



The Seven Churches: Smyrna

The Geography and Topography

Smyrna was a large city on the western edge of Asia Minor. It sat at the head of a gulf of the Aegean Sea that reached far inland and the Hermus river connected it with the inland areas. This places the city about 35-40 miles north of Ephesus. The modern city of Izmir, Turkey today has enveloped old Smyrna.

The city was built on the lower slopes of Mount Pagus. The area was considered to have the “perfect” climate, well defined seasons, which combined with the abundance of water in the area, led to a bounty of fertility.

Lysimachus built the city in the 3rd century BC on and near the ruins of former Greek colonies that had been destroyed and dispersed in the 7th century BC. The site had all of the elements for prosperity—it was a fertile region, there was a natural harbor with a connecting river, and it was positioned on the major north-south highway.

The Politics and Economy

In Roman times, Smyrna was considered the most brilliant city of Asia Minor, successfully rivaling Pergamum and Ephesus. Its streets were wide and paved. Its system of coinage was well established. It was celebrated for its schools of science and medicine, and for its handsome buildings. Among them was the Homerium—Smyrna was one of several places which claimed to be the birthplace of the poet. On the slope of Mt. Pagus was a theater which seated 20,000 spectators.

Smyrna was the first to erect a temple to the city of Rome in 195 BC, therefore fixing one of the most important relationships the city ever had. According to Cicero, Smyrna was “the most faithful and most ancient ally” of Rome. In AD 23-26 a temple was built in honor of Tiberius and his mother Julia, and the Golden Street, connecting the temples of Zeus and Cybele, is said to have been the best in any ancient city.

The ancient writer/geographer, Strabo, had this to say: “Their city is now the most beautiful of all; a part of it is on a mountain and walled, but the greater part of it is in the plain near the harbor and near the Metroum and near the gymnasium. The division into streets is exceptionally good, in straight lines as far as possible; and the streets are paved with stone ...”

Under Roman control the city was favored by many emperors. They donated to the reconstruction of the city after the earthquake of AD 178.

The Religious Background

Many gods were worshiped here, but the tutelary deity of Smyrna was the mother goddess, Cybele, the patroness and guardian of the city. She is often pictured sitting with her feet on the sea, her head rising to the heavens, and crowned with a circlet of beautiful buildings; this is a picture of the city itself. Essentially the worship of Cybele was the worship of the city itself. Athena was also highly regarded here. The temple of Athena is one of the oldest structures uncovered, dating back to the 7th century BC.

There was also a strong Jewish presence in this city. Even in the modern era, numbers of synagogues could be found in the area.

Acts 19:10 would indicate that Christianity probably spread here during the third journey of Paul. The apostle John is closely associated with this church; his student, Polycarp, was from here and was martyred here in AD 155. This was probably largely due to agitation from the Jews of the area. John alludes to this as he writes the Revelation, *“I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”* One scholar has even noted, “It seems that the Jews of Smyrna were more antagonistic than were the Romans to the spread of Christianity, for it is said that even on Saturday, their sacred day, they brought wood for the fire in which Polycarp was burned.”

The Letter—Revelation 2:8-11

Unlike the church at Ephesus, we know absolutely nothing about the history of the church at Smyrna. However, we do know that much preaching had been done in the area of Smyrna (**Acts 19:10**). This individuals of this church had been taught well, as is evident from this letter.

Consider Christ’s description of Himself. Again we see that Christ depicts Himself as being *especially* qualified to discuss that which was needed by this church. Jesus had suffered, too (**Revelation 2:8**). He also had been victorious. Christ also stated that He was first and last. When others have lived and gone, Jesus is. This suffering church could take courage, as Jesus, the author, had been killed and had become the first-fruits of them that slept (**1 Corinthians 15:20**).

Consider the good things Jesus knew about this church. He knew! (**Revelation 2:9**). He knows all things (**Hebrews 4:13**). Jesus knew their tribulations. He knew they were having a hard fight, but that they were fighting. Jesus, also, knew their poverty. However, this was not so bad, for they were really rich. The churches in Macedonia were poor, too, still they were rich (**2 Corinthians 8:1-3**). So, we should learn not to be discouraged if we are a poor church and not to be elated if we are a rich church. Being poor might make us realize our dependence upon God, or it might make some disgruntled or worried. Being rich might make us think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, or it might make us even more cognizant of our responsibilities toward the work God has given us. There is no spiritual value in being poor, and there is no spiritual value in being rich. Jesus also knew the blasphemy which they had to endure, still they were enduring. Consider the value of an application of this to ourselves.

Consider the bad which Jesus knew about this church. Nothing bad is said about this church. They were faithful (**Revelation 2:10**). But they needed encouragement because yet more was to come—figuratively there would be 10 days of tribulation. This time the figure is not defined as it had been with other figurative language like the stars and the lampstands. Tribulation, especially

if it continues, may make people discouraged, but it can also do the opposite (**Matthew 5:11-12; 2Timothy 3:12; James 1:2-6**). Even so, tribulation may bring sorrow (**1Peter 1:6-7**).

Now consider the requirements which Jesus gave (**Revelation 2:10**). We have here one of the classic statements of Scripture: *“Be faithful until death ...”*

Consider the promise: *“I will give you the crown of life.”* These, if faithful, would not be hurt by the second death (**Revelation 2:11**).

What might be said of you? Of this church? Every Christian of every generation should remember the requirement and the promise to these Christians in Smyrna. We are part of the same family as they are.