**Jesus’ message to the Church in Smyrna**

1. **About the 7 letters**

1a) These letters are spoken in the **context of the book of Revelation**. Though the letters were originally addressed to the churches of that area, it is clear that the Holy Spirit wanted to give messages that would help the end time church to be aware of what they should **embrace** and what they need to **be purified from** as they walk through the days of the book of Revelation.

1. **Background to Smyrna**

2a) Smyrna has been inhabited continuously for over 3000 years. It is the only one of the seven cities that John wrote to that still exists as a city today, though today it’s called Izmir, in Western Turkey. In John’s day it was a city of about 100,000 inhabitants and a rival to Ephesus.

2b) A few hundred years before Jesus was born, the whole city was destroyed and the best town planners of the day designed and rebuilt it from scratch. Beautiful boulevards lined with marble columns sloped down from the surrounding hills towards the natural harbour. It was one of the most beautiful cities of the ancient world, known as the “flower” or the “crown of Asia, surrounded in a ring by hills that were topped by temples, towers and other impressive buildings. The city boasted a great library, a colosseum and a theatre. Homer, one of the ancient world’s greatest writers lived there.

2c) It was also a very wealthy city, because of its natural harbour and its connection to the major Roman roads that ran East-West across the roman province of Asia.

2d) Smyra was also very patriotic city. In the days of the ascendancy of Roman power, Smyrna had competed with 11 other Asian cities for the right to build a temple to the worship of the Roman emperor, and won. At public feasts and national holidays citizens were required to bow or burn incense before the emperor’s statue. Those who refused were seen as a danger to the state and were often executed.

2e) Because of its trade, there was a large colony of Jews there, among whom the church was founded

1. **The Church was suffering persecution**

3a) “I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”.

3b) They **suffered slander** (v9). Though the early Christians were good citizens, honest business people who even prayed for the emperor, the Jews continuously passed untrue claims to the Romans that the Christians were causing people to disobey roman laws; they said the Christians were cannibals, eating the flesh and blood of people (referring to the Lord’s supper) and were sexually immoral (referring to their “love feasts”).

3c) They suffered economically, to the point that many were now living in poverty. The Greek world used here for poverty (ptóchos) means to be **utterly destitute and reduced to begging**.

3d) **The worst persecution nearly always comes from compromised believers.**

The Jews were a rich and stable community, that caused no trouble to the city, and were often benefactors to the city’s projects, they usually were in good standing with the Roman rulers. They were the only group had been granted special permission to not worship the emperor, a privilege that they guarded jealous. In the early centuries of the church, no-one hated the Christians more than the Jews. They used every opportunity to get them into trouble with the Romans.

Today, compromised believers have **a faith that is acceptable to the world around them**. They talk about peace and unity and love – things that they world can accept. This cosy religion wins a place in society which they fight to keep. Consequently, they distance themselves from believers who talk about the more challenging aspects of the faith.

3e) **Persecution by fellow believers can often take you by surprise.**

In the early days of the Church, many Christians still called themselves Jews and went to the synagogue every week. They did everything most observant Jews did but just added some more things to them.

Yet, the Jews had developed a pathological hatred towards them which only makes sense if you understand that it is demonic. Jesus said “They are **a synagogue of Satan”** (v9). As a believer, you aren’t hated or persecuted because you were a bit unwise or too zealous in your faith. Your persecution **is rooted in the devil’s hatred of God.**

3f) **The more you become like Jesus, the more you will be loved by some but hated and openly persecuted by others, especially those with a religious spirit who feel that your true faith is threatening their acceptable religion.**

3g) Polycarp was a very well respected, godly old man and the bishop of Smyrna. He had been a disciple of the apostle John and had talked to many who themselves had known Jesus. But the Jews hated him so much that they broke the sabbath to gather the wood to make the fire on which he was burned to death. As they were tying him up, the proconsul of Smyrna appealed to him; “Deny Christ, and you can go free. I beg you, as an old man, consider your grey hairs”.

But Polycarp said; “eighty and six years have I served Christ and he never did me any wrong. So how, then can I now blaspheme my king? …. You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the ungodly." As they lit the fire, a wind came and blew the flames away from him, so a merciful soldier ran in and pierced him with a spear.

1. **Why the UK Church is not persecuted?**

4a) The Bible is very clear that if you follow Christ, you should expect persecution.

4b) “No servant is greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (John 15, 18-20)

4c) “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3, 12)

4d) If you aren’t being persecuted, there are three possible reasons why. **Reason 1;** The Church has so influenced our nation’s culture that people don’t see us as different from themselves.

4f) **Reason 2;** No-one knows you are a Christian. You keep your light hidden under a bowl (Matt. 5, 16) and only talk about it when you are with fellow Christians. You feel its important for your witness to be a “nice” person, everyone’s friend, so you don’t really talk openly about your faith as it might upset others.

4g) The only trouble with that is that Jesus says; “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” (Mark 8, 38).

4h) **Reason 3;** the world has influenced the church to the extent that we are not really very different from them in what we believe or how we live. We accept one little compromise after another, so that gradually what used to be unacceptable a few years ago becomes the new normal.



4i) Are you ready to face persecution for Jesus? How can you strengthen yourself and prepare for it? **QR Code for talk on Persecution**

1. **Do not be afraid**

5a) “**Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer”** – seems contradictory. He warned them that their persecution was about to get worse. “…I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you” (2, 10).

5b) “The devil will put **some of you** in prison to test you”. The “Some of you” is the hard bit. Some will be spared. Some will be arrested. Some may have miraculous deliverance stories. It was like that in the book of Acts. Peter and James were arrested together (Acts 12). James was beheaded. Peter was led out by angels. Later Peter was arrested again, and instead of a miraculous deliverance there was martyrdom. Paul was arrested multiple times. Sometimes he was let off. Other times he was whipped and beaten. One time, as he and Silas sung in the city of Philippi, the prison walls fell down and they could just walk out. The next time he was in prison, his imprisonment lasted for 9 years and only ended when he was beheaded. We need to rest in Jesus words “**I know your affliction”.**

5c) “You will suffer persecution for 10 days”. On this occasion the suffering will only last for a short time.

5d) **Don’t let fear dominate your mind and emotions.** It’s easy to excuse fear, to just allow it room to reside unchecked in our life. Yet most frequent command in the scripture, repeated hundreds of times is “Do not be afraid”. This is so often repeated because it is our greatest challenge.

5e)Both the devil and God have plans for our life. One is to bless, to nurture, to give and help us grow and develop. The other is to steal, kill and destroy. **If we allow fear to dominate our mind, we are agreeing with the devil’s plans for our life, not with Gods.**

5f) Both the devil and God try to influence our lives in a similar way. They speak words or thoughts into our mind and then seek to get us to agree with those words. When we agree with them, we empower those words and those words start to change our life.

5f) Jesus tells us that in the last days the issue that will pull most people away from following him will be fear. “people will faint with terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world” (Luke 21, 26).

I put a QR code on the notes which leads you to a talk in a series I did 3 years ago called “Developping a mind-set for the end times”, and that talk looks at what the Bible calls **“The great falling away”** and looks in detail about **the negative effect that fear can have** in our life if we give it room.



5g) Fear is the opposite of faith. You can’t be afraid and believe at the same time. If you are afraid, it’s because you aren’t believing God.

5h) We need to seek to “Build yourselves up in your most holy faith” (Jude 1, 20)

1. **Turn your eyes upon Jesus**

6a) What does Jesus say to this church that is suffering such intense persecution?

“I know your afflictions” (v9).

6b) In each of the 7 letters, he names **one specific characteristic** that will meet the challenge of that particular church and one or more rewards that will come if they keep on in the faith. For this church that was facing extreme persecution, it names Jesus as “**the First and the Last, who died and came to life again**.” (2, 8).

As the **First,** He created all things. They only exist because he gives them permission. As the **Last**, Jesus has the final say in every situation, whether the believers would live or die, whether they would go free and flourish or be persecuted and remain destitute. But also, Jesus has the **Last Word** in everyone’s life. He will be the judge that will decide a person’s eternal reward and destiny. This title of Jesus (First and Last) comes 7 times in scripture; (Is. 41, 4; 44, 6; 48, 12; Rev. 1, 8 & 17; 2, 8; 22, 13),

6c) “I am he who died and came back to life” (v8). Most people live, then die. Only Jesus died then lived! Death is the greatest fear, the end of the road. The worst thing that anyone can threaten you with is death. But not with Jesus. He conquered death, so death is no-longer the same threat. Instead it’s the doorway to eternal life.

6d) To the one who is faithful even to the point of death, I will give you life as your victor’s crown. That is one of the high honours of heaven that will mark you out as different from those around you in heaven for ever!

6e) The one who is victorious **will not be hurt at all by the second death**” (2, 10-11). Jesus said; “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mt 10, 28).

6f) Jesus says of the church in Smyrna; **“You are rich”.** There’s a spiritual richness that comes over your life in hardship and persecution that you lose in comfort. “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Pet. 4:14). Richard Wurmbrand "Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."