



THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

"Suffering Makes Scents"

2:8

Every celebrity has their own fragrance. Some are calling the trend "the sweet smell of success" or "bling-bottled." Among the celebs getting in the scent business:

1. Beyonce, with *True Star*.
2. Jessica Simpson, with *Taste*.
3. Jennifer Lopez (J-Lo), with *Glow*.

Celebrity men want some of the market. Carlos Santana for Women is available. Sean P. Diddy Combs, who now goes by Sean John, has *Unforgiveable*. But my favorite would have to be something simply called, *The Fragrance*, by Donald Trump.

The letter Jesus dictated and sent to Smyrna has a fragrance about it. **Smyrna** means *port of myrrh*. It was so named because of the

export trade in myrrh - a gum resin product taken from a certain tree that was an important ingredient in several compounds.

Then, too, there was a lot of fragrant incense being burned in Smyrna. In 195BC a temple to *Dea Roma*, Rome as divine, was constructed in Smyrna. In 25AD there was a competition among Roman cities to build a temple to then Emperor Tiberius. Smyrna won the rights and built the temple.

A feature of the temple to Tiberius was a bust of the emperor before which a fire was kept burning. Citizens were required to put a pinch of incense in the fire and, as they did, say aloud, "*Caesar is Lord!*"

The Christians could not and would not offer incense. Jesus was their Lord, not Caesar. It was a serious civic and social dilemma in the city which prided itself on being the center of empire and emperor worship.

It may have gone no further than suspicion and slander against Christians had it not been for the Jews of the local synagogues. It turns out that they were exempt from offering incense to Caesar. They seized on the opportunity to vilify the Christians to the Gentile citizens and Roman authorities. It fanned the flames of persecution to a firestorm of poverty, slander, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

The symbolism of myrrh is profound. The gum resin would be collected from the tree by making an incision in the outer bark. Then it would be allowed to harden. It released its fragrance only when crushed.

The Christians in Smyrna were being crushed by persecution. They were releasing the sweet spiritual fragrance of those who share in the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Each of the seven letters opens with a description of Jesus from John's vision of the risen Lord in chapter one. Each time Jesus describes Himself, His description is also the answer to the dangers or difficulties that the particular church is facing!

The church at Smyrna was suffering; the believers were being systematically crushed for their faithful testimony. Jesus describes Himself to them in verse eight, saying,

Revelation 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 **angel of the church at Smyrna** is a reference to its pastor. Jesus identifies Himself as **the First and the Last**. This means more than just the fact Jesus is eternal. **First** and **Last** is a title for Almighty God in the Old Testament. You can find it, for example, in Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12. Jesus is declaring that He is God.

When Jesus says He **was dead**, the verb tense literally reads, *became dead*. When and how did the eternal, almighty God become dead? When Jesus came as God in human flesh and was crucified on the cross at Calvary.

And when and how did the eternal, almighty God come **to life**? When Jesus rose from the dead three days after His crucifixion! He lives, having come and conquered death in His resurrection.

Consider His description in light of the suffering in Smyrna. The believers there, as you'll see in verse ten, were facing death for refusing to declare Caesar their Lord. Their true Lord, Jesus, had died, but had conquered death for them so that they might live forever.

The description He gives them of Himself reminds you of His words in Matthew 10:28,

Matthew 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

The believers were being crushed. Their Lord had already been crushed. When Jesus was crushed in His death on the cross, He released the fragrance of eternal life to the world. This descriptive metaphor is used by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:2, where you read,

Ephesians 5:2 ... Christ ... loved us and [gave] Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

Isaiah spoke of Jesus being crushed:

Isaiah 53:10 (NIV) Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

Myrrh was especially associated with the suffering of Jesus Christ:

1. The magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts for Jesus. Myrrh was significant in that it was used as an embalming agent. Their gift of myrrh indicated that Jesus was born to die.
2. As He hung on the cross, Jesus was offered wine mingled with myrrh to drink.¹ Myrrh in this form was an anesthetic. Jesus refused to dull His suffering on the cross. You must refuse the world's anesthetics when called upon to go to the cross!
3. At His burial, Jesus was anointed with myrrh according to the burial customs of the time.²

The crushing of Jesus, represented in the Scriptures by myrrh, released the sweetest fragrance the world has ever or will ever know! His death on the cross released mankind to breathe the sweet fragrance of eternal life as He resolved once and for all the matter of sin and separation from God.

Myrrh is conspicuous in its absence when Jesus is once again presented with gifts in His future rule over the earth:

Isaiah 60:6 The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.

This is a reference to the future kingdom of heaven on earth that Jesus will rule as King. No myrrh is offered Him. The cross behind Him, He wears the crown.

¹ Mark 15:23

² John 19:39

The believers in Smyrna were being systematically crushed. He was writing to comfort and encourage the saints as they were being crushed for His sake. They, too, could conquer and expect to wear the crown!

I mentioned a few on the growing list of celebrities who have their own signature fragrance. You and I have our own signature fragrance. It is myrrh mixed with your own unique tribulations. As you suffer for Jesus, as you are crushed, you emit your signature fragrance.

We're going to tackle the problem of suffering a little when we look at verses nine, ten, and eleven. For now I want to point out that the presence of myrrh is a sign of the Lord's great love for you.

Myrrh is mentioned in the Old Testament book that extols love, the Song of Solomon. When the maiden is waiting in anticipation of her lover, she says,

Song of Solomon 3:6 Who is this coming out of the wilderness Like pillars of smoke, Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, With all the merchant's fragrant powders?

Psalm forty-five is believed by scholars to be a prophecy about the Messiah and points to Him as the Bridegroom coming to marry His church. - In verse eight you read,

Psalms 45:8 All Your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes *and* cassia, Out of the ivory palaces, by which they have made You glad.

On Saturday, February 23, 155AD, **the angel of the church at Smyrna** was Polycarp. He was a disciple of John's. At age 86 he was ordered to burn incense at the altar of Caesar. He refused and was sentenced death. He was stabbed after an attempt to burn him failed. He died, then was placed upon a fire and burned. Foxe's book of Martyr's records the smell of the burning,

"... not as burning flesh, but as gold and silver refining in the furnace. We received also in our nostrils such a fragrance as proceeds from... precious perfume."³

³ p. 24.

Whether literally a sweet fragrance, certainly spiritually a sweet fragrance was released at Polycarp's martyrdom.

Your crushing is intended to release a sweet fragrance to all who encounter you. In 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 you read,

2 Corinthians 2:14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

2 Corinthians 2:15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

