

## **Rev. 2:8-11: Smyrna: Persecuted Church**

Why is Christianity the most persecuted faith in the world?

Because Satan is the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4). Since Satan cannot do anything to Christ, he persecutes his body, the church. Remember what Jesus said to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?"

You want to hurt me but cannot hurt me, so you hurt my children. That would make me very angry!

*2 Cor. 4:4: Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.*

2:8-10: 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."

### Smyrna Is the Persecuted Church

Smyrna has nothing to repent of; it has no false apostles, Jezebels, or doctrine of Nicolaitans.

The tribulation caused their poverty. But the church was rich in spiritual blessings from Jesus Christ.

The source of Smyrna's tribulation is Jews who form "a synagogue of Satan." Jesus referred to the Jews in Smyrna as a "synagogue of Satan."

The church around the world is persecuted.

Today Satan is NOT persecuting the church by Jews in a "synagogue of Satan." Today there are many more persecutors.

It is Muslims and the mosque of Satan.

It is Hindu nationalists and the Hindu temple of Satan.

It is the Buddhist temple of Satan. (Note: Buddhists are generally peaceful, but there are militant sects of Buddhism combined with nationalism. For now Muslims are the target of militant Buddhists. Christians are a non-violent minority.)

It is Communist governments and the CCP of Satan. (Atheistic Communism persecutes every religion.)

It is intolerant Western democracies. If we did not have a Constitution with a First Amendment, then we would be persecuted.

(It is the intolerant LGBTQ of Satan. Churches that refuse to perform same-sex weddings have been threatened with the lose their tax-exempt status. If the Democrats have their way with the "Equality Act" then it will happen. Would a church be willing to give up this 'gift' from the government to be faithful to God's word?)

Jesus would consider a liberal, progressive church that has abandoned the word of God to accommodate the pagan culture a "church of Satan." It is no longer faithful to Jesus and the truth of his words.

Satan has thousands of ways to persecute the true church of Jesus Christ.

The letter is addressed to the "angel of the church in Smyrna." One of those angels or pastors or bishops was a disciple of John the Apostle, the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp. He was persecuted by the Jews of the "synagogue of Satan" and the Roman government in Asia Minor.

**Supplemental Story: Tribulation of Persecution Test: The Martyrdom of Polycarp.**

The tribulation (affliction) of Smyrna is a test. The GR word for tribulation (GR θλιψις) refers to an event or a condition. The GR word for test (GR πειραζω) refers to a method or process. So, God uses tribulation as a test or method of purification. Assaying is the testing of a metal or ore to determine its

ingredients and quality. It is like how assaying is used to extract precious metals like gold from ore. In this analogy the tribulation would be the assaying with fire (extreme heat) and chemicals and the whole process is testing to extract the gold from rock/ore. There is a mineral called iron pyrite or fool's gold. Assaying determines whether it is fool's gold or genuine.

Why and how does Jesus use the test of tribulation?

Here is a reason Moses spoke to the Hebrews before they entered the Promised Land: Deuteronomy 8:2: *Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.* I am certain God knows what is in our hearts. It is more likely God tests for me to know what is in my heart. When I see what's in my heart then I will humble myself and repent.

Psalm 66:10-12:

*For you, O God, have tested us;  
you have tried us as silver is tried.  
You brought us into the net;  
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;  
you let men ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and through water;  
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.*

Psalm 26:1-2:

*Vindicate me, Lord, for I have walked in my integrity,  
And I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.  
Examine me, Lord, and put me to the test;  
Refine my mind and my heart.*

Testing is a refining process. Jesus tests loyalty, faithfulness, and obedience. Will we be faithful to keep Jesus' commands when the pressure is on and even when we are threatened with death?

### The Test of Tribulation

Jesus said, "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."

We test items to determine their genuineness? In fact, the biblical word for examine or test is used of assaying metals.

I think Jesus has at least three kinds of tribulation that test us, examine us, or assay us: 1) the **tribulation of persecution test** which involves suffering, 2) the **non-tribulation of prosperity test** which involves success, 3) the **tribulation of pandemic test**. All tribulations are meant to test faithfulness and to refine or purify.

The **tribulation (thlipsis) of persecution** TESTS the faithfulness of the church (2:10). The test of persecution is not meant to destroy the church. Satan's intention is to destroy. God's intention is to purify and strengthen. Jesus is sovereign over this 10-day persecution. The fact that Jesus warned the church and the persecution has a time limit shows that he is in control. God uses Satan to accomplish his purposes.

[One spiritual benefit or blessing of persecution is fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. Jesus Christ suffered for his faithful testimony to God and to himself as the Son of God. Paul wrote, Philippians 3:8-11: <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes

through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—<sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, **and may share** (GR *koinonia* = fellowship) **his sufferings**, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.]

**Non-tribulation of prosperity** TESTS the church differently and tends to cultural compromise and distortions like “prosperity preaching.” One of the seven churches seems to be an example of this type of test. We will examine that church later (Laodicea).

**The tribulation of pandemic** TESTS the faithfulness of church members. Every tribulation comes with fear. The question is “Will faith triumph over fear?” Satan is a fearmonger. Satan promotes fearmongering in the media and every crisis. COVID19 is demonic. It originated in Communist China. Communism is satanic. Think about this: How is Satan exploiting this pandemic with fear? How is God using this pandemic to accomplish his will? How is Jesus Christ using this pandemic to test the faithfulness of his churches? In the seven churches Jesus Christ used persecution and false apostles and prophets to test their obedience.

Scripture commands Christians to gather for fellowship. Hebrews 10:24-25: *Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Do not yield to fear. Keep walking in faith, trusting God’s protection. Do not yield to “selective fear.” If you can go to work and shop for food at Kroger with strangers, then you can attend church with people you know. Church is the safest public place.

If Church were your job, would you still be employed?

COVID19 tests faithfulness. There is a temptation to cut back on ministry, on outreach, on Sunday school, on Bible study. There is a temptation to stay safe and comfortable at home. After one year of avoiding public worship at

church it becomes habitual. While you are locked down or quarantined do you remain faithful? Do you attend church in person or at least online? Do you continue to increase in love, faith, service, and patient endurance?

The churches in CA were ordered to shut down and threatened with fines by unelected health department officials. When they were finally permitted to gather in person they were given arbitrary and ridiculous mandates; for example, no singing! They appealed to their Constitutional First Amendment rights and eventually won in court. They are experiencing revival!

There have been worse epidemics and pandemics in the history of mankind. How has the church responded? Here is a story about how the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon responded to the London cholera epidemic of 1854.

### **Supplemental Story: Charles Spurgeon and 1854 London Cholera Epidemic.**

#### The Reward

2:10-11: "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."

The first death is the death of your body.

The second death is hell, the lake of fire. Revelation 21:8: *"But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."*

Matthew 10:28: *Jesus said, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."*

The reward is victory over the second death in the lake of fire.

Believe in the promises of God.

Keep increasing in love, faith, service, and patient endurance.

### **Supplemental Story: The Tribulation of Persecution Test: The Martyrdom of Polycarp**

Polycarp's Vision: Polycarp knew the police were looking for him and he tried to avoid arrest. Three days before he was arrested, while he was praying, he had a vision of the pillow under his head in flames. He said prophetically to those who were with him, "I will be burnt alive."

The Arrest: The police extracted a confession by torture from two young men from his own household and came to arrest him with weapons as if he were a dangerous criminal. Polycarp could have escaped but he refused saying, "God's will be done." They were amazed at his age and steadfastness, and some of them said. "Why did we go to so much trouble to capture a man like this?" He offered the police food and drink and asked for an hour to pray uninterrupted. When he finished praying they put him on a donkey, and took him into Smyrna.

Polycarp Refuses to Deny Jesus: As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!" No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured they cheered. The Roman Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, 'Down with the Atheists!'" Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, "Down with the Atheists!" The Proconsul said, "Deny Christ, and I will set you free." Polycarp declared, "86 years have I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

"I have wild animals here," the Proconsul said. "I will throw you to them if you do not repent." "Call them," Polycarp replied. "It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil." Proconsul said, "If you despise the animals, I will have you burned." Polycarp responded, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want."

The Fire is Prepared: The crowd collected wood and bundles of sticks from the shops and public baths. The Jews (from the "synagogue of Satan"), as usual, were keen to help. When the fire was ready, Polycarp was stripped of his clothing. But when the soldiers went to nail him to the post, he said, "Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire, will enable me not to struggle, without the help of your nails."

Polycarp Prays: So they simply bound him with his hands behind him like a ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and

every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen.”

A Miracle: Then the fire was lit, and the flame blazed furiously. We who were privileged to witness it saw a great miracle, and this is why we have been preserved, to tell the story. The fire shaped itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, and formed a circle around the body of the martyr. Inside it, he looked not like flesh that is burnt, but like bread that is baked, or gold and silver glowing in a furnace. And we smelt a sweet scent, like frankincense or some such precious spices.

The Death of Polycarp: Eventually, when those wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to pierce him with a spear. When he did this such a great quantity of blood flowed that the fire was extinguished. The crowd were amazed at the difference between the unbelievers and the elect – of whom the great Polycarp was surely one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Church in Smyrna.

The Body: When the Enemy saw the wonder of his martyrdom, his blameless life and now his crowning with immortality, he did his utmost to stop us keeping any memorial of him or taking possession of his holy body. He inspired the Jews to ask the governor not to hand over his body for burial. The Jews said, “They might turn from worshipping the crucified one only to start worshipping this one.” They did not realize that it is impossible for us to abandon Christ who suffered for the salvation of the world, or to worship any other.

### Celebrations

The centurion then, seeing the disturbance caused by the Jews, took the body and publicly burnt it. Later, we collected up his bones, more precious than jewels and better purified than gold, and put them in an appropriate place where, the Lord willing, we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year with joy and rejoicing, both to remember those who have run their race and to prepare those yet to walk in their steps.

### **Supplemental Story: Charles Spurgeon and London Cholera Epidemic**

Spurgeon adjusted his meetings but continued to meet. Why? People were afraid and more receptive to the Gospel.

“In the year 1854, when I had scarcely been in London twelve months, the neighborhood in which I labored was visited by Asiatic cholera, and my congregation suffered from its inroads. Family after family summoned me to the bedside of the smitten, and almost every day I was called to visit the grave.” ~ “If there ever be a time when the mind is sensitive, it is when death is abroad. I recollect, when first I came to London, how anxiously people listened to the gospel, for the cholera was raging terribly. There was little scoffing then.” So, every visit to the sick and dying was an evangelistic opportunity.

He visited the sick and dying and entrusted his life to God.

He wrote about his fear and trust in God:

“At first, I gave myself up with youthful ardor to the visitation of the sick, and was sent for from all corners of the district by persons of all ranks and religions; but, soon, I became weary in body, and sick at heart. My friends seemed falling one by one, and I felt or fancied that I was sickening like those around me. A little more work and weeping would have laid me low among the rest; I felt that my burden was heavier than I could bear, and I was ready to sink under it. I was returning mournfully home from a funeral, when, as God would have it, my curiosity led me to read a paper which was wafered up in a shoemaker’s window in the Great Dover Road. It did not look like a trade announcement, nor was it, for it bore, in a good bold handwriting, these words: “Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the Most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.” (PSALM 91)

The effect upon my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying, in a calm and peaceful spirit; I felt no fear of evil, and I suffered no harm. The Providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window, I gratefully acknowledge; and in the remembrance of its marvelous power, I adore the Lord my God.”