and a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold.”
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - It had a large Jewish population that virulently opposed Christians. This may have been occasioned by the destruction of the temple and consequent anti-Jewish feeling in the Roman Empire.
 - Christianity thus became a double threat, not only religious but political. It is common to theorize that the edict under Domitian demanding emperor worship made it easy to persecute Christians, and that the Jews were active in denouncing Christians to the authorities, possibly to deflect attention from themselves.
 - Rome had given the Jews the right to practice their religion, and they did not want this precious privilege threatened.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - In addition, in the 80s Judaism had excommunicated the Christian “heretics” from their synagogues, and they wanted nothing to do with them.
 - In a.d. 155 the famous bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar “Lord” during an extensive persecution instigated by the Jews.
 - The Smyrna church itself had been founded either by some returning Jewish traveler present at Pentecost or (more likely) during the Pauline mission of Acts 19.
 - In John’s day it was a city that had been “resurrected from the dead,” in that it had been destroyed 700 years earlier and had lain in ruins for 300 years.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - ***““And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. “ ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’” (Revelation 2:8–11, ESV)***
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - The church is sometimes called upon to suffer terrible persecution. This has always been true down through history, and it was certainly true in Smyrna.
 - The church was under heavy attack from both the community and city officials. And there was even more horrible persecution lying over the horizon ([Rev. 2:10](#)). But note: the church was faithful to Christ and His mission. The church was standing fast for the truth against all attacks.
 - It was a church in which nothing was wrong, that is, nothing of any major significance. Therefore, it was one of the few churches that Christ did not have to warn.

- Smyrna is the picture of just what a church should be: a dynamic witness for Jesus Christ through all circumstances no matter the trial or temptation. It is the picture of a church that loves the Lord enough to stand up for Him even when the community attacks its witness.
 - Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary - The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Revelation.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - The church at Smyrna displayed the power and purity that comes from successfully enduring persecution. Persecution had purified and purged it from sin and affirmed the reality of its members' faith.
 - Hypocrites do not stay to face persecution, because false believers do not want to endure the pain. Trials and persecution strengthen and refine genuine saving faith, but uncover and destroy false faith.
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - As was customary in ancient letters, the writer identifies Himself at the beginning of the letter, instead of signing His name at the end. The depiction of the writer as **the first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life** identifies Him as the glorified, exalted Lord Jesus Christ described by that phrase in the vision of [1:12-20](#) (cf. [1:18](#)).
 - **The first and the last** is an Old Testament title for God ([Isa. 44:6](#); [48:12](#); cf. [41:4](#)), and its application here (and in [22:13](#)) to Christ affirms His equality of nature with God. He is the eternal, infinite God, who already existed when all things were created, and who will continue to exist after they are destroyed. Jesus Christ transcends time, space, and the creation.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - Yet, amazingly, the eternal God became man and **was dead, and has come to life**.
 - Here is a profound mystery: How can the ever-living One who transcends time, space, and history die?
 - Peter reveals the answer in [1 Peter 3:18](#): Christ was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." He died in His incarnate humanness as the perfect sacrifice for sin, but now **has come to life** (by His resurrection) and lives forever "according to the power of an indestructible life" ([Heb. 7:16](#); cf. [Rom. 6:9](#)).
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - This designation of Christ was to bring comfort to the persecuted believers at Smyrna. Knowing that they were undergoing difficult times, Christ was reminding them that He transcends temporal matters, and, through their union with Him, so should they.
 - And should they face death at the hands of their persecutors, beside them is the One who conquered death ([Heb. 2:14](#)) and who promised, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die" ([John 11:25-26](#)).
 - Jesus Christ also endured the most unjust and severe persecution anyone ever suffered (cf. [Heb. 12:3-4](#)), so He can serve as a compassionate and understanding source of power ([Heb. 2:17-18](#); [4:15](#)). He is the One who addressed this letter of comfort and encouragement to the church at Smyrna.

- MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- As usual, Christ affirms His awareness of their circumstances: **I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (v. 9).**
- It is sometimes necessary to be reminded of this in times of suffering, since God may seem distant at such times. Though they are poor in material things, He testifies on their behalf, but you are rich.
- James, in his epistle states that God has “chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom” (James 2:5)—a probable allusion to Luke 6:20, but also fitting well with this evaluation of the Smyrnian Christians. This contrasts sharply with Jesus’ assessment of the Laodicean believers, who think themselves rich, but are poor (3:17).

- Steve Gregg, Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 2:811.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- There are two Greek words for poverty. One is the word *penia* which describes the poverty of the man who has to work for a living. That would describe most of us.
- The word for poverty here is *ptocheia* which means "destitution." The implication is the person has nothing at all. These folks were so poor that even the poor folks thought they were poor. Because of their stand for Christ, they lost their jobs, businesses, and social status and were considered outlaws. Many of these folks had their homes plundered by vandals, thieves, or Romans and no one lifted a finger to help them because of the stigma that was placed upon them.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- People felt they deserved this treatment. People hated the Christians in Smyrna for several reasons.
 - Christians were considered disloyal to Rome because they would not worship Caesar.
 - Christians were considered atheists because they would not worship the Greek and Roman gods.
 - Christians were accused of being cannibals because of misunderstandings about the Lord's Supper.
 - They were accused of being immoral because of the greeting of a holy kiss.
 - Christians were accused of being home-breakers because of the division that was caused when one spouse was saved and the other was still lost in sin.

- Mattoon's Treasures - Mattoon's Treasures – Treasures from Revelation.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- Finally, the believers at Smyrna faced **blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of the ultimate blasphemer, Satan.** That shocking statement affirmed that those Jews who hated and rejected Jesus Christ were just as much Satan's followers as pagan idol worshippers (cf. [John 8:44](#)). Jesus' use of the strong term **blasphemy**, usually reserved for hostile words against God, indicates the slander's wickedness, intensity, and severity.

- Hoping to destroy the Christian faith, some of Smyrna's wealthy, influential Jews reported these blasphemous, false allegations to the Romans. These haters of the gospel were a **synagogue of Satan**, meaning they assembled to plan their attack on the church, thus doing Satan's will. They may have claimed to be a synagogue of God, but they were just the opposite.

- MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- The synagogue's blasphemy leads John to retort that they are not Jews but a synagogue of Satan. The context for this is the synagogue's accusation that church members are not Jews.
- This fits the etymology of the word Satan: 'one who accuses falsely' (Job 1–2; Zech. 3). It also corresponds with 'blasphemy' that indicates 'slander' as the NRSV has translated (Mt. 12:31, 15:19; Mk. 15:29; Rom. 3:8; 1 Cor. 10:30; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Tim. 6:4; 1 Pet. 4:4; Jude 9).
- Therefore, underlying the word is a charge made against the church. In sum, Revelation 2:9 is understandable in the context of the synagogue accusing the church of not being Jews.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- The synagogue's accusation heightened the church's expectation of trouble in which the faithful would be thrown into prison by the devil (2:10). The ancient serpent is also the devil and Satan (Rev. 12:9 and 20:2). These three signify the forces of opposition to God represented in the contemporary political power that is Rome. Rome is the beast, the devil and Satan.
- The synagogue of Satan reflects not only a synagogue that accuses falsely, but also a synagogue in collusion with Rome.
- The setting is then that of the synagogue informing Roman officials that the churches are not synagogues of Jews. Because only Rome had the power to incarcerate, this act of the synagogue had consequences for the church.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- In conclusion, the accusation that the synagogue is of Satan is a rebuttal to allegations that the synagogue made against the church that the church was not Jewish.
- The synagogue informed Rome that members of the church were not Jews. This led to a heightened sense of danger for the churches.
- The church argued that the synagogue informers were hand in hand with Rome and, thus, no longer worthy of the name "Jew". As Satan is Rome, the synagogue is of Rome.
- In sum, in 2:9–10 two groups have differing attitudes towards Rome, and those who compromise with Rome cannot be considered faithful to the God of Israel according to John.

- Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 130.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- The Christians should not **fear any of those things which [they] are about to suffer (v. 10)**, even as Jesus had previously taught His disciples not to fear those who can "kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do" (Luke

12:4). Peter likewise instructed the churches of this region, "even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake ... do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled" (1 Pet. 3:14).

- Fearlessness, however, may not necessarily mean the total absence of dread, but rather the refusal to succumb to intimidation, so that threats of harm do not turn them back from their duty to Christ.

- Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 2:811.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- The church in Smyrna was soon to become a special object of diabolical malice, as the **devil is about to throw some of you into prison ... you will have tribulation (v. 10)**. God has a purpose for this, however, namely, **that you may be tested**.
- Such testings are not to be feared, but should be cause for rejoicing (Matt. 5:11–12; James 1:2), since they are intended to produce endurance and result in the glory of God (Rom. 5:3f; James 1:3f; 1 Pet. 1:7). Since the persecution is said to be instigated by the devil, and since the Jews of Smyrna were a synagogue of Satan (v. 9), it is probable that the persecution here, as elsewhere, was brought about by the local Jewish community (cf. Matt. 23:34; Acts 13:45; 14:19; 17:5, 13; 1 Thess. 2:14–16).

- Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 2:811.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- Specifically, the Lord predicted that **the devil was about to cast some of them into prison**. God's purpose in permitting that imprisonment was **so that they would be tested**. By successfully enduring that trial, they would prove the reality of their faith, be strengthened (cf. [2 Cor. 12:9-10](#))—and prove once again that Satan cannot destroy genuine saving faith.
- The supernatural battle in Smyrna was just one skirmish in the age-long war of Satan against God. It has always been Satan's plan to attack God's children and attempt to destroy their faith. That is why one of his titles in Scripture is the "accuser of [the] brethren" ([12:10](#)).

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- His attacks on God's true children, however, cannot succeed. Jesus declared, "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" ([John 10:28-29](#)); and "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" ([John 6:39](#)).
- As their Great High Priest, Jesus is "able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" ([Heb. 7:25](#)).
- In [Romans 8:28-29](#) Paul traces the unbreakable chain from foreknowledge to predestination to effectual calling to justification to glorification; no one is lost along the way. All who are called will be kept until they are made like Christ in glory.

- **Letter To Smyrna**

- The knowledge that his efforts to destroy saving faith are doomed to failure does not deter Satan from trying. His most notable attack on saving faith is recorded in the book of Job, where (with God's permission) he took from Job his family, possessions, and physical health. All Job was left with was a cantankerous wife and friends whose inept counsel drove him to distraction. But "through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God" ([Job 1:22](#); cf. [2:10](#)). Job's triumphant declaration, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" ([Job 13:15](#)), signaled both the triumph of true saving faith and Satan's utter defeat.
- God, who alone sovereignly controls all the circumstances of life, would not permit Satan to torment the Smyrna church for long. Jesus promised that they would **have tribulation for only ten days**. Though some see the **ten days** as symbolically representing everything from ten periods of persecution under the Romans, to an undetermined period of time, to a time of ten years, there is no exegetical reason to interpret them as anything other than ten actual days. Satan's major assault on that local church would be intense, but brief.
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - Among *historicists* and some *futurists*, Smyrna is believed to represent the church during the period of persecution under the Roman emperors. This began with the brief but severe persecution under Nero in a.d. 64, but became more focused and deliberate under Domitian and many of his successors, from about 95 till 313. The tenth of these, it is said, began under Diocletian and lasted ten years (303–313).
 - The year-for-a-day interpreters (historicists) believe that the **ten days (v. 10)** of tribulation promised to the Smyrnan Christians correspond to the ten years of this final persecution.
 - "The ten days of Smyrna is one of the greatest arguments for the messages of the seven churches being applied to successive ages. This divine time measure forces the issue."
 - Steve Gregg, Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 2:817.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - As previously noted, Christ has no reprimand for the faithful church at Smyrna. He closes the letter with some final words of encouraging counsel. Those who prove the genuineness of their faith by remaining **faithful** to the Lord **until death** will receive as their reward **the crown** (*stephanos*; the victor's crown) **of life** (cf. [James 1:12](#)).
 - The **crown** (reward, culmination, outcome) of genuine saving faith is eternal **life**, and perseverance proves the genuineness of their faith as they endure suffering.
 - The Scriptures teach that true Christians will persevere. That is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture (e.g., [Matt. 10:22](#); [24:13](#); [Mark 4:13-20](#); [John 8:31](#); [Col. 1:21-23](#); [1 John 2:19](#)).
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - The promise to **he who overcomes** (all Christians; cf. the discussion in [chapter 4](#) of this volume) is that he **will not be hurt by the second death**. Though

persecuted believers may suffer the first (physical) death, they will never experience the **second death** (which is not annihilation but conscious, eternal damnation in hell; [Rev. 20:14](#); [21:8](#)).

- **Not** is the strongest negative the Greek language can express.
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **Letter To Smyrna**
 - The second death is the lake of fire, the judgment of eternal hell and torment from the presence of God forever and ever. The believer who overcomes in persecution shall escape the second death, the lake of fire and torment. The believer may have to pass through physical death, but he will never go through the second death. He shall be transported immediately into the presence of God to live forever and ever.
 - Note the exhortation: he who has an ear, let him hear what the Holy Spirit says to the churches. It is the duty of every believer and every church to hear this message.
 - We must all stand fast against the persecution of the world: ridicule, mockery, abuse, being bypassed and overlooked, neglected and ignored, being imprisoned and killed. We must be faithful. The promises are too great to lose: we shall receive the crown of life and never suffer the second death.
 - Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary - The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Revelation.