

# The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 2:8-11

Topic

Jesus tells the persecuted church in Smyrna the blunt truth that they can expect their suffering to get much worse, including a period of time He calls "tribulation [for] ten days"

Title

*"The 10 Day Forecast"*

## Introduction

Most perfumes make 'scents' to me - pun intended. There are some fragrances, however, that are downright weird.

Let me give a few examples.

- *Eau de Pizza Hut*. It was a real product. The limited edition fragrance commemorated Pizza Hut Canada reaching the 100,000 Facebook-fan milestone. It smelled like "freshly baked, hand-tossed dough."
- While we are talking food chains, *Flame by BK* is Burger King's perfume. It's supposed to smell "like meat and seduction."
- Demeter markets a perfume called *Earthworm*. What is perplexing is that the reviews are mostly positive.
- Sephora sells a scent called *Fresh Cannabas*.
- How about *Frisky Pirate* - described as smelling like you are "wrapped in leather, smoke and gunpowder."

- Want to walk around smelling like you just finished playing with a classroom of kids? Then grab a bottle of Demeter's officially licensed *Play-Doh* cologne.
- If you're especially fond of elephants, tightropes, and bearded women, L'Artisan Parfumeur's *DZING!* is intended to smell like a circus

Fragrances play a metaphoric role in Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna. The city 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 fragrances. 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 believers in Smyrna were being systematically crushed by Roman persecution. And their persecution was going to get much more intense.

So Jesus encouraged them to release a sweet fragrance while being crushed - the fragrance of eternal life.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 When He Was Crushed For You, Jesus Emitted The Fragrance Of Eternal Life, and #2 When You Are Crushed For Jesus, You Can Emit The Fragrance Of Eternal Life.

#1 When He Was Crushed For You,  
Jesus Emitted The Fragrance Of Eternal Life

(v8)

The city of Smyrna was a center of emperor worship in first century Rome.

In 26AD she had been chosen over several other cities to be the site of a Temple built to honor Tiberius Caesar. It was required by Roman law that once each year every citizen offer a pinch of incense on the altar at the Temple and say aloud, "Caesar is Lord."

The believers in Smyrna could not, with a clear conscience, offer incense and say the words, "Caesar is Lord." Because they refused, they were subjected to both *official* and *unofficial* persecution.

Maybe more than any of the other churches, Smyrna was hanging on every word Jesus had to say.

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," their pastor, got up on a Sunday and read aloud the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

They'd been praying, for sure; seeking the Lord. How would He answer them?

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.

It is also, obviously, meant to convey that there is a plan. There was a "first," and there will be a "last." It conveys the truth that Jesus superintends everything in-between.

What Jesus said next was a defining moment. It set the tone for their immediate future.

Speaking of His own Gospel mission on the earth, Jesus said He "was dead and came to life." He was rejected by men, persecuted unto death on the Cross. Three days later He was resurrected from the dead.

They, of course, knew this; so what was Jesus' intention? I offer this paraphrase. "Beloved, I died at the hands of wicked men for the sake of the Gospel - and so will some of you. But you will live on after death, in your resurrection, which is guaranteed by My resurrection."

It 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 Hebrew scriptures spoke of Jesus' death on the Cross as His 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:

- 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.
- As He hung on the cross, Jesus was offered wine mingled with **myrrh** to drink (Mark 15:23). Myrrh in this form was an anesthetic.
- At His burial, Jesus was anointed with **myrrh** according to the burial customs of the time (John 19:39).

The crushing of Jesus released the sweetest fragrance the world *has ever or will ever* know. His death on the Cross released mankind to breath the sweet fragrance of eternal life as He resolved once and for all the matter of sin and separation from God.

Now it was His followers who could expect to be crushed to release the fragrance.

This fragrance 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.](#)

The believers were being systematically crushed. He was writing to comfort and encourage the saints at Smyrna as they were being crushed for His sake. They were being treated just like their Lord had been treated.

And they could expect the victory that their Lord had received - resurrection from the dead to rule and reign in the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

I couldn't help but think of those good news/bad news scenarios; you know, when someone says, "I've got good news, and bad news; which would you like first?"

Truth is - in Jesus, *there is only good news.*

But isn't being told that your persecution will only get worse bad news? It never seemed to be bad news for those who were martyred, did it? It is when they seemed their strongest and best. Their grace in dying for Christ smelled to others like salvation and eternal life.

It's impossible to know how many Christians were martyred by Rome. Estimates range from only about a thousand to nearly 100,000. What we can say is that more believers have been martyred in the last fifty years than in the church's first three hundred years.

To each of them Jesus was He was dead and came to life. He didn't call upon them to do something for Him that He had not already done for them.

Ever sing,

*Make me like You, Lord; make me like You  
You are a servant... Make me one, too*

Next time you do sing it, remember that Jesus was a suffering servant.

## #2 When You Are Crushed For Jesus, You Can Emit The Fragrance Of Eternal Life

(v9-11)

If you're a fan of the Avengers, you'll remember the scene in the blockbuster film when Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a., the Black Widow, was conducting an interrogation.

It was a very unusual interrogation, in that she was being held captive, and being tortured.

Of course, she had everything under control, and was able to turn the tables on her captors - getting the information she was seeking while defeating them. Her capture, and torture, were all part of her greater strategy.

It's not a great illustration, but I offer it to show that we understand that a battle can be won, an objective can be achieved, even when we seem to be losing.

Persecution is a little like that. To an observer, it would seem that the persecutors have the upper hand. But there is just too much history of believers being persecuted, even unto death, resulting in spiritual gain.

Let me put it another way. Sometimes our being persecuted IS the plan.

It was in Smyrna.

Revelation 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

The word “works” does not appear in most of the ancient manuscripts; they simply read, “I know your tribulation.” The Greek word chosen by Jesus to describe their persecution was *tribullim*. It has the following uses in Greek literature:

- It was used of executing a man by putting a heavy boulder upon him. As his strength gradually failed, the boulder would **crush** him.
- It was used of wheat being ground into flour as it was **crushed** under a heavy grinding stone.
- It was used to describe the **crushing** of grapes to produce the juice.

“Poverty” is the word used of the most destitute of beggars. It wasn’t just that they were poor and had little; they had nothing.

In Smyrna, if a person refused to offer a pinch of incense to Caesar, he would be excluded from the trade guilds and couldn’t work to earn a living.

As traitors to Rome, their goods could be confiscated and given to the “loyal” citizens who identified them as traitors.

It's not improbable that a time is coming when we might have to say "No" to Caesar. It can happen in your part of the world at any time - depending upon the laws that are passed.

The believers were being crushed by poverty, but Jesus said of them “but you are rich.” They were rich in the commodities of the Kingdom of Heaven. Listen to these verses:

Matthew 6:20 "... lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."

James 2:5 ... my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Your true wealth is measured in spiritual terms. You're a gazillionaire!

The believers were also being crushed by "blasphemy":

Revelation 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

The "synagogue of Satan" was blaspheming the Christians, fueling the Roman persecution. For example we know that Christians were sometimes accused of cannibalism because they spoke of eating the body, and drinking the blood, of Jesus.

Jesus identifies them as "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." It's easy to point at the first century Jews, who were antagonistic to Jesus Christ and His followers, and say they were who Jesus was describing. Indeed the Lord Himself had once told a group of Jewish leaders that their father was the devil.

I'm not so sure anymore these guys were physically Jews. For one thing, the words, taken at face value, are, "they say they are Jews **and are not.**"

We assume Jesus was saying that, even though they were born Israelites, they were not really Jews because they had rejected Him.

But that's our assumption.

Why would they "say they are Jews" if they were not? Well, I can't say, but I can say that folks throughout history have done just that. Let me give you an example.

There is something called British Israelism. Ever heard of it? British Israelism (also called Anglo-Israelism) is a doctrine based on the hypothesis that people of Western European descent, particularly those in Great Britain, are the direct lineal descendants of the Ten (supposedly) Lost Tribes of Israel. The doctrine often includes the teaching that the British Royal Family is directly descended from the line of King David.

Historically, it isn't unusual for a group of Gentiles to claim they are the true Israel of God. It is at least possible that the synagogue of Satan, in Smyrna, was a group of Gentiles.

We want to be careful reading things into the text that aren't there because of where it can lead us. A popular Reformed commentator, William Hendriksen, drew this conclusion:

How anyone can say that the Jews of today are still, in a very special and glorious, and pre-eminent sense, God's people, is more than we can understand. God Himself calls those who reject the Savior and persecute true believers "the synagogue of Satan." They are no longer his people.

It is a subtle but serious form of anti-Semitism. God is **not** through with ethnic Israel. In point of fact, the bulk of this book will describe the seven year Tribulation on the earth, which is elsewhere in God's Word called "the time of **Jacob's** trouble." It is so named because God will draw physical Israel back to Himself; all Israel **will** be saved.

Get ready for something heavy: **Jesus tells these suffering saints that the worst was yet to come.**

Revelation 2:10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Notice these key phrases: "things which you are *about to* suffer," "the devil is *about to* throw some of you into prison," "you *will have* tribulation."

Poverty and blasphemy were just the beginning of their *tribullim*, their crushing. It would get worse. Some of them would be called upon to "be faithful until death" - to die for their testimony.

Let's realize four things about being crushed:

First, being crushed is **Satanic** in its cause. Satan was behind the efforts to crush them. He is behind efforts to crush you.

Is Satan therefore merely a dupe doing exactly what God tells him to do? No. He is exercising his free will to be a malevolent, rebellious murderer. He is a defeated foe, but he wages war against the victorious people of God.

We face him in spiritual battle, and we assume, because he was defeated at the Cross, that we need not suffer. However, sometimes we are called upon to have the Natasha Romanoff strategy of being taken captive and tortured in order to obtain a spiritual advantage or objective.

Unlike the legendary Black Widow, Christians don't always survive. But we are victorious - whether we live or whether we die.

Second, being crushed is **spiritual** in its effect. In verse ten Jesus says it comes "that you may be tested." Job put it best when he, being crushed by suffering, by Satan, said, "When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10).

Third, being crushed is **short** in its duration. "You will have tribulation ten days." It had a very definite duration.

The exact meaning of "ten days" is debated. I think it is best to think of it, first of all, as a literal period of ten days during which horrendous persecution was going to be unleashed upon the believers in Smyrna.

It can be quite comforting to know how long, exactly, some pain or suffering is going to last. It is, in fact, one of the things we almost always want to know in what seems to be a bad situation. "How long do I have?" is often the first thing out of our mouths when we are diagnosed with a terminal disease.

"Ten days" probably means more than this, too. These letters to the churches have meaning and application beyond the specific, local circumstances of each church.

With regard to the ten days, it's been suggested that it was also predictive of ten periods of extreme persecution by various emperors of Rome.

With hindsight, historians have, in fact, identified exactly ten emperors who actually and officially persecuted Christians.

You might recall, too, that we see these churches, in the order they are presented, as predictive of church history.

- The letter to Ephesus represents the church of the first century.
- The letter to Smyrna predicted the persecution of the church from the end of the first century until about 312AD when the emperor Constantine took a liking to Christianity. It fits.

The crushing would have a definite, fixed duration. Every trial, every affliction, every suffering, is short when you look at it from eternity.

And every crushing is light. The apostle Paul said,

2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

Paul never had anything we would consider "light." For him, stonings and shipwrecks were all in the job description.

Fourth, being crushed is **sweet** in its result. It releases the fragrance of eternal life, and smells like *fearlessness* and *faithfulness*.

“Do not **fear**,” Jesus said. When crushed, it’s possible to be fearless. A sweet fragrance is released in your life and from your life as you face danger and difficulty with no fear.

“Be **faithful** unto death,” Jesus said. Some of the believers at Smyrna, and later under the reign of Diocletian, and later under the reign of each of the other Caesar’s who persecuted the church, would die. Again, a sweet fragrance was released as they faced death with the grace of God.

On Saturday, February 23, 155AD, the angel of the church at Smyrna was Polycarp, who was faithful unto death. At age 86 he was ordered to burn incense at the altar of Caesar. He refused and was sentenced to be burned at the stake.

Church tradition has it that the fire failed to come near him, so a guard pierced him with a sword. His bleeding extinguished the flames.

He died, then was placed upon the fire and burned. *Foxe’s book of Martyr’s* records the smell of the burning, saying it was “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.”

You might call Polycarp (wait for it) a Myrrh-Man.

Literally, at the time; and spiritually, throughout church history, 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.

Jesus promised them the "crown of life." The various temples scattered around Smyrna were called "the crown of Smyrna." In a play on words, Jesus promised them, and He promises you, "the crown of life."

There's a scene in the film, *The Right Stuff*, where one of the newbie test pilots looks at the wall behind the bar, filled with photos of the pilots who've preceded him. The newbie says, "I'm gonna be on that wall," and everyone laughs. He asks why his aspiration is so funny. He's told that you get on that wall only if you crash and burn while pushing the limits of flight.

The crown of life is like that. It is earned by martyrdom.

Rev 2:11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

You have "an ear to hear," do you not? These verses are addressed to **you**, too.

"He who overcomes" has at least two senses:

- In one sense, you are already an overcomer, in that you are a born-again child of God.

- In another sense, you are expected to actually overcome on a daily basis.

The “second death” is explained later in Revelation (20:11-15). The second death is the judgment of all nonbelievers from all time before Jesus at the Great White Throne.

Having rejected eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they are cast alive into the Lake of Fire - into Hell - to spend eternity separated from God, in conscious torment.

Christians need have no fear of death, or of the second death. Death for the believers is a departure for home. Though some in Smyrna would die, they would not be defeated.

The ten day forecast in Smyrna was for crushing with a chance of martyrdom. It was an accurate forecast.

Let me give you one final picture. There are at least six references in the Old Testament to individuals whose trade was to produce and manufacture perfumes, incenses, and fragrances.

These people were called *apothecaries*.

Jesus Christ is your apothecary. When you find yourself in Smyrna, i.e., when you are being crushed, Jesus brings forth the sweet fragrance of eternal life.

You're the Myrrh-Man... You're the Myrrh-Maid.

