

“Faithful to the Point of Death (Smyrna)

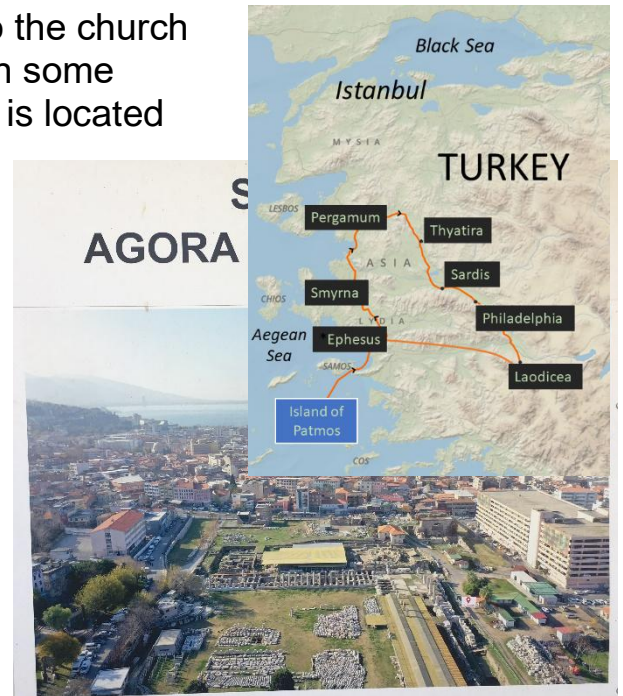
Revelation 2:8-11 on July 24, 2022

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Please read Revelation 2:8-11 before going further in this transcript.

For the past several years, our church has been having focused prayer on the 24th day of each month. We chose the 24th because, Lord willing, the year 2024 will be our church's 100-year anniversary. Today is July 24, and that's why you'll find a Vision 2024 Prayer Letter in your bulletin. We're praying that God will help us to be more and more the church that He wants us to be. In addition to consistent prayer, we've also been focusing in on a few, particular sermon series. We're trusting that God will use His Word to guide and shape us into the church that He wants us to be. So, a while back, we went through the Book of Acts and studied the early church. We learned from their example, both their mistakes and their successes. This past spring we intentionally went through our church's 10-point Statement of Faith. We dug into "What We Believe" and WHY we believe it. And now, we're going through this sermon series on Revelation. We've begun by focusing on the 7 churches in Revelation 2-3. Once again, we're hoping to learn from their example, both their mistakes and their successes.

Today we're going to consider Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna, just 4 verses long. Let's begin with some background info on Ancient Smyrna. Smyrna is located about 40 miles north of Ephesus. In fact, just like Ephesus, Smyrna is located on the east coast of the Aegean Sea, which was not only beautiful but also quite lucrative for commercial trade. New Testament scholar Robert Mounce describes Smyrna this way: It "was a proud and beautiful city.... It boasted a famous stadium, library, and [the largest] public theater...in Asia. It claimed to be the birthplace of the great epic poet Homer. A famous thoroughfare called the Street of Gold curved around Mt. Pagus¹ (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor).... The [high point] on Mt. Pagus was called the crown or garland of Smyrna. In NT times the population may have been [as high as] 200,000. Coins describe the city as "FIRST of Asia in beauty and size."² (Of course, Ephesus would have something to say about this since it was quite beautiful as well, not to mention that its population was at least 50,000 greater.) Nonetheless, Smyrna was very intentional about aligning itself with Rome, and it was "eager to meet its demands for emperor worship. This, plus a large and actively hostile Jewish population, made it extremely difficult to live there as a Christian."^{3 4}



The modern city of Izmir is located right on top of Ancient Smyrna.⁷ You can see in the picture here that it continues to enjoy a beautiful harbor location on the Aegean Sea. Since the modern city was built right on top of Ancient Smyrna, there's actually not a whole lot to see when you visit there.

¹ "PAY gis"

² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 73.

³ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2152 footnote on Revelation 2:8.

⁴ "In AD 26 Tiberius chose Smyrna from eleven Asian applicants to become the temple keeper for Asia's second imperial cult temple." Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 312.

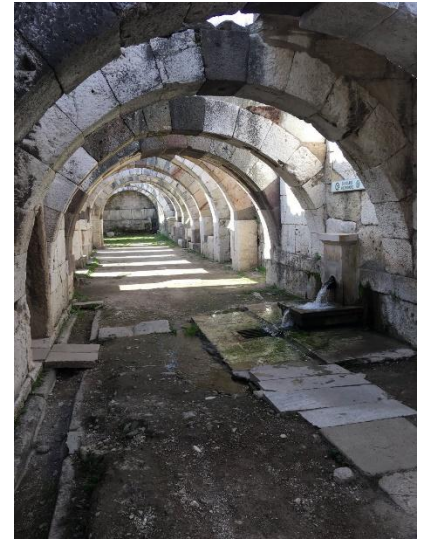
⁵ "Because of its strategic location, Smyrna developed into a major seaport. It was also connected by road with Ephesus which was located 40 mi to the SW." Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 311.

⁶ Smyrna was located in an ideal location so it "became one of the most important cities of Anatolia [Asia Minor]... The right to build a temple in the name of the Emperor...was very important with the Roman cities. It was also an important title given to Smyrna three times." This information is posted on a sign that I read at the Smyrna (modern Izmir) site on April 24, 2022.

⁷ Information about what remains of Ancient Smyrna, and what's been built next to or on top of it, is posted on a sign that one can read at the Smyrna (modern Izmir) site. I was there on April 24, 2022.

You can see some ruins piled up in the bottom center of the screen (my wife calls them piles of rocks).

Just beyond those piles of rocks are some really cool arches. This is part of the basilica⁸, which was a large, roofed hall used for transacting official business in Smyrna. Sadly, we only spent about an hour here because there is so little left of Ancient Smyrna.⁹



Jesus begins His letter to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:8, “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” As mentioned earlier, Smyrna was a beautiful city, filled with civic pride, which is why they considered themselves first among the cities of Asia Minor.¹⁰ In contrast, Jesus describes Himself as first, in fact, “The First and the Last.” This is “connected to God as the Alpha and Omega... Both titles mean that God and Christ are sovereign over history, in control not only of the past but [also] of the future.”¹¹ In other words, Jesus was reminding the Christians in Smyrna that they didn’t need to fear Rome, or to be overly concerned with pleasing Rome. As much as their city was trying to make itself into something great, Jesus was greater. Later on in Revelation 22:13 Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” In Isaiah 44:6 God describes Himself this way, “This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” In other words, Jesus is fully God, fully eternal, and fully in control of everything from A to Z, and everything in-between.¹² ¹³ New Testament scholar Grant Osborne

⁸ Basilica = “A Roman building with a large, roofed hall used for transacting official business. ...After Christianity was legalized, the church adapted this architectural style for its buildings because basilicas were very functional.” (Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, pp. 391-392.

⁹ And about half of what’s left wasn’t even open to the public when we visited.

¹⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, top of p. 127.

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 128.

¹² “beginning and the end...as well as everything in between.” Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 71.

¹³ See Revelation 1:8, 17; 21:6.

says it this way: “The ‘First and the Last’ title derives from Isaiah...where it refers to God as creator of all and sovereign over history. ...God precedes all things, as their Creator, and he will bring all things to [End Times] fulfillment. He is the origin and goal of all history. He has the first word, in creation, and the last word, in new creation.”¹⁴

In Revelation 2:8, Jesus also describes Himself as the One “...who died and came to life again.” This echoes His words to John back in Revelation 1:18, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!” In other words, not only did Jesus rise from the dead in the past, but He continues to be alive, right now, in the present, and He will continue to be alive forever and ever. We can only begin to imagine how encouraging and comforting it must have been for the believers in Smyrna to read these words. They were facing intense persecution, persecution that was getting some of them thrown in jail, and some of them put to death.¹⁵ (*They probably all knew someone who’d been put to death.*) As followers of Christ, they knew that He had the power and authority, to make them “alive for ever and ever!”

Jesus goes on in Revelation 2:9, “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.” The persecution being poured out on the Christ-followers in Smyrna had two particular aspects: poverty, and slander (which can also be translated blasphemy). Let’s look at these one at a time.

First of all, **they were persecuted through POVERTY**. Even though Smyrna was an incredibly wealthy city, the Christians who lived there were financially broke. Their poverty wasn’t the result of a bad work ethic, or laziness, or anything like that. The immediate context suggests that their poverty was a byproduct of their afflictions and persecution. So we could imagine some possible scenarios that may have made them poor:¹⁶ First of all...

1. They had limited social status. Early on, the Christians had some freedoms because they were considered a Jewish sect, and that placed them under the protective umbrella of the well-established Jewish religion. But eventually the Jews kicked the Christians out because of their bold proclamation of Jesus. They lost their protected status, and they fell out of

¹⁴ See Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12. In part citing Bauckham, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 95.

¹⁵ Jesus is the LIVING God, who stands in stark contrast to the LIFELESS idols of this world, including the dead idols that were being actively worshipped all around them in the city of Smyrna. Notice how Psalm 42:2 and 84:2 talk about the Living God.

¹⁶ See discussion on p. 129, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

favor with Rome.¹⁷ New Testament scholar G.K. Beale explains: “Rome was antagonistic toward new religions, especially those that did not deify the emperor; and the Jews, jealous that Gentile ‘God-fearers’ were converting to Christianity in such numbers, were only too happy to inform the Romans that Christianity was NOT a Jewish sect.”¹⁸ In other words, the best way to get ahead financially, and to enjoy economic prosperity, was to improve your social status, by participating in the Roman cult; in fact, “Citizens of both upper and lower classes, were required by local law, to sacrifice to the emperor on various special occasions.”¹⁹ (*Jews were given an exception, Christians were not.*) So the Christians had an incredibly low social status. Both the Jews, and the Roman pagans alike, could treat the Christians poorly, with little or no repercussions. Perhaps they damaged their property, or knocked over their carts and workstations, or harassed them in other ways.²⁰

Another thing that may have made the Christians poor is that...

2. They had limited job opportunities. At this time in history, trade guilds were common. A guild was simply an association of workers who controlled a particular area of work. So you might have an agricultural guild, fishing guild, leather-workers guild, etc. The thing about the trade guilds is that they were careful to pay homage to any of the Roman and Greek gods that might grant them favor in their industry. But the Christians refused to worship false gods. This not only got them barred from the trade guilds, but it also likely discouraged others, outside of the guilds, from wanting to hire them or do business with them.²¹ ²² So we can see how limited social status and limited job opportunities, might have left many Christians in poverty.²³ On top of all this, some Christians were being thrown into prison, which would obviously make it difficult to hold down a job or provide for your family. Hebrews 10:32-34 comes to mind, “Remember those earlier

¹⁷ See discussion on pp. 129-130, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

¹⁸ Grant R. Osborne citing Beale, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 130.

¹⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 240.

²⁰ New Testament scholar Robert Mounce mentions that “In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christians to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute. They may also have been the victims of mob violence and looting.” Grant R. Osborne citing Mounce, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 130.

²¹ Afflictions “Including economic hardship, verbal abuse, and marginalization, likely because they refused to participate in idolatrous trade guilds.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2591 footnote on Revelation 2:9.

²² You see, in grand cities like Smyrna, there would be pagan religious rites and sacrifices at all the various temples, but also processions and celebrations right in the streets, and even among the marketplace. These devoted Christ-followers in Smyrna, refused to attend or participate in any kind of false worship. And yet, the common belief was that these activities would curry favor with the gods. Therefore, association with Christians may have been considered bad luck, or even as taking a risk of offending the gods and suffering their wrath.

²³ Even self-employed Christians who worked hard, likely got pennies on the dollar for their agricultural crops or daily catch of fish.

days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”²⁴ The fact is, the believers in Smyrna were financially broke, and yet Jesus tells them in verse 9 “yet you are rich!” Jesus reminds them that they are spiritually wealthy, that they have the kind of riches that truly matter in this life.^{25 26 27}

The believers in Smyrna were also persecuted through SLANDER. In Revelation 2:9 Jesus says, “...I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” Now, “a synagogue of Satan” doesn’t mean that they were having active satanic worship services in their synagogue. But they were actively partnering in Satan’s evil work, albeit through his lens of deception.²⁸ The Jews living in the city of Smyrna were not living the way that God intended them to live; instead of aligning themselves with God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, and with those who were following Christ, they were aligning themselves with Satan.^{29 30} Romans 2:28 explains, “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code....”³¹ So they say they were Jews, but they were not Jews.³² However, they used their position as Jews to slander

²⁴ And yet, in Mark 10:29-30 Jesus promised, “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

²⁵ Consider Proverbs 22:1.

²⁶ The faithfulness of the believers in Smyrna in the face of persecution demonstrates their immense spiritual riches. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 239.

²⁷ All of this illustrates a vital spiritual principle: persecution for our faith will enrich our faith. Persecution brings us closer to God because it resets our worldview, and it reminds us that we are not home yet. It helps us keep in mind Jesus’ 2nd coming: He’s coming back for us, to get us out of this place! James 2:5 says, “...Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” So, what do you think? If you were given the choice between the two, would you rather be financially rich, or would you rather be spiritually rich?

²⁸ Let’s be clear, John is not making some kind of an antisemitic statement here. After all, John himself was a Jew. And Jesus, the One who this letter is from, was also a Jew.

²⁹ “Smyrna’s large, influential Jewish population persecuted Christians...thereby aligning with Satan against God’s purposes.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2591 footnote on Revelation 2:9.

³⁰ Consider Matthew 16:23.

³¹ Also consider John 8:44-47 and Acts 13:10.

³² New Testament scholar Grant Osborne gives some helpful background information: “Rome had given the Jews the right to practice their religion, and they did not want this precious privilege threatened. In addition, in the 80s Judaism had excommunicated the Christian ‘heretics’ from their synagogues, and they wanted nothing to do with them.” Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 127.

the Christians living in Smyrna. It actually goes further than slander though; it was really a form of blasphemy. You see, what the Jews were doing was declaring the Christian Faith heretical. (*And by association calling God heretical.*) Jesus forewarned His followers about this back in John 15:20-16:2, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.... They will treat you this way because of my name.... All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.”³³

So, with all of this being said about persecution through poverty and slander, should we then conclude that these are weaknesses of the church in Smyrna or strengths? It’s worth taking some time to reflect on this. In Philippians 3:10 Paul boldly declares, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection AND participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” You see, persecution through poverty and slander may actually be a good thing, especially if we consider them through a discipleship lens. If we truly mean it, when we say that we want to know Christ, to be like Christ, then it shouldn’t trouble us overly much to become like Him in His death, and to participate in His sufferings. New Testament scholar Grant Osborne notes: “For the early church, suffering for Christ was a privilege, not just a sorrow. It was certainly painful but was also considered a participation in Christ at a deeper level.”³⁴

Osborne also makes three helpful observations about Modern-day persecution:³⁵ ³⁶ First of all, we should...

1) Pray for persecuted Christians around the world.³⁷

To learn more, visit: persecution.com (Voice of the Martyrs) or opendoorsusa.org

A 2nd observation about modern-day persecution is that...

2) U.S. Christians should be ready for *potential* persecution.

We just read Jesus’ words to His disciples in John 15:20, “...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also....”³⁸ With just a few

³³ Some of us will remember from our study through the book of Acts, that the Jews were the primary source of Christian persecution; in fact, the Jews were the primary reason the Christians had trouble with the Roman government. “the Jews were the primary opponents [of the Christians] and caused many more problems than the Roman authorities, who often were reacting to Jewish complaints.... (e.g., 13:45-52; 14:19; 17:6-9, 13; 18:12-17; 21:27-40)” Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, top of p. 131.

³⁴ See discussion on p. 129, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

³⁵ This list is based on ideas found in Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, pp. 100 and 136.

³⁶ Furthermore, suffering of any kind can fashion us into greater Christlikeness. In other words, persecution is one thing that God can use to make us more like Christ. But learning how to endure through other kinds of suffering can mold us as well.

³⁷ Romans 12:15 reminds us to mourn with those who mourn. Hebrews 13:3 tells us to remember “those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

exceptions, most of us have had relatively little persecution in our lives, but, in light of Jesus' warning, perhaps it should surprise us more, when we aren't persecuted for our faith?

A 3rd observation about modern-day persecution is this:

3) We shouldn't hide our Faith to avoid persecution.

Oftentimes denying Christ is done in very small and subtle ways, but denial is still denial. In Matthew 10:32-33, Jesus told His disciples, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." Sometimes as Christians, our integrity and purity in the workplace, may cost us a lucrative contract or a significant job promotion. Sometimes living as a deeply devoted follower of Jesus may keep us from being included in certain friend groups or invited along for things. But if we hide our faith in Jesus for financial gain, or conceal it in order to gain a few popular friends, then our Christian testimony isn't really much of a testimony, is it? Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't use discernment in various circumstances. But, if we're ducking out of persecution as a matter of personal convenience, then we may want to reexamine our faith. The Christians in Smyrna paid a high price for their devotion to Jesus. They suffered poverty and slander, imprisonment and even death. But through all of it, they enjoyed spiritual riches, and in verse 10, Jesus promises to give them LIFE as their victor's crown! If you think Smyrna's crown was beautiful, just wait till you receive the victor's crown of life that Jesus will award to those who are faithful!

As I studied the timeline of Ancient Smyrna, I realized that right around the time that Jesus' letter was delivered to the church at Smyrna, there was likely a young man in that church named Polycarp. In fact, there's evidence to suggest that Polycarp was probably about 25 years old when he first read the letter addressed to his own local church in Smyrna.^{39 40} Can you imagine this young believer, in his mid 20s, reading Jesus' challenge in verse 10, "Be faithful, even to the point of death." Polycarp was only 25 years old, he had his whole life ahead of him! So how do you suppose he responded to Jesus' words? Well, his decision is a matter of historical record; Polycarp lived as a Christian in Smyrna for the rest of his life. He committed himself to faithfully serving Jesus, until his very dying breath. He

³⁸ Not to mention Paul's clear statement in 2 Timothy 3:12, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

³⁹ "Some have suggested that Polycarp himself may have been one of the readers of this letter, since he became bishop of Smyrna in AD 115, and that he was particularly encouraged by its message before his death." G. K. Beale, [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 243.

⁴⁰ Polycarp was martyred around 156 AD at the age of 86. This means he was born around 70 AD. That means that when the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation around 95 AD, Polycarp would have been about 25 years old.

became the Bishop of Smyrna, and pastored that church for over 45 years, in fact some people believe it may have been for as much as 60 years.⁴¹ In other words, reading Jesus' letter to his home church at Smyrna caused Polycarp to respond with lifelong devotion to Jesus Christ. Until he was 86 years old, Polycarp committed himself to "becoming a deeply devoted follower of Jesus together" with the other believers in Smyrna. He did this up to his dying breath. Some of us already know how he died, but some of us probably don't. Either way, it's a testimony well worth hearing. Polycarp was executed around AD 156, at 86 years old, "for his refusal to renounce his faith... [for his refusal to] sacrifice to the...guardian spirit of the emperor.... [He] was burned at the stake. When the flames were miraculously prevented from consuming his body, his executioner was ordered to stab him with a dagger."⁴² And that's how Polycarp lived for Jesus – "faithful, even to the point of death."

The church in Smyrna recorded a vivid account of Polycarp's refusal to renounce his faith in Christ. Here's what they recorded... "But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: 'Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.' And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. And then, as he was brought forward, there was a great tumult when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, 'Have respect for your age,' and other such things as they are accustomed to say: 'Swear by the...Guardian Spirit of Caesar; repent; say 'Away with the atheists!' [What the proconsul meant here by "atheist" was anyone who didn't worship the Roman gods or pay homage to the Roman emperor. Therefore, followers of Christ were considered atheists. Well, Polycarp had a different definition of atheist than Rome did.]⁴³ So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then, groaning as he looked up to heaven, said, 'Away with the atheists!' But when the magistrate persisted and said, 'Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ,' Polycarp replied, 'For eighty-six years I

⁴¹ "Smyrna is closely associated with the church father Polycarp. His disciple Irenaeus ("ee ruh NAY uhs") says that Polycarp not only was instructed by apostles but also conversed with many who had seen the Lord. He served as the bishop of Smyrna for at least forty-five and maybe sixty years." Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 313.

⁴² Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 313.

⁴³ "Early Christians were widely reviled as atheists because they did not believe in the existence of the Roman gods. During the Roman Empire, Christians were executed for their rejection of the pagan deities in general and the Imperial cult of ancient Rome in particular."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_atheism see heading for "Classical Greece and Rome" See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_imperial_cult

have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 313.