



# Jesus' Appraisal

## The Letter to Smyrna

March 28, 2021

### SONG #1

#### CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 90:1-4, 12, 16-17

God, it seems you've been our home forever;  
long before the mountains were born,  
Long before you brought earth itself to birth,  
from 'once upon a time' to 'kingdom come' – you are God.

So don't return us to mud, saying,  
'Back to where you came from!'  
Patience! You've got all the time in the world—whether  
a thousand years or a day, it's all the same to you.

Oh! Teach us to live well!  
Teach us to live wisely and well!

Let your servants see what you're best at—  
the ways you rule and bless your children.  
And let the loveliness of our Lord, our God, rest on us,  
confirming the work that we do.  
Oh, yes. Affirm the work that we do!

### SONG #2

#### PRE-SERMON READING | Revelation 2:8-11

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. 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.'

## A LETTER TO THE CHURCHES | Prophetic Utterances

It never ceases to amaze me that we have here in these brief letters communication of the most intimate, specific, and pastoral type. Words from the Word himself to those whom he loved so much that he gave his life that they might share in his. Words from the “Lamb who was slain,” the One who possesses “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12), speaking encouragement and admonition with surgical precision to ordinary disciples and unfamed apprentices amid the wonderous convolution of tribulation **and** kingdom.

These seven brief letters, bursting with the wisdom and power and wealth of the One who speaks them, are nothing short of prophetic utterances. Every time we hear and read, “The words of him who...” we should be transported back to the Old Testament days when the prophets would share the words of Yahweh himself, beginning each new address from God to his people with the phrase, “these things says the ONE.” These are the words of Jesus, the ONE, who is not only king, priest, and sage, but also prophet. Jesus, prophesying not merely in the predictive formula that our modern ears are accustomed, but in the historical formula of God speaking directly to his people **so that they might live well and relate rightly with him and neighbor until all is made new.**

It is no happenchance that the pastoral letters or prophetic utterances of Jesus are given to seven churches and not just one. One church would make his words too easy to dismiss as “for them.” But seven, somewhere within seven, we (us together and each of us individually) will find words “for us,” too. Words, as the scribe of Jesus’ vicarial addresses tell us, bless “those who hear and who keep what is written” (1:3). Blessed are we when we hear Jesus’ words to Smyrna's church as words to Christ City Church. So let’s look more closely at the context and text of Jesus’ prophetic blessed address.

## SMYRNA | Cultural Background

“If it was inevitable,” writes commentator William Barclay, “that Ephesus should come first in the list of the seven churches ([we discussed why last week](#)), it was only natural that Smyrna, its great rival, should come second. [Ephesus was the first and greatest metropolis of Asia, yet] Of all the cities of Asia, Smyrna was the loveliest.”<sup>1</sup>

It was a city reborn in splendor. In 600 b.c., the city was destroyed by Lydia and existed a collection of villages for nearly 300 years until Alexander the Great commissioned its rebuilding. Through the authority and power behind this commanded rebirth, Smyrna become one of the first planned cities of the ancient world and thus architecturally exquisite and advanced. As if to make clear the city’s place in the beauty of the world, it wore a crown.

Smyrna was famous for its temples to Zeus and Cybele, which capped either end of a great mall that was the ancient world's envy. This group of expertly designed and magnificently maintained buildings was known as “the crown of Smyrna,” as it sat atop the city’s highest ridge. Encircling this stunning coalescence like a jeweled necklace was a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold.”<sup>2</sup> No city could compare.

Not only was the city designed to be beautiful, but its natural features added to its reputation. Surrounding the city were groves of trees that produced an aromatic gum called myrrh, that same myrrh brought by the wise men from the East to Jesus’ feet. Capped by the crowned ridge, surrounded by groves of precious trees, and sitting on idyllic waters which cooled the city during the hot summer months, providing a pleasant climate year-round, Smyrna was truly a paradise. Add to the visual splendor that Smyrna claimed to be the birthplace of the famed Greek poet Homer, and thus a center for thought and creativity, and it is easy to imagine the beauty of the world holding no more excellent representation.

Located thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, Smyrna was an exquisitely crafted and naturally beautiful city nestled in the sheltered harbor that is today the gulf of Izmir in Turkey. It is, in fact, the only city of the seven named in the Revelation that is still today a lived-in city. As a harbor city, the trade and commerce that developed turned Smyrna into a commercial metropolis. Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a free city, free because of its distinction as Rome's most loyal city.

Even before Rome had risen to absolute power, Smyrna threw in their lot with the soon-to-be empire. Throughout its history, it “maintained an excellent relationship with Rome and was one of four cities...to host the provincial assembly. **It was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma** (195 b.c.). In a.d. 26, because of its long loyalty to Rome, it beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberias. In succeeding decades, [about the time of Jesus’ address] it became a center of the imperial cult.”<sup>3</sup> The details of daily living (work, municipal services, and faith) were one in Smyrna. Politics, religion, and economy formed a three-corded strand not easily broken.

Smyrna was not only “great in trade, beauty, and political and religious status; it was also a city where culture flourished,”<sup>4</sup> argues Barclay. Here, in this marvelous metropolis, everyone “wanted to exalt Smyrna and had a

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, vol. 1, 81.

<sup>2</sup> G.R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 127.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, 83.

personal desire to climb to the top of the municipal tree. It is not without significance that in the address of the letter, the risen Christ is called ‘the first and the last.’”<sup>5</sup> In a city that boasted in the pursuit and achievement of everything good, true, and beautiful, a crucified and risen peasant, King was certainly an oddity.

## WHO JESUS IS (Person) | v. 8

As we’ll notice after Jesus acknowledges the human and divine relationship with his church and always “introduces himself with a description from [chapter 1’s] vision **that most suits the situation of [that specific faith family].**”<sup>6</sup> No church represents Jesus fully, yet every church is represented by Jesus perfectly.

The Ephesian church was a protector of Jesus, his words, and way. A people who felt like they had to fight to uphold Jesus amongst a plethora of options, to uphold the church as a distinct way of life. If they didn’t, who would? They were people who thought their faith and faithfulness the standard and the model for others. To the faith family of Ephesus, Jesus is the one who has them in his hands (not him in theirs), whose authority and judgment is over all the churches, and of whom they are but one. Standing firm without growing weary is good, but only if it is love in which they stand. Jesus does not need your protection; he desires your steadfastness because you are loved by him, and he loves even his enemies. To protect without love is to lose the very thing God who so loved the world sent the Son die so that it might be restored.

The faith family of Smyrna was in a different spot. **They were not fighting for faith, but surviving it.** They were fighting to live. They were a people confined because of their expressed faith, barred from the basics for daily living, running into afflictions at every turn of life. To this faith family whom we know little about either in origin or influence Jesus is depicted as the utter sovereign over all of life and even death. He is the “first and the last, who died and came to life.” (Rev. 2:8) Jesus is life itself, the One who gives life and frees from the fears of death (daily and forever) because he has defeated it. Jesus is the one who was dead and *is* alive.

If the Ephesians were most in need of love, **Smyrna’s faith family was most in need of hope.** While their faithfulness was no less than the Ephesians, it was pressed differently. The Ephesians held fast to Jesus in a world full of options for something other or twisted or comprised. The Smyrnians were holding fast in a world closed off to them because of their relation to Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>6</sup> G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, 239.

## ENCOURAGEMENT | v. 9

In this address alone, Jesus modifies his encouragement from “I know your works...” to “I know your tribulation (compression, restriction, being squeezed) and your poverty and the slander (or blasphemy)” they face. **The works—those acts of godly fortitude—of the Smyrnians are simply (yet with high cost) sticking with Jesus and one another when it would be easier not to do so.** They were sharing in the suffering of Jesus and others whose lives and words called people to right relationship with God and others. Revelation 2:9 is Matthew 5:11-12 in real life:

*Blessed (says Jesus to his disciples on the mountainside near Jerusalem) are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

The faith family of Smyrna found themselves on the outside of everything that made Smyrna, Smyrna. The entanglement of politics, religion, and economics had created exclusive civility, requiring allegiance to Rome and her leaders to participate in even the most basic of trades within the city. If you wanted to buy and sell, craft, study, lead, i.e., make a living, loyalty to the city's politics (which was religious) was required. Otherwise, you were on the outside, confined to eke out an existence off the ladder, *unable to achieve what the culture said was the best good: prominence of citizenship (an insider, influencer, person who could get things done).*

But here is the real kicker, while we might expect this pressure, this squeezing or tribulation, to come from those pagan Roman trade guilds and temples, the sad truth was that the pressure came from “the Synagogue of Satan,” (2:9) from those in the city that shared a root of faith with the Jesus followers in Smyrna.

Jewish faith had a “pass” of sorts when it came to Emperor worship, that loyalty that allowed one to participate in the economics and politics of city life. They could abstain from the emperor's direct worship as the deity by pledging their fidelity to his causes. This accommodation allowed the Jews to participate in the city but retain some distinction. They were Jews in all the historical and ethnic sense, but like the Jews in Jerusalem at Jesus’ trial and execution, they played both sides of the game. There are, after all, ways to get ahead for God when you leveraged the powers of this world—so they thought.

For a while, Christians experienced similar “passes” because they were considered a sect within the Jewish faith. But in Smyrna, as would happen elsewhere, there were Jews who wanted nothing to do with Jesus. Some rejected the Jesus followers out of spite for the Christians’ popularity among the “God-fears,” those gentiles who were attracted to a monotheistic and moral faith for whom Jesus was especially attractive. But most rejected Jesus out of a conviction that they didn’t need to be freed from sin and death by a suffering Messiah.

The Smyrnaian Jews were much like some Jews in Jesus’ time who were initially intrigued by Jesus’ wisdom and power. Still, they were just as quickly offended by his claim that through him came freedom from sin and death—which, of course, assumed that those whom Jesus was inviting into life were dead in sin and enslaved to something other than their own wills. While these Jews, as is recounted in John 8, saw themselves as children of Abraham, Jesus said their father was the devil, “and your will is to do your father’s desire” (Jn. 8:44). Rather than receive God’s rescue, they would rebel against God’s rule, just as the enemy of God himself

had done. The Jews in John 8 would quickly demonstrate the accuracy of Jesus' assessment by seeking to kill him (Jn. 8:59). This tactic was similar to the one the Jews in Smyrna were willing to employ.

Certain Smyrna Jews made it a point not merely to remove the Jesus followers from their places of worship but also to make sure the governing officials knew they were an illegal, contentious, and dangerous rabble. Their means of affliction was *slander*, *blasphemy* against God's children, going as far as making up dramatic lies about the Jesus followers, claiming they were:

- Cannibals because when they received communion, they would say as Jesus did, "this is my body, and this is my blood."
- Hedonists, since they called their community meals the Agape or Love feasts
- Against the family, since families did split over Jesus, and
- Disloyal to the city, since they would not say 'Ceaser is Lord,' which proved to be the most effective lie.

This group of Jews, Jesus calls the synagogue, or assembly of Satan, the accuser/blasphemer/slander. They were not, as they claimed, the assembly of God, but the assembly of the enemy or adversary of God. As one scholar notes, "Thus the 'synagogue of Satan' is also a synagogue in collusion with Rome, as they denounced Christians to the authorities," showing that they were "filled with hatred and slander,"<sup>7</sup> and therefore, opposed the very heart of God's rule and reign and working throughout history.

It's important to note that why Jesus says that it is the synagogue of Satan that slanders or blasphemes the Jesus followers, it is, in verse 10, "the devil" who will inflict this upcoming squeezing. "**The Devil...is the principal enemy of God and his people,**"<sup>8</sup>**the Revelation.** Not culture or cults or particular people—though they often work in union (knowingly or not) with the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places, cosmic powers over the present darkness, rules and authorities influencing people (Eph. 6:12)

Against such adversity, the faith family of Smyrna had suffered well, sharing in the "the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings,"

*that I may know Jesus and the power of his resurrection, and may share his suffering, becoming like him...that...I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

(Philippians 3:10-11)

The Smyrnan's knew what taking up their cross daily (Lk. 9:23) entailed, as they learned that servants were indeed not greater than the master to whom they are apprenticed.

*Remember the word I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.*

(Jn. 15:20-21)

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<sup>7</sup> Osborne, 131–132.

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: a literary and theological commentary*, 35–36.

Smyrna's faith family shared in Jesus' experience of suffering. Now they had the opportunity to share his experience of life forever—both now and on the other side of suffering—by being “faithful unto death, and” receiving from Jesus “the crown of life” (2:10).

## ADMONISHMENT | v. 10

Many assume that Jesus' letter to the Smyrna church doesn't have an admonishment, but that's because we usually think of admonishment only in the strongest terms. But verse 10 helps us see that Jesus' warning of something to avoid: “Don't **fear**...”

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12

***Blessed are you when** others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **Rejoice and be glad**, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Again, it sounds a lot like Jesus' words to the church of Smyrna. But notice that while Jesus can completely identify and thus empathize with the anguish and difficulty of such revile and suffering, he says already happy (full, complete) are you amid the tribulation, so rejoice and be glad. Jesus also said in Matthew 10:28,

*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.*

**Fear, while “natural,” keeps us from experiencing the fullness of what we share when we suffer because we are relating rightly to God and others.** Fear was keeping the Smyrnas from the joy of suffering, what Paul would explain comes from suffering:

*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces **hope**, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

(Rom. 10:3-5)

Why should they not fear? Because they know *who Jesus is*—first and last, dead and a come alive—and *what is proven in “testing.”*

The reference to “ten days” of “tribulation” or suppression and lack; is not only a reference to some specific hardship to come (and which did come several decades later) but a reference back to a similar difficulty of Daniel (1:8-21).

Daniel and many of his fellow educated and gifted Jewish sisters and brothers were forced to leave their homes and exiled to Babylon. Having been conquered, they were pressured to accommodate to the ruling culture's collision of politics and religion to live. Already under pressure, Daniel and several of his companions *chose to be tested*. Daniel approached his steward and said, "Test your servants for ten days" (Dan. 1:11-12). The test was not of Daniel's faithfulness but came because of Daniel's faith. Daniel and his companions were tested, like the Smyrnians, because they choose not "to defile themselves" with the entangled way of the city. Tribulation isn't chosen. Daniel did not choose to be ripped from his home, his family, his place of faith. Tribulation isn't chosen, but it is inevitable. **Testing, comes because of faith**—out of faith already present, already demonstrated, already grounded in something sure. Testing proves what is true (see the stories of [Job](#) and [the Cannonite women!](#))

Like Daniel, the Smyrna's were being pressured to fit in, join in, add a little, take a bite of the life of the city, to accommodate Jesus' way into the way of politics, religion, and economics. **Fear** would be the thing to keep them from acting as Daniel, and his friends did and receiving the abundance of place within the community which was persecuting them (see the whole store in [Daniel 1:8-21](#)). Receiving what the world and the enemy are after—in all its goodness, truth, and beauty—is what Jesus promises.

## WHAT JESUS GIVES (Promise) | v. 10b-11

The first promise is "the crown of life," the prize for the one who reaches the top of the ladder. Ironically, the church gets what the city and the synagogue of Satan want, a crown of civic honor and beauty<sup>9</sup>. They do so not by climbing the ladder of accommodation but by patient endurance. Receiving the prize, not through compromise or competition or combat, but laying down their lives to share Jesus'.

The second promise is freedom from fear of "the second death," a rabbinic term used to summarize God's final judgment of both humanity and divinity. There is physical death and forever death, and God is the One who is over both. But remember what Jesus says about himself in chapter 1,

***Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.***

(Rev. 1:18)

Jesus' promise in verse 11 is a promise that he holds sway over what comes after this life—and those who hold fast to him need not fear what is to come. Why, because he is the One who opens and closes the door to both life's physical ending and its forever. He is the door (Jn. 10:8-9) by which his sheep enter and out of life. And as he said to his apprentices and all who become so,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 37.



*Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

(John 5:24)

Death is no longer an enemy to fear but a passage to life fully and forever. And there is more because Jesus took on death and is alive; we need not fear the stings of death in our daily living either. Jesus' "resurrection gave him power over the entire sphere of death...which enabled him both to bind the [Satan and Devil] of this realm and to protect his own people from its ultimate harmful effects.<sup>10</sup> Whatever can be done to us cannot be done forever and has no power over our inevitable and joyous future. Our souls are safe with our Good Shepherd.

Because that is who Jesus is, our faith, which is faith ultimately and exclusively in him, will make it through seasons of testing as well as life in the tribulation **and** kingdom. So, "Do not fear...Rejoice and be glad," Christ City Church.

Let's pray.

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<sup>10</sup> Beale, 245.

## SONG #3

### INTO TO A CORPORATE WORD | Jeremy

*Blessed is the one who reads about the words of this prophecy, and blessed are **those** who hear and who keep what is written in it; the time is near. (1:3)*

### A CORPORATE WORD | Ally Landis

#### CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION w/ COMMUNION

Father God, we stand before you in humble adoration as we set our face to the tasks and interests of another week and season as Jesus' church.

**Thank you for the blessed assurance** that we shall not be called upon to face them alone or in our strength alone, but that at all times, we will be accompanied by your presence, strengthened by your grace, and encouraged by your family.

**Thank you** that throughout human life run the footprints of **our Lord and Savior, King and Sage, Priest and Friend**: Jesus Christ, who for our sake became flesh and tasted all the different challenges of daily living as well as the end we need no longer fear.

**Thank you** that as we go about our work and play, in pursuit of relationships and aspirations, we can be conscious of the spiritual presence of the heavenly host.

**Thank you** for the saints who rest from their labors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and prophetesses, apostles, noble martyrs, for all the holy and humble, for our dear departed friends and family who have shown us your way. As we remember them, we bless and adore your great name. **We rejoice, O Father, that you have called us to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ.**

**Let the awareness of this holy fellowship follow us wherever we go**, cheering us in loneliness, protecting us in company, strengthening us against temptation, and encouraging us to act in love and justice.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you called the disciples to shine as lights in a dark world. In remembrance and repentance, **we acknowledge before you the many faults and weaknesses of which we are guilty**, we who in this generation represent your Church to the world. **We, as Christ City Church especially acknowledge our part in this brokenness.**

**Forgive us; we pray**, the feebleness of our witness, the meagerness of our giving and loving, and the mediocrity of our zeal. **Help us** live equal in measure to love received, following the One who cared for the poor and the oppressed such as we.

**Let the strength of your Spirit, O Jesus, be in us all**, to share the world's suffering and redress its wrongs, in the fullness of your joy. **Through Jesus' life given, we live.** Amen.

## SONG #4

### BENEDICTION

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25)