

## The Church at Smyrna

### Revelation 2:8-11

*"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'these things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation 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 shall not be hurt by the second death.'"* (NKJV)

### City of Smyrna – Its Location

Smyrna, is the third largest city in Turkey. It is now called Izmir and is about 50 miles north of Ephesus; it lies at the sheltered head of a gulf extending thirty miles inland.

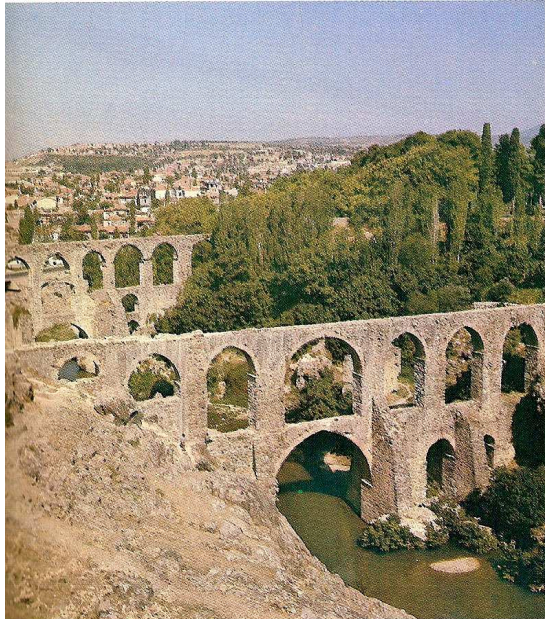


Showing the ancient ruins of Smyrna

Being in the very heart of the of the Aegean region of Turkey it has a natural seaport which serves one of the most fertile regions of the country is the prime harbour for exports. Its airport also serves most of the Aegean holiday resorts.

Smyrna kept its name until 1924 when the last Greeks were expelled by the Turks in the final battle to regain their land. Shortly before that Turkey expelled all those of Greek origin and many thousands of Greek people were killed. The last city to be cleansed was Izmir. The General that led the successful creation of the Republic of Turkey became its first present Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He brought drastic change to the country establishing a secular and democratic system of government. He changed the weekly rest day from Friday to Sunday!

The first occupants of Smyrna were the Hittites who inhabited the land stretching from the steppes of Asia Minor to the Aegean coast 2500 BC The Hittites are first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 15:20. Their name appears some 27 times. Remember Uriah the husband of Bathsheba? He was a Hittite. After the Hittites came Leleges. The Greek poet Homer referred to them in his oracle.



The photograph here shows the Roman system of aqueducts used for transporting water to the city. As in Ephesus most homes had running cold water and a proper sewage disposal system.

In more prosperous houses hot water was also available. There is evidence of central heating systems for winter use in the main shopping areas and covered ways so giving protection from the heat during the summer and from the cold during the winter months.

Barclay says that it was inevitable that Ephesus should come first in John's list of Churches but Smyrna was the natural rival to come second. Of all the cities of Asia, Smyrna was the loveliest. Men called it the 'ornament of Asia', 'the crown of

Asia' and 'the flower of Asia'. The Greeks like Lucian said that it was 'the fairest of the cities of Ionia'. Aristides, sang the praises of Smyrna with such splendour of words like, 'the grace which extends over every part like a rainbow'...'the brightness that pervades every part, and reaches to the heavens, like the glitter of the bronze of armour in Homer.'

It was added that one of the charms of Smyrna was the west wind; the gentle zephyr ever blew through its streets. There was one disadvantage was the as the sewage was discharged into the gulf and harbour area, the wind blew a strong smell of sewage across the city. May I add that it still did ten years ago although steps are now being taken to divert and treat the sewage as part of their case to enter the European Union.

Smyrna was and still is a great trading city. It stood at the end of the road which crossed Lydia and Phrygia. Paul preached in the area of Smyrna (Acts 18:23). Smyrna commanded the trade of the Hermus valley. It was the safest of all harbours in Asia and deep able to take the largest of ships. Coins of Smyrna had an inscription of a merchant ship ready for sea. From the sea there are roads leading to the foothills and a hill covered at that time with temples and noble buildings and was spoken of as "The Crown of Smyrna."

Smyrna was one of the few planned cities of the world. It was a Greek colony in about 1,000 BC but about 600 BC disaster struck it. The Lydians broke into it and destroyed it. For 400 years there was no city, just a collection of small villages. It was awakened to glory and prosperity by Alexander the Great the story goes that soon after Alexander came to the throne of Macedonia he defeated the Persians at Granicus, about forty-five kilometres. South of the Dardanelles. Pausing in Smyrna on his way to fresh victories at Sardis. Miletus and Halicarnassus (Bodrum) he went out hunting on Mount Pagus. He fell asleep near the sanctuary of the goddess called Nemesis. She appeared to him in a dream and told him to move the people of Smyrna across the bay to the land below the hill which would make an excellent

fortified citadel. The people checked this out with the oracle, that of Apollo at Claros, and this answer came back;

“Thee and four times happy shall those men be hereafter  
who shall dwell on Pagus beyond the sacred Meles.”

This was unusually clear advice from an oracle so the people moved without hesitation and the village that had its “Right shoulder” to the bay became a city facing front on. Since the days of Alexander Smyrna has always prospered. Its favourable setting gives it a unique position among the many ancient centres of the world and it is older than several other well known cities such as Athens and Rome. Lysimachus rebuilt it as a complete city. Magnificent streets were built with great rectangle buildings. Roads ran cross wise across the foothills. Most famous street called Street of Gold which began at the temple of Zeus and ended Temple of Cybele.

Smyrna was also a free city and loyal to Rome. Long before Rome was undisputed city of the world, Smyrna identified itself with it. It never wavered in its support for it. Cicero called Smyrna “one of our most faithful and our ancient of allies.” When soldiers of Rome were suffering great hardship following a battle the people of Smyrna stripped of their own clothes and sent them to Rome.

Smyrna was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. In AD 26 when all the cities of the world were competing to be allowed to build a temple to the godhead of Tiberius, Smyrna was chosen above that of Ephesus. In the Roman Agora there are the statues of Poseidon, god of the sea and Demetra, goddess of the earth. They were the deities of the Smyrneans. It is suggested that Homer was born in Smyrna in either the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The people earned their living by being seafarers or farmers and having male and female patron deities they thought they had formed a good balance. Smyrna had rich heathen temples while the Christian Church was very poor. (Rev. 2:9) There were five temples here;

1. Cybele - a Phrygian goddess
2. Zeus - the chief deity
3. Apollo - god of light (Sun God)
4. Aesclepius - god of medicine
5. Aphrodite - goddess of beauty

### **Jewish Influence**

The Jews were very influential in the city. At one time they contributed 10,000 denarii for the beautification of the city. Smyrna generally was very hostile to the Christian Gospel and to those who became Christians. The message of the Cross and Jesus Christ was challenged by both Jew and Pagan.

The city with a rich valley and a magnificent harbour needed all the cultic support that could be obtained and the general opinion was that the two deities, Poseidon and Demetra supplied it. It is believed that the Christian message was brought to Smyrna by the apostle Paul or some of

his associates during his long stay in Ephesus. "All they who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).

Polycarp was an early member of the Christian Church in Smyrna. He was the Bishop there from 115 to 156 AD. Several contemporary accounts of him have been preserved along with some of his writings. The times were tempestuous ones because of persecution. On his return from Rome Polycarp faced the persecution of the Church. The Jews were persecuting the Christians and stirring up trouble. It was the day of the public games on 23rd February 155 A.D. The city was crowded; and the crowds were excited. Suddenly the cry went up, "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for. Polycarp had already had a vision in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire and had awakened and told his disciples: "I must be burnt alive." Polycarp was in hiding on a farm but a slave had been tortured to give his whereabouts. When captured he insisted that the soldiers had a meal. He requested one hour for prayer. Even the police captain did not want this old man to die. "What harm is it to say, "Caesar is Lord" and to offer sacrifice and be saved?" In the arena he was given a chance to curse the name of Christ and make a sacrifice to Caesar or death. His reply has been an inspiration to the Church throughout the centuries

"Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong, how can I blaspheme my King who saved me"?

The crowd shouted for him to be thrown to the lions but the proconsul told the crowd that the games were over. They angrily refused to release Polycarp or postpone his death and were only satisfied after they succeeded in burning him at the stake. The Jews helped to find wood to burn Polycarp although it was their Sabbath which they willingly broke. Polycarp was important to the early Church as a preserver of the purity of the gospel. It was reported at the time that the angry crowd shouted at him

"This is the teacher of Asia, this is the destroyer of our gods; this is the father of the Christians" Some testimony to die for!

His dying prayer has been recorded

"O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, God of angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before thee, I bless thee that thou hast 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 thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as thou, the God without falsehood and of truth, hast prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise thee for all things. I bless thee, I glorify thee through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Child, through whom be glory to thee with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come. Amen."

The Bible Text

*Rev. 2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'these things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:'*

The beginning of the message to the Church at Smyrna was the image of Christ the First and the Last. In this struggling community of faithful Christians Christ's message is plain. Do not worry about your present circumstances. I was before all others and I shall be the last even at the destruction of the earth when there is nothing left I will be the last. This means we can trust him because he is all powerful. In another sense it means that your persecutors are but for a time. As they read this letter they would be reminded of what Isaiah had said,

*" 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. Isaiah 44:6*

*&*

*"Listen to Me, O Jacob, And Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last. Isaiah 48:12*

The words 'who was dead and came to life' not only speaks of the resurrection of Christ but the bringing back to life of this dead city which had lain dormant for 400 years. This appeal then was not only to Christians but also to the history of Smyrna. Smyrna was captured and destroyed by the Lydians and for three centuries its name was obliterated from the roll of cities. However it was restored and became an important Greek city. It became "dead" and now "lives" again.

A principle to remember when studying the seven Churches of Revelation is that there is always a natural explanation to what is said as well as a spiritual one. This particular statement presented a strong appeal to the Smyrneans in another way. A patron deity of the city was Cybele whose worship was based on her typical descent into death and resurrection in new life. Taking up the very mythology of the people of Smyrna the Lord's address plainly indicates that these are but mists of human imagination which obscure the glorious reality, which is that the Lord is the true life. He descended into death and came forth again in resurrection power and He still lives today.

These words also carried a glorious message to all who were suffering under persecution. Christ declares that even if the suffering led to death, out of that dust of death would spring forth a more glorious life.

The One who had died and now lives was the personal pledge for His people's future life. The Lord gave quite an appropriate message for that period in time.

*Rev 2:9 "I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."*

We can see that the Church in Smyrna was a suffering Church and that Christ with His characteristic care and concern takes the time and the trouble to reveal to them His personal feelings. Christ addresses each of the seven Churches with the saying: "I know" and in this case He says "I know your afflictions and your poverty" Christ speaks directly to the needs of His people and shows them that He is not unaware of their problems but rather very aware of the tribulation through which they were passing. It was not easy to be a Christian in Smyrna. The city had acquired a reputation for loyalty to the Roman Empire and as a result a temple had been erected to the Emperor Tiberius. Citizens were required to sprinkle incense on the

fire that burned before the emperor's statue and to acknowledge Caesar as lord. Christians who would not conform to this rule and as a consequence were outlawed and also persecuted by both the civic authorities and the Jewish community in particular.

It is comforting to know that Jesus also understands our trials and our tribulations. Nothing happens to us that He does not know about. Our Great Shepherd knows every bruise sustained by His sheep.

Poverty denotes the lack of material possessions. The early Church was made up largely of the poorer classes. If you were wealthy and said that you believed, your property was confiscated by the Roman authorities.

We do have spiritual wealth.

*"...that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Eph 2:7*

We are in the Christian faith for the long haul and not just for the 'here and now.' Meantime like Moses we declare;

*"Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward." Heb 11:26*

This is worth far more than material possessions.

To the believers in Smyrna the persecution worsened by the malignant opposition of the Jews. Many of them acted as informers against them. These were Jews outwardly. There has only been a remnant of Jews who truly have been God's people. (Rom 11:5) Smyrna was a city of culture in which many Jews had discarded their belief in the Old Testament. All through the New Testament we see the Jews opposed to Jesus and the Good News. They had given themselves over to Satan to carry out his works otherwise they would not have launched such a vicious attack on the Church. Calling them the synagogue of Satan was strong language but God has the beautiful knack of calling things exactly what they are.

Remember how Jesus treated some Jews on one occasion. The incident is recorded in the Gospel of John Chapter 8:41-45

*"You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, {even} God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. "Why do you not understand what I am saying? {It is} because you cannot hear My word. "You are of {your} father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own {nature;} for he is a liar, and the father of lies. "But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.*

**Never forget that the source of all opposition and persecution to individual Christians or to the Church as a whole comes from the devil.**

*Rev 2:10 "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer, I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

"Do not be afraid" is the encouragement of the Lord to his own in the midst of persecution. The persecution against the Church in Smyrna intensified more and more exactly as Christ had foretold. History tells us that multitudes went to their death singing praises to God. What a life of hardship these Christians experienced but they considered that their love for Christ was their supreme responsibility.

Against the seven praise worthy qualities of the Ephesians these had only one. This however was sufficient to make them acceptable to Christ.

Christ labels the devil as being responsible for the suffering of the Saints and the actions of the persecutors is ascribed to the evil spirit which prompts them. This predicted suffering corresponds with those foretold by Jesus in Matthew 10: 17 - 19 Matthew 24: 9 and Luke 21:12 - 17, and also those already experienced by the Church in Acts 8: 3

The ten days may refer to the ten persecutions through which the Church would pass during its conflict with pagan Rome these included;

NERO AD 6-68	Paul beheaded. Nero first Emperor to persecute Christians
DOMITIAN AD 95-96	John exiled to Patmos, Christians in Ephesus Persecuted
TRAJAN AD 104-117	Ignatius burned at stake
HADRIAN AD 117-138	Apostolic Fathers persecuted, Clement Bishop of Rome executed
MARCUS AURELIUS AD 161-180	Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna martyred
SEVERUS AD 200-211	Christians throughout the Roman Empire were Persecuted
MAXIMINIUS AD 235 - 237	Prominent Christian Leaders put to Death
DECIUS AD 250 - 253	The period of severe prosecution of Christians by Rome
VALERIAN AD 257 - 260	Bishop Pion burned at stake and Camprian was slain
DIOCLETIAN A. D. 303 - 313	The worst emperor, attempted to exterminate the Christian Faith

"Be faithful, even to the point of death" i.e. up to the point of enduring death for the name of Christ. Christ Himself had been obedient to His death on the cross. (Phil 2:8). For some there would be no help while on earth in terms of being given relief from persecution. Some will die for their faith. The promise however from the risen Christ is that they would receive the Crown of Life. This is a special award for those who are martyrs for the cause of Christ. For eternity Christ will see that they are recognised continually by the wearing of the special crown. The crown of gold is a symbol of steadfastness. It means that the crown will last forever and show to all a symbol of perseverance.

Yet again although the Risen Christ speaks of spiritual things it is interesting to note that at night the hilltop of Mt. Pagus overlooking the city shows its lights and it appears to the viewer in the City to be a crown glowing in the night sky.

Look at what Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12 - 19

*"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if {anyone suffers} as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. For {it is} time for judgement to begin with the household of God; and if {it begins} with us first, what {will be} the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" 1 Pet 4:12-19. (NAS)*

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*"But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to {the} courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. "But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. "For it is not you who speak, but {it is} the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. Matt 10:17-20 (NAS)*

*Rev 2:11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death"*

Again the command goes forth. He that has a spiritual ear, those who are tuned into God, who have a relationship with him, they will hear of things to their own advantage. Those in Smyrna who overcome will not be hurt by the second death. In fact death will not visit them because they already have the guarantee of eternal life. The second death is the final condemnation which sinners undergo at the Judgement Seat. (Rev 20: 6, 14: 21: 8) No believer will



experience the second death. The first death concerns the body but the second death concerns the soul and spirit. John was right when he said, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith (1 John 5:4.) and again in John 5:24, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

Please note that out of all the seven Churches only Smyrna has maintained a Church throughout the ages.

#### Additional History

In 1535 A.D. Süleyman the Magnificent signed a commercial treaty with France and Izmir became a sophisticated commercial center. Any worthwhile merchant was expected to speak Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, and Turkish. Additional knowledge of Armenian, Ladino and Russian was appreciated. The large Christian population, mainly Greek, led the Turks to refer to the city as "Gavur İzmir", i.e. infidel İzmir. In the 19 and early 20 century, İzmir's hashish and opium bars were the birthplace of the Greek folk music known as *Rembetika*.

## Present Day Smyrna (Ismir)

