



**“Letter to a Persecuted Church” • Revelation 2:8–11**

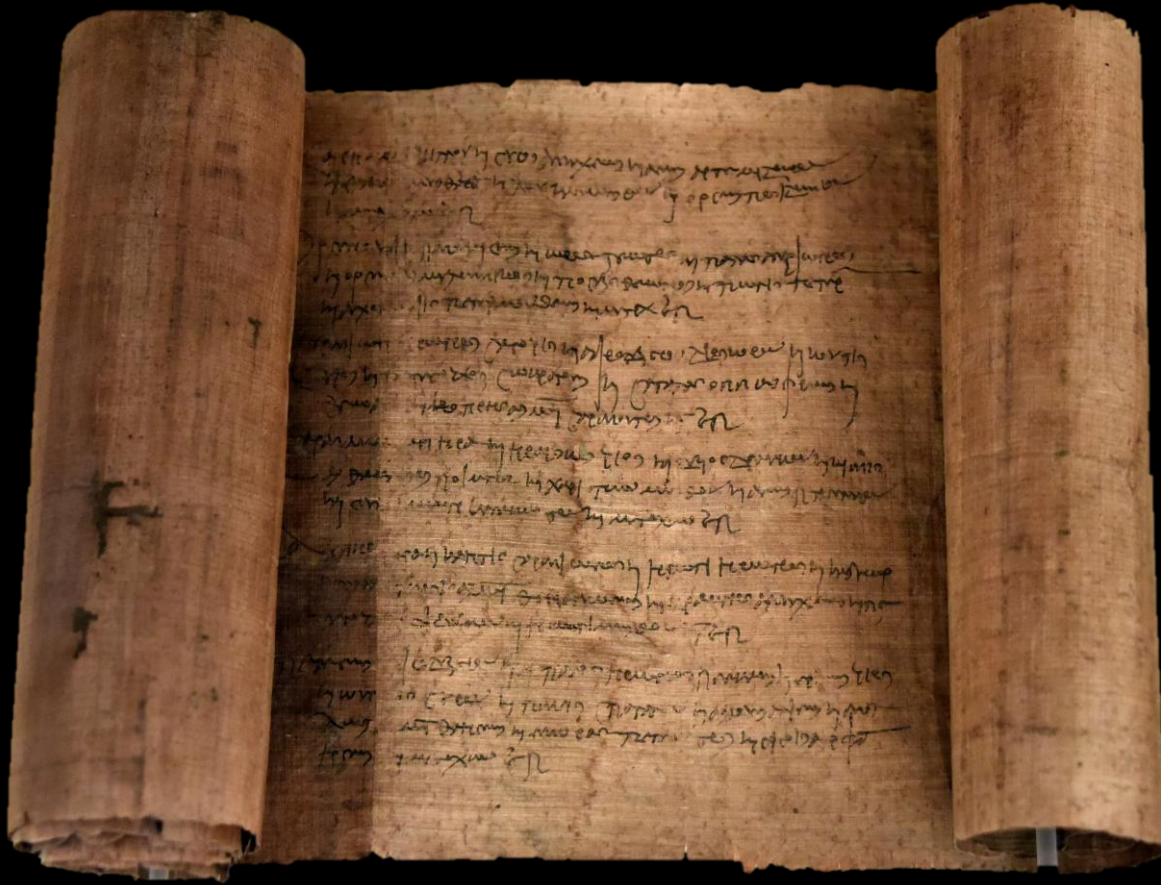




## Text

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say 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 cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until 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. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

# Outline



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- II. The Assessor (2:8b)
- III. The Approval (2:9)
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- VI. The Appeal (2:11a)
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## Background

- Beginning in Ephesus, each messenger would read the entire book of Revelation to his own congregation.
- The messengers followed major roads along the coast and valleys that formed a postal route for the province of Asia.

## I. The Address (2:8a)

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“And to the angel of **the church in Smyrna** write.”

- Smyrna (modern day Izmir) was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus, along the Aegean coast, and had a population of up to 200,000 people.



- Although the gulf at Ephesus was always silting in, Smyrna was situated on a deep natural harbor—one that is still in use today.
- Smyrna was known as “the ornament of Asia”—the most ideal of all the cities of the province.
- More than its landscape, Smyrna was praised for its attractive city planning and architecture.





Artist's rendering of the ancient city of Smyrna

- The Greek poet Homer was said to have been born in Smyrna.
- Smyrna boasted the largest agora (marketplace) in the world.
- It was a city particularly known for its longstanding *fidelity* to Rome.
- It was the first city to establish the formal worship of Rome (*dea Roma*), constructing a temple in Rome's honor in 195 BC.
- Tiberius (ruled AD 14–37) selected the city out of all of Asia to host the temple built for his worship.





- When the gospel first reached Smyrna is not known.
- Most likely, a church was planted in the city as a result of Paul's 3-year ministry on his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey (AD 52–55).



- **Acts 19:9–10** – “But when some [in the synagogue in Ephesus] were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”



“Indeed, the imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult. Citizens of both upper and lower classes were required by local law to sacrifice to the emperor on various special occasions, and sometimes even visitors and foreigners were invited to do so. City officials were so dedicated to the cult that they even distributed money to citizens from public funds to pay for sacrifices to the emperor . . . . It was almost impossible to have a share in a city’s public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult. Pressure on Christians to conform to such participation would have increased during Domitian’s reign (81–96 AD). Those refusing to participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and would be arrested and punished according to Roman law.”

—G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, 240–41

## II. The Assessor (2:8b)

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**“The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:”**

- The exalted Christ identifies Himself by two of the characteristics revealed to John in the vision of chapter 1.

**(1) “The first and the last”** – a reference back to 1:17b.

- The title recalls Yahweh’s self-descriptions in Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12–13; and will be used again by Jesus in Revelation 22:12–13.
- In Revelation 2:8, the description points to Jesus’ *divine* nature—emphasizing His *eternality* and *ultimacy*.





“In the role of the eternal and infinite one  
He launches His word of encouragement to  
a church exposed to fierce persecution. He  
was already in existence at the beginning of  
all things, and will be after all comes to an  
end. He is the eternal and abiding one. . . .  
Neither time nor things within time pose  
any limitation for Him.”

—Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 161

“The first and the last, **who was dead, and has come to life,**  
says this:”

(2) “Who was dead, and has come to life” – a reference back to 1:18a.

- This description points to Christ’s *human* nature—emphasizing His *humiliation* and *triumph* (cf. Philippians 2:6–11).
- Christ has not only experienced death but has also experienced resurrection.
- To hear from One like this—with the divine attributes of *eternality and ultimacy*, and with the human experiences of *death and resurrection*—would have been a particular comfort for the persecuted church.



### III. The Approval (2:9)

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**“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”**

- As in all seven letters, Christ begins by affirming His intimate knowledge of the state of the church.
- There were *three praiseworthy qualities* that Christ knew:
  - 1) **“Tribulation”** – a general quality; “trouble that inflicts distress,” “a restricting pressure that burdens the spirit.”



“Under Domitian (AD 81–96) emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen. Failure to comply meant death. 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 must have been the case for Christians obedient to Christ, was to risk discovery and the death penalty.”

—Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 160



**“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”**

- 2) “Poverty”** – a more specific characteristic; not merely that the Christians came from a low class, but that they *suffered loss* because of their faith.
- Not the typical Greek word for “poverty” (“having nothing superfluous”) but one that emphasized “abject poverty” (“having nothing at all”).
  - They probably were banned from practicing certain trades and left undefended against Jewish or Gentile mobs.
  - But Christ affirms their true, spiritual status: **“but you are rich.”**

**“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”**

- 3) “Blasphemy”** – a second specific characteristic: they endured “speech that denigrates or defames” —used mostly against God, but also against other human beings (e.g., Mark 7:21–22).
- Included exposing Christians to officials and making false claims.
  - This slander came from **“Jews,”** who were probably furious over the conversion of some of their number to Christianity (cf. Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 18:12–13).
  - Jesus identifies these Jews’ ultimate allegiance: **“of Satan”** – “the adversary” (cf. Revelation 3:9; John 8:39–44).

# IV. The Accusation

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## V. The Admonition (2:10)

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**“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

- **“Do not fear”** – “Cease being afraid”; Jesus gave a similar command to John in Rev 1:17, but here it is the threat of persecution causing fear.
- **“What you are about to suffer”** – Christ does not remove the suffering, but forewarns them of more serious suffering to come.
- **“The devil”** – “the slanderer” – the real agent behind the persecution and suffering.

“We sometimes assume that Christians were persecuted, because the truth for which they bore witness affronted the pride, the prejudices, and the passions of men; and this is true; but we have not so reached the ground of the matter. There is nothing more remarkable in the records that have come down to us of the early persecutions . . . than the sense which the confessors and martyrs, and those who narrate their sufferings and their triumphs . . . that these great flights of affliction through which they were called to pass, were the immediate work of the Devil, and no mere result of the offended passions, prejudices, and interests of men. The enemies of flesh and blood, as mere tools and instruments, are nearly lost sight of by them in a continual reference to Satan as the invisible but real author of all.”

—R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches*, 141–42

**“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

- **“Prison”** – there were three uses for prisons in the Roman empire: (1) to coerce obedience; (2) to hold for trial; and (3) to await execution.
- **“So that you will be tested”** – the purpose of the imprisonment; “to entice to improper behavior, tempt”; the agent of this testing: “the tempter.”
- **“Ten days”** – probably a reference to the period of time set for incarceration in Smyrna, ten literal days.



“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

- “Be faithful” – in the place of *fear* they were to cultivate *faith*; they were to cease *trepidation* and to keep exercising *fidelity*.
- “Until death” – the idea is not just up to the moment of death, but *up to and including* death.



- “Crown of life” – the emblem of triumph; the One who Himself had experienced death and resurrection is able to grant this same life after death (cf. James 1:12).

## VI. The Appeal (2:11a)

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“He who has **an ear**, let him hear what **the Spirit** says to **the churches**.”

- The same appeal is repeated in each of the seven letters; it serves to gather attention and emphasize the need for a response.
- The wording points to the obligation each one has to receive and obey the truth, but that doing so comes only with *the gift of a hearing ear*.
- Here in 2:11, the Spirit is the one described as *speaking* this letter to the churches, although it is Christ who is also *speaking* this letter (2:8).
- The contents of the letter were not just directed to the church in Smyrna, but to all seven churches—and by extension, *to all churches universally*.

## VII. The Assurance (2:11b)

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**“He who overcomes** will not be hurt by the second death.”

- Who is the one “who overcomes”?



- **1 John 4:4** – “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”
- **1 John 5:4–5** – “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”



“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer  
through Him who loved us.”

—Romans 8:27

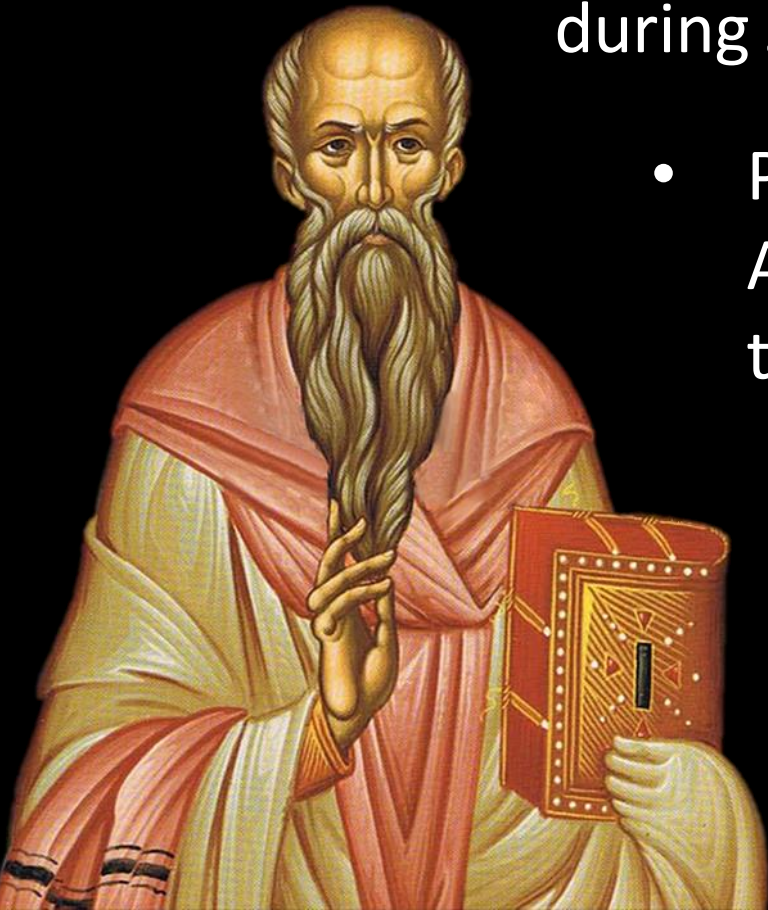
**“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”**

- **“Will not be hurt”** – pain is the great enemy of man, and death is the ultimate pain.
- Christ assures this suffering church that the pain that is to be feared the most, **“the second death,”** will not touch them.
  - **Revelation 20:14** – “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”
  - **Revelation 21:8** – “But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and 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.”



## An Historical Illustration

- According to tradition, a man named Polycarp (martyred AD 155) served as a bishop of the church in Smyrna in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.
  - It is written that Polycarp even learned under the Apostle John during John's time in Ephesus (AD 70–97).
    - Polycarp was arrested, brought before the proconsul of Asia, Quadratus, and adjured to deny Christ or die: "Take the oath, and I will let you go. Revile your Christ."
    - Polycarp refused and was sentenced to be burned with ten other Christians in the theater of Smyrna.
    - It is said that the Jews helped collect the wood, even though it took place on the Sabbath.







“Eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong.  
How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

—Polycarp of Smyrna, died AD 155



# APPLICATIONS

- Remember that Christ, the Eternal One, is in control.
- Remember that Christ has Himself experienced the humiliation of death and the triumph of resurrection.
- Remember your real opponent: *the adversary, the slander, the tempter.*
- Remember that it is not necessarily Christ's plan to rescue from persecution, but it is His intent to comfort.
- Remember to cultivate faith in the place of fear.
- Remember the reward that awaits.

