

REVELATION 1.4 (Announce pick-up curriculum)
(Rev. 2:8-11)
Smyrna: The Persecuted Church
Introduction

I am writing in response to your request for additional information. In block number 3 of the accident reporting form, I put, "Poor Planning", as the cause of my accident. You said in your letter that I should explain more fully, and I trust that the following details will be sufficient: I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a ten-story building. When I completed my work, I discovered I had about 500 pounds of bricks left over. Rather than carry them down by hand, I decided to lower them to the ground in a barrel by using a pulley which, fortunately, was attached to the side of the building at the tenth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went to the roof, loaded the 500 pounds of bricks, then went back down to the ground and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 500 pounds of bricks. (You will note in block 11 of the accident reporting form that I weigh 135 pounds). Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forget to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the fifth floor, I met the barrel coming down. This explains the fractured skull and broken collarbone.

I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley.

Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope in spite of my pain.

At approximately this same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground, and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed approximately 30 pounds.

I refer you again to my weight in block number 11 of the accident reporting form. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the fifth floor, I met that barrel coming up again! This accounts for the two fractured ankles and lacerations of my legs and lower body.

The second encounter with the barrel slowed me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks, and fortunately, only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there on the bricks -- in pain and unable to stand -- watching the empty barrel ten stories above me -- I again lost my presence of mind -- I LET GO OF THE ROPE.

To the church at Ephesus, Jesus said, "Remember, repent and repeat the first works. Now to Smyrna the message to the persecuted church is "remain faithful".

Fear: Smyrna the fearful church: The contrast here is between fearfulness and faithfulness.

Commission (2.8)

Background: Smyrna claimed to be the birthplace of Homer who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey. Smyrna coin's featured a portrait that was supposed to bear resemblance to the famous Greek poet. Smyrna was a wealthy commercial city, loved and respected by Rome for its loyalty to Rome. The name Smyrna incorporates another word: Myrrh: the aromatic spice (perfume) that gives off its fragrance when it is crushed and bruised, a great reference to our Lord's suffering. In 600 B.C. the city was destroyed by Lydia, and four centuries followed where Smyrna was a ghost town. It was restored and became a thriving commercial city. It was also all but destroyed in a devastating earthquake, but revived again. "It was dead and is alive".

Smyrna was a beautiful city. In the ancient world it was renowned for beauty. Like San Francisco or San Diego--it sat on a natural harbor. It was on the major route to Persia. All the trade from East to West passed through Smyrna. Large amounts of money were poured into the ornate architecture. It had great political prominence. It was a major headquarter for the government of Rome. It was also a city filled with temples, including the very first temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar. It became the central place of Caesar worship. Smyrna had a large and influential Jewish population.

Character (2.8)

"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."

1. "First and the last" is a phrase borrowed from Isaiah.

Isa 44:6 "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God'".

Few places emphasize the Deity of Jesus more than Revelation. The titles and honors associated with YHWH in the OT are ascribed to Jesus in the NT. The expression "First and Last" speaks of the eternal nature of God. When Isaiah was speaking, Israel was swept into captivity, the temple destroyed, and all seemed hopeless and lost. Everything the people had hoped in, trusted in, had been taken away. What do you do when God takes things or sometimes people away from you? Isaiah 48:10 "See I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another."

2. **It is very difficult for us to understand that God does allow us to suffer! He does this for a reason!** Knowing the reason doesn't always help. When God calls himself the "first and the last"--he is saying I know the beginning and the outcome. Ultimately, God is control of the situation. Of all the churches when this book was written, none experienced greater persecution, than Smyrna. To the Church facing persecution and

death--its nice to know that Jesus is the first and the last. It is also nice to know that "he was dead, and came back to life." The most fearful thing about death, is what happens when you die? Jesus experienced death and can speak to the issue rather authoritatively. There is only one person who can speak to this issue Jesus Christ. Other people are talking about their "near death experiences". Since Jesus has stripped death of mystery and power, he can provide hope and comfort.

Title: God Leads a Pretty Sheltered Life

Billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Some of the groups near the front talked heatedly -- not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

"How can God judge us?" said one.

"What does he know about suffering?" snapped a brunette. She jerked back a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror, beatings, torture, death!"

In another group a black man lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched for no crime but being black! We have suffocated in slave ships, been wrenched from loved ones, toiled till death gave release."

Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in Heaven where there was no weeping no fear, no hunger, no hatred!

Indeed, what did God know about what man had been forced to endure in this world? "After all. God leads a pretty sheltered life," they said.

So each group sent out a leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. There was a Jew, a black, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate person, a victim of Hiroshima, and one from a Siberian slave camp.

In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather simple: before God would be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God "should be sentenced to live on earth -- as a man!"

But because He was God, they set certain safeguards to be sure He could not use His divine powers to help Himself:

Let Him be born a Jew.

Let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted, so that none would know who is really His father.

Let Him champion a cause so just, but so radical, that it brings down upon Him the hate, condemnation, and efforts of every major traditional and established religious authority to eliminate Him.

Let Him try to describe what no man has ever seen, tasted, heard, or smelled -- let Him try to communicate God to men.

Let Him be betrayed by His dearest friends.

Let Him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge.

Let Him see what it is to be terribly alone and completely abandoned by every living thing.

Let Him be tortured and let Him die! Let Him die the most humiliating death -- with common thieves.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the great throngs of people.

But when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew: God had already served
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Commendation (2.9)

Jesus begins by saying "I know". What comfort! When you are facing an hour of dark trial, it's good to know that Jesus is standing by you. I have noticed, that it is in great trial and affliction that I often sense the presence of Jesus.

1. The word "tribulation" is the Greek word "thlipses". It means suffering, affliction or tribulation. People in the church were beaten and sometimes killed. Mobs attacked and wrecked their homes. Beat them and drug them off to prison. Many in Smyrna died.

2. **One the pastors of Calvary Chapel at Smyrna** was Polycarp. He was a disciple of John the Apostle, he was "raised" in the faith so to speak. I am sure that he was totally aware of what this message meant to him and to his church. When John was Pastor at Ephesus, Polycarp went off to Smyrna to pastor the church. Church tradition tells us that Polycarp was murdered under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (about 155 AD). Here is the story: "The crowds at Smyrna were at the public games, and they began to chant, "away with the atheists, let Polycarp be searched for". Christians in those days were known as atheists because they refused to worship Caesar. The night before, tradition tells us, Polycarp had a dream in which he saw himself on a burning pillow. He went to the people in his church and told them that God had revealed to him that he must be burned alive for his faith. The next day as the Romans came to arrest Polycarp, he had a meal provided for them and told his disciples that they were to serve the men who had taken him to his death. Tradition again states that as he entered the arena a voice came from heaven and said, "Be strong Polycarp and play the man." In the arena the magistrate gave him a choice. Either curse the name of Christ and sacrifice to Caesar, or be put to death. His response: "86 years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? Again the magistrate threatened him, and said unless he cursed the name of Christ and sacrificed to Caesar, he would be burned at the stake. His response: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will.

The townspeople brought burning embers to set Polycarp on fire. The Jews were so antagonistic that even though the day was the Sabbath, they carried the wood to the arena to fuel the fire to burn Polycarp. As they were getting ready to bind him to the stake, he told them, "leave me as I am. for he who give me power to endure (remember our text) the fire will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved, even without the security you will give by the ropes." They did not bind him. As the fire was kindled, Polycarp prayed: "O Lord God Almighty, father of your beloved and blessed child Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of you; God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous who live before you; I bless you, that you have granted unto me this day and hour that I may share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before you as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you the God without falsehood and of truth have prepared beforehand, and shown forth and fulfilled (just like our message ed. Gino). For this reason I also praise you, for all things. I bless you. I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest. Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom be glory to you, with him and with the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come."

3. Smyrna was under tremendous pressure. Many people gave their lives as a faithful testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus says "I know your poverty". There are two Greek words which speak of poverty: "Penia" this means poor to the extent that he or she had nothing extra. "this is the bare essentials-hand to mouth. Pay check to paycheck. You had what you needed to survive that day. There is also the word "ptocheia" which was used of the man or woman who had nothing superflous, but of the man who had nothing at all. We would use the term "destitute". The word "ptocheia" is used of the church in Smyrna. The Christians, in one of the most beautiful, rich and affluent society's was destitute.

4. Smyrna was a town built on trade guilds (unions). In order to make a living in Smyrna you had to belong to the "guild". Every trade guild, stone masons, carpenters, metal smiths, fishmongers, had their own patron deity. **To belong to a trade guild you had to sacrifice to the deity.** Chrisitans refused to sacrifice to these deities. They were boycotted, alienated and forced out of business. their property was confiscated and they lost all rights and property. The result was the church at Smyrna was in abject poverty, and the members were deepening in their reliance upon one another just for survival. When they prayed, "give us our daily bread" that was what they meant. They had to depend on God for daily provisions. What is Jesus' message to a church like that? **" but you are rich" They gave up everything to have the one thing:** Compare that with the church at Laodicea (us) "you say you are rich, I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing, but you do not realize that you are wretched and pitiful poor blind and naked." The one rich spiritually was poor materially, the one rich materially was poor spiritually. They are rich indeed who are spiritually rich! Love, peace joy.

Jesus was no stranger to poverty. Paul wrote: "He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9)

5. Church historians have often compared this church with the primitive church of the first three centuries. They were materially poor. They did not wear designer robes and have Lexus chariots. The Bible makes it clear that wealth is not the abundance of possessions. Real wealth is simplicity of desire. They were in touch with God's presence.

SEE HEB. 11:34,37-38 During the Depression, a Christian who had been quite wealthy, and had given away large sums of money, lost everything. She was asked, "Aren't you sorry you gave it all away?" She replied, "Oh no, that is all I really have." The saints in Smyrna gave up wealth to obtain wealth.

6. "and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Some have taken this to be a rebuke. That they tolerated false doctrine or false teachers. Whether this qualifies as a rebuke or a correction we will examine. The Jews in Smyrna were a gigantic problem to the Christians. There were six slanders that were charged against the Christians, and the synagogues in Smyrna led the attack. (1) The first slander was that Christians were cannibals. People outside the church heard they ate the "body and blood of Christ". (2) They were accused of sexual orgies. The Christians had a celebration called the Love Feast. A Love feast to the Greek and Romans were a total sexual party. (3) They were accused of being antifamily. Like today, when a person comes to know Jesus, it sometimes causes division in the family. The Jews also misunderstood the teaching; "If anyone loves brother, sister, father or mother more than me, he is not worthy of me." Because of these things Christians were seen as antifamily. (4) They were called atheists--because they refused to worship other gods. Their's was a God without statues, beads or icons. The Romans could not understand that. (5) They were accused of treason--because they refused to sacrifice to Caesar. (6) They were accused of being fire brands or incendiaries, radicals who always talked about the end of the world and the coming back of Jesus the Messiah. They always talked about the end of the world taking about it going up in flames "it's all gonna burn".

All of these accusations were constantly being brought up by the people in the synagogues. The Jews identified themselves as the synangogue of God of YHWH. Jesus says no, they are the synagogue of Satan. He even states that they aren't real Jews. The NT teaches a Jew is not one outwardly but inwardly, who has been circumcised in heart, responsive to God. A synangoue in Smyrna, willing to break the Sabbath, to carry wood to a burning, would be the same as a church providing robe for a lynching, or bullets for a firing squad.

7. Some have suggested this was a rebuke for tolerating the idea that Jews and Christians are the same. Israel is distinct from the church. From earliest times, people have tried to graft Judaism and Christianity. They have a lot in common, yet Paul realized the two systems are mutually exclusive. Paul knew this even as a murderous Rabbi. That is why he persecuted the church. Some have suggested Smyrna was willing to tolerate the Judaistic graft. Some wish to graft in lawkeeping, or are fascinated by ritualism, or by sacerdotalism of the OT. Others wish to deny factual differences. The church at Smyrna may have been harboring some extreme form of Judaism. They may have been even a kind of Messianic congregation who had neither left Judaism or entered Christian faith.

This is not to say that Messianic Jewish congregations are wrong! Yet just like any other congregation, if anyone sets up heretical teachings in opposition to the gospel, we must be careful.

Condemnation and Correction (2.10)

1. For this reason, some people find "no rebuke". The church under persecution, is a church refined. Pain and sorrow, mistreatment has a way of drawing close to God. Since there is no correction, rather counsel or exhortation:

2 **"Don't be afraid to suffer"** There are a couple of interpretations. The church is getting ready to suffer intense persecution for a short time. Or it could mean 10 periods of persecution through out the church age. Some have seen this as 10 Roman emperors who put the church through persecution.

Trials are miserable. There is a human level. Jesus says don't be afraid to suffer because for the most part we are afraid to suffer. The church is filled with examples of people who have braved suffering and death to make a strong testimony. The story is told of John Knox, that great reformer, was consigned to a galley for defying Mary Queen of Scots. He was a man who simply refused to cower. One day, while rowing, a catholic priest came with an image of the virgin Mary and was required to give reverence to the statue. John Knox took the image in his hand and said "Mother? Mother of God?" This is no mother of God, this is a piece of painted wood, more fit for swimming than worship," and he tossed it overboard!

3. Note the reason: "TO TEST" testing is always purifying. James 1 testing produces endurance. I Peter 1 Peter (1.7) says of trials "These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine. **God refines people in the furnace of affliction.**

4. **Satan** hates the church. "The devil will cast some of you into prison" Satan attacks the church consistently. C.S. Lewis has captured some of this in his book "Screwtape

Letters" Screwtape is dictating a letter to Wormwood (young protege) junior demon. Castigating him for losing a soul to the enemy Christ. He advises Wormwood on how to make the best of a bad situation and draws his attention to the church. He suggests that he get the "client" to notice the people, the way they look, their dress, their clothes, their mannerisms." THEN in a falsh of honesty, Screwtape the senior demon admits his uneasiness about the church. He says that it is fortunate that humans have never seen the church as she is seen by the powers of darkness. For in reality she is spread through time and space rooted in eternity and terrible as an army with banners." That Scewtape, admits makes even the bravest temptor shudder.

We oftern wonder, why would God allow such a thing? Why does God allow Satan to persecute? **That you may be tried.**

Challenge (2.10-11)

1. What is the crown of life? Stephanos victor's crown, the laurel wreath of olympic champions. The stephanos was a perisible crown, the reward Christ gives is eternal life. This could be translated: "TO Him who overcomes, I will give the crown which is life. The one who is faithful to the point of death will receive the reward which is life itself." The man or woman who dies for Jesus Christ is thrust into eternal life. He/she will not be hurt by the second death. Chapter 20 of Revelation tells us about the second death.

2. Satan may be allowed to try, but it is for a season, with a purpose. We must be faithful to death. Ease and wealth are not promised. We are warned to expect persecution in a hostile world. Have you ever wondered how you would respond with full on persecution? "We must live for Jesus today, it is the only guarentee we will be able to die for Jesus tomorrow.

3. The world says, "I can kill you a thousand different ways." Jesus says I can give life for eternity. Jesus gives us a life that will outlast the universe.

Years ago, Andre Kole, the talented illusionist who traveled all over the world as a representative of a Christian youth organization, wrote about the death of his wife Aljeana. She had an incurable brain tumor, and for two years she endured incredible suffering. She gradually lost the use of her arms and legs and couldn't move her head or body. She became totally blind. Day after day she could do nothing but lie helplessly in bed. Kole wrote, "While Aljeana was still able to do some speaking, she always shared a poem that ended with these lines: 'We should not long for heaven, if earth held only joy'"

Heaven is a place, designed by the greatest architect, and it is promised that there we will receive our glorious inheritance.

