

## 7 Churches Tour – 2019 - Smyrna

### Introduction

- The city of Smyrna was 40 miles north of Ephesus, and was a commercial city of striking beauty. Nowadays it is known as Izmir, located on a beautiful inlet of the Aegean Sea. It boasted the only known 3 level market plaza in the ancient world, with a basement, ground and 1<sup>st</sup> level.
- Smyrna was built by the Greeks about 1,000BC, then destroyed by the Lydians in 600BC. Lysimachus, one of Alexander the Great's generals, later rebuilt it around 200BC. Thus, the themes of death and resurrection permeate this letter. Jesus introduces Himself as the one who "was dead, and came to life," and it is written to Christians who are bound for death, yet are promised a crown of life. Smyrna was a persecuted church!

### The Message to the Church of Smyrna

- **Rev. 2.8-11.** Smyrna represented the persecuted church of the Roman Empire, and speaks to those who are persecuted today. Persecution raged throughout this period (100-313AD), and climaxed in the 10 year persecution of Diocletian (303-313AD). Many were tortured and died for their faith. Most of the bishops at the Council of Nicea in 325AD had been tortured, burned, dipped in oil, mutilated, blinded or disabled.
- Polycarp - a direct pupil of the apostle John, Polycarp lived between 70 and 155AD, connecting him to both the biblical apostles and the age of the early church fathers. Several ancient sources document the contributions of Polycarp to Christianity, including his letters written to the church at Philippi, in which he encourages the members to remain strong in their faith and to flee from materialism.
- Polycarp served as the bishop of the church at Smyrna, and was recognized as one of the early combatants of Christian heresies, particularly of Gnosticism. Yet, Polycarp is not as well known for his life as for his death. His martyrdom stands as one of the most well documented events of antiquity.
- Polycarp was arrested in 155AD on the charge of being a Christian, and amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on such a gentle old man and urged Polycarp to proclaim, "Caesar is Lord".
- If only Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue, he would escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, "**Eighty and six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?**" Polycarp refused to deny his faith in Jesus as Lord, and thus was burned alive at the stake, as it was too late in the day to execute by using lions.
- Polycarp died for one reason - his unyielding faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ. Yet Polycarp's well-recorded death is only one of many lives that were given out of loyalty to Jesus Christ during this era.
- Polycarp was a '*martus*', a witness. Today, we believe one is a martyr who dies for their faith. Yet in the Scriptures, a *martus* is one who testifies to their faith, even unto death if necessary. Polycarp was a witness, a *martus* or martyr, not because he died, but because he was steadfast in his confession of faith whilst alive.
- And so we pause to remember the modern-day persecuted church. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom produces an annual report that details those who experience persecution each year. Most who die for their faith are Christians. Daily, our brothers and sisters are slaughtered around the world.
- VOM / Open Doors USA carefully tabulate those who are known to die for their faith in Jesus, but only Jesus knows the true number. In 2018, over 92,000 Christians were murdered for their faith worldwide.
- We in the "Free Church" may learn valuable lessons from those of the Persecuted Church. Paul wrote that, "Jesus Christ...who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Cor. 1.4).

### Conclusion

- In this letter to Smyrna, Jesus is speaking who confess Him as Lord today, regardless of the consequences to their personal lives, their careers, their studies, their financial or social prospects. Jesus is calling us to be living witnesses today, living martyrs, who are faithful to Him no matter what, even to the point of death.
- Rev. 2.10c, 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life'. In confessing Jesus as Lord today when it really matters, when everything we hold dear is on the line, we have the assurance that when Jesus comes again, He will confess us before the universe as being in the Lamb's Book of Life, and we will receive a Crown of Life.