



# river west church

A Faith Greater than Death

Revelation 2:8-11

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## **Smyrna – The Church That Got it Right**

In the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, there are only two churches that receive no word of correction: Smyrna and Philadelphia. These two churches receive only words of praise from Jesus. Smyrna goes first. So we should think of Smyrna as the church that got it right. That's great! But, when we actually read the passage (2:8-11), we are surprised to see that Smyrna was the church that experienced the greatest amount of persecution of them all! Is there a connection? Could it be that this was the church that held the deepest and purest faith and so they stood out the most in the culture? Could it be that this was the church that refused to compromise, taking their stand for Jesus without apology, even when allegiance to Caesar as Lord was demanded of them?

## **Opposition and the Temptation to Compromise**

The letter to the church at Smyrna is Jesus' word for a church that faced huge pressure to compromise its faith and values. This is also Christ's word to us. The pressure at Smyrna came in several forms.

For one thing, there was the pressure to fit in with everybody else by honoring Rome and worshiping Caesar as Lord. What might be the parallel for us? Society has a way of demanding conformity to cultural values. It's hard to be different, to stick out. Has your Christian faith impacted how you live your life? How you do business? How you talk? What activities you engage in? Are you open about your Christian faith, or do you keep it hidden?

There was also outright assault. Verbal, economic and physical. They were "slandered" regularly. At Smyrna it was a particular Jewish community that was leading the attack. There were specific cultural reasons for this at the time. But what about now? Who is coming against Christian faith in our day? Perhaps the "new atheist" movement heads the list. The last few years has seen the multiplication of attacks on Christian faith, through a barrage of books that directly challenge everything about Christian faith. Even more extreme, Christians were put to death for their faith at Smyrna. Though we have been shielded from such things in the United States, all around the world, in the last several decades, Christians have been martyred for their faith.

## **Jesus' Word: "You are Rich"**

Smyrna was a highly competitive society. They were extremely sensitive to appearances and status. They called their city "first," "best," and "most beautiful." To be seen as a "loser" at Smyrna was completely unacceptable. To most people at Smyrna the Christians looked like a bunch of poverty stricken losers (part of the persecution was economic and so they were broke).

But Jesus told them that they were rich! This was a radical word from Christ. It was designed to re-program their thinking. The question is, who is really rich? Who is really a winner? How do you see it? Oddly, Jesus did not tell them that He was going to end their suffering in this world. But He did tell them that they were the truly rich ones. They were the winners. To get this perspective we have to look at life from an entirely different perspective, an eternal perspective. Jesus says, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life."

## **A Faith Greater than Death Because Jesus is Greater**

The key to the letter to Smyrna is Jesus. Jesus is the first and the last. Jesus died and came back to life (2:8). The way to courage, faith and faithfulness, is to look at Jesus. Jesus is greater than

anything you will ever face – in life or even in death. The strength of our faith is rooted in our view of Jesus. This is why the Book of Revelation has such a laser light focus on Christ. How about you? There is nothing more important in our lives than seeing and trusting Jesus, our risen and triumphant Lord. The more we see and trust Him, the less we succumb to the pressure to compromise. The greater Jesus is in our hearts, the less we worry about what the world around us thinks of us. This is Christ's word to the church at Smyrna. It is also His word to you and me, right here – right now. May we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches!