

Our Future through the Eyes of Yeshua

Lesson 5 The Persecuted congregation at Smyrna Revelation 2:8-11 CJB

PERSECUTION is the act or practice of persecuting; the infliction of pain, punishment or death upon others unjustly, particularly for adhering to a religious creed or mode of worship, either by way of penalty or for compelling them to renounce their principles.

Historians enumerate ten persecutions suffered by the Christians, beginning with that of Nero, A.D. 31, and ending with that of Diocletian, A.D. 303 to 313.

The believer in Smyrna was experiencing **severe** persecution.

Revelation 2:8

"To the angel of the Messianic Community in **Smyrna**, write: 'Here is the message from the **First and the Last**, who **died and came alive again**:

Yeshua began **each letter** with one of the **characterization** of himself based on the vision that John saw of him in chapter 1:12-18 which applied to the **situation** of the particulate congregation.

Because **some in this congregation** were going to be martyred, he would encourage the believers and remind them that **death is not the end**, but only the **beginning**. Yeshua was the example, because he died and was resurrected again.

Hearing this, the believers would be reminded that death is not the end, but only the beginning. Yeshua was the **example**, because he died and "**came alive again**".

Smyrna means "myrrh," the substance used for perfume and often for anointing **a dead body** for aromatic purposes.

Smyrna is the modern city of **Izmir, Turkey**. Smyrna was, and still is, a major seaport on a gulf of the Aegean Sea. In **2014** Izmir had a population of **4,005,459**, the third largest in Turkey.

Nelson new illustrated bible dictionary states:

As early as 195 B.C., Smyrna foresaw the rising power of Rome and built a temple for pagan Roman worship. In 23 B.C., Smyrna was given the honor

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of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius because of its years of faithfulness to Rome.

*Thus, the city became a center for the **cult of emperor worship**—a fanatical “religion” that later, under such emperors as Nero (ruled a.d. 54–68) and Domitian (ruled a.d. 81–96), brought on **severe persecution** for the early church.*

Smyrna’s intense loyalty to Rome resulted in a strong **emperor-worship cult**.

Tiberius chose Smyrna from eleven Asian applicants to become the keeper for the second temple of the imperial cult in Asia”.

Revelation 2:9

(9) "I know how you are suffering and how poor you are (though in fact you are rich!)"

It is easy to understand how severe persecution would result in poverty. There would be discrimination in jobs. Smyrna had a large population of Jews who hated the believers. Combined with the other heathen nations the believers would have had problems securing the daily necessities.

However, the riches that believers have go far beyond daily housing, clothing and food. In fact poverty tends to make believers rich in the manner that matters most, which is faith.

James makes this clear in chapter 2.

James 2:5 CJB

(5) Listen, my dear brothers, hasn't God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and to receive the Kingdom which he promised to those who love him?

Yeshua said to this congregation "*in fact you are rich!*" They were rich in their faith in Him.

Revelation 2:9

..... and I know the insults of those who call themselves Jews but aren't — on the contrary, they are a synagogue of the Adversary.

Almost every commentary that I referred to says that “those who call themselves Jews but aren't” were natural born Jews, who had not become

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spiritual born Jews by believing in Yeshua. However, I believe that there is another interpretation which comes more closely to the truth.

First of all, nowhere in the New Testament is unbelieving Jews called non-Jews. Therefore, there is no reason to assume that Yeshua is saying these are none spiritual Jews. When we consider the fact that in order to become a Jew one must be circumcised. Gentiles who became proselytes were required to be circumcised and to keep the Torah.

At that time many gentiles had become proselytes to the Jewish faith. Therefore, there is no reason not to believe that these were phony gentiles, as Yeshua said.

David Stern said in his New Testament commentary:

“A good rule of interpretation is that when the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense”.

He said, “These were gentile Judaizers who adopted a slight or small knowledge of Jewish practices and tried to force them on the gentile believers. They may have subjected themselves to legalistic perversion of the torah. They apparently organized a pseudo messianic synagogue. These false doctrines probably led them to wrong and immoral behavior, since false doctrines usually does. They probably drew gentiles believers away from the truth and thereby threatened the messianic community.

Adam Clark said:

“There were persons there who professed Judaism, and had a synagogue in the place, and professed to worship the true God; but they had no genuine religion, and they served the devil rather than God. They applied a sacred name to an unholy thing: and this is one meaning of the word blasphemy in this book”.

Satan has always used those under his influences to harass those who believe in Yeshua and who walk with him by faith.

Paul tells us in Romans 2-

Romans 2:28 CJB

For the real Jew is not merely Jewish outwardly: true circumcision is not only external and physical.

Yeshua goes on to say in verse 10.

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Revelation 2:10

Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the Adversary is going to have some of you thrown in prison, in order to put you to the test;

Satan works through people. Many of our battles that we attribute to humans are actually the work of the Devil, our adversary.

Yeshua said the phony Jews were a synagogue of the Adversary. (9) *I know the insults of those who call themselves Jews but aren't — on the contrary, they are a synagogue of the Adversary.*

Therefore, this congregation was in direct conflict with the powers of evil.

Smyrna was a Roman city which includes many temples dedicated to Roman deities. It was also a center of the Imperial cult; the worship of Roman imperials as deities. Much witchcraft and demonism was practiced in that City.

However, Yeshua said *"Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer"*.

In others words "I have overcome the adversary and I am with you now to strengthen you, to encourage you, and to bring you through victorious

Revelation 2:10

..... you will face an ordeal for ten days. Remain faithful, even to the point of death; and I will give you life as your crown.

I read an interesting article on "mores" about the legal systems of Rome as to the length of time prisoners were held in prison.

"Romans did not use prisons as do we. The wealthy accused was kept under house arrest. The poor found justice swift and usually fatal.

Actual prisons truly served as a holding place for those condemned to die. Occasionally one might be detained to await trial, but usually those awaiting trial were encouraged to go into voluntary exile.

The most famous Roman prison can still be visited today. It is located just outside the Forum Romanum buried at the foot of the Capitoline Hill. It was Ancus Marcius, the fourth king of Rome, who, sometime during his reign (640-616 BC) had constructed this dark, damp and foreboding subterranean structure.

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Sallust described it as about twelve feet deep into the ground. "Its appearance is disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness and the stench." It was into this room, 6 1/2 ft. high, thirty feet long and twenty-two feet wide, that prisoners who had been condemned to die either by strangulation or starvation were thrown. One attributes the phrase "to be cast into prison" had its origins here".

This could very well be what Yeshua was talking about when he said "the Adversary is going to have some of you thrown in prison, in order to put you to the test; and you will face an ordeal for ten days". It may well be that those who were thrown in prison would be there for 10 day before execution, rather than to wait 10 days before being released from prison.

However, it could very well be as some say; the 10 days signify a short period of testing. That the believers would suffer only a short while and their suffering would be over.

Fifty years after John's death, Polycarp, the bishop or pastor of the church in Smyrna, was burned alive at the age of eighty-six for refusing to worship Caesar. Polycarp was faithful to death.

According to tradition, when he refused to deny being a follower of Yeshua, the whole multitude both of the heathen and Jews, who dwelt at Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable fury, and in a loud voice, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the over thrower of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods."..... Then it seemed good to them to cry out with one consent, that Polycarp should be burnt alive. Here he suffered martyrdom, A.D. 155.

When facing persecution believers are given a choice. To either stand firm in their faith, or to surrender to Satan.

The believers of Smyrna chose to stand firm regardless of the cost. They refused to surrender to Satan. To remain Standing firm for Yeshua will always cost believers something.

In Smyrna, it cost some their lives. It cost some their freedom, it cost them to suffer poverty and to be outcasts. However, the one who is "the First and the Last, who died and came alive again" stood by them to comfort and to encourage them. And he will do the same for his congregation today.

He said "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer". We need not fear when we are called upon to suffer for the name of Yeshua, because our living savior who walks among his congregation will never leave our side.

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The apostle Paul told Timothy and the congregations Philippi:

2 Timothy 3:12 CJB

And indeed, all who want to live a godly life united with the Messiah Yeshua will be persecuted,

Philippians 1:29 CJB

Because for the Messiah's sake it has been granted to you not only to trust in him but also to suffer on his behalf,

Yeshua said we would have tribulation in this world.

John 16:33 TLV

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have shalom. In the world you will have **trouble**, but take heart! I have overcome the world!"

Yeshua greeting to this congregation in Smyrna, is a testimony to them and to us, that he has indeed overcome the world. "*Here is the message from the First and the Last, who died and came alive again*". In this Yeshua is saying the grave could not hold me and it will not hold you either.

And Peters also says:

1 Peter 4:12-13 CJB

(12) Dear friends, don't regard as strange the fiery ordeal occurring among you to test you, as if something extraordinary were happening to you.

(13) Rather, to the extent that you share the fellowship of the Messiah's sufferings, rejoice; so that you will rejoice even more when his Sh'khinah is revealed.

Yeshua said in John 15-

John 15:20 CJB

(20) Remember what I told you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word, they will keep yours too.

Yeshua told his congregation not to give up.

Revelation 2:10

....."*Remain faithful, even to the point of death; and I will give you life as your crown*".

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The things that we are called upon to suffer for the cause of messiah, will pale in the light of his glorious face and the privilege of living with him throughout all eternity.

This privilege is reserved for those who believe in Yeshua as savior, and who order their lives according to His instructions. And preservers to the end by overcoming sin, temptation and the stumbling blocks that Satan places in our path.

“Those who have ears let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Messianic communities. Let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the congregation of Yeshua messiah.