

THE GRACE OF WRATH

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Text

Chapter 2:8-11

Topic

The believers in Smyrna are told that they will soon be crushed like fragrant myrrh for their testimony of Jesus Christ

Title

"Scent of a Witness"

Residents of Pawley's Island off the Carolina coast tell the legend of the Gray Man.

In the early 1800's, a young man was going to visit his love to ask for her hand in marriage. Along the way, his horse stumbled and he was thrown. He landed in quicksand which slowly pulled him under.

When she learned of his fate, the young woman was devastated. She took to walking the beach alone.

One night while on her walk, she came upon a man dressed in gray staring at the ocean. When the figure turned to her, she recognized her true love. He told her the island was not safe and to leave.

Her family evacuated to the mainland. That very day, a hurricane swept over Pawley's. When they returned to the island, everything was in shambles.

Everything, that is, but one thing: Their family home was untouched.

Residents say that the Gray Man has appeared several times over the years right before a major storm. Those who heed the warning survive, as do their homes.

As early warning systems go, the Gray Man is pretty lame. He doesn't always appear. Maybe he is too busy hanging out with the Moth Man. The National Hurricane Center gives everyone 36hrs notice. I'd go with them.

Jesus issued a warning to the saints in the church of Smyrna.

It's in verse ten: "The devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days..."

It would seem wise to get out of Dodge.

But this was *not* an evacuation notice.

Jesus advised them to "be faithful until death."

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 God Released The Fragrance Of Eternal Life As Jesus Was Crushed For You**, and **#2 You Release The Fragrance Of Eternal Life As You Are Crushed For Jesus**.

#1 - God Released The Fragrance Of Eternal Life As Jesus Was Crushed For You (v8)

You don't need to be a linguist to see the word *myrrh* in Smyrna. Myrrh is a gum resin taken from a tree that was an important ingredient in several fragrances. The 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.

Myrrh was especially associated with the suffering of Jesus:

- ⇒ 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. Myrrh in this form was an anesthetic. Jesus refused it; He refused to dull His suffering on the Cross.
- ⇒ At His burial, Jesus was anointed with myrrh according to the burial customs of the time.

In Isaiah 53:10 (ESV), prophesying of Jesus, we read, "Yet it was the Lord's will **to crush him.**"

The apostle Paul was alluding to Jesus being crushed when he wrote, "Christ ... loved us and [gave] Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for **a sweet-smelling aroma**" (Ephesians 5:2).

The crushing of Jesus to obtain salvation for all who believe is the context in which the Lord will tell the saints in Smyrna to endure to the end.

Rev 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. He would be the most likely individual to read aloud the scroll, and thereby present the message, as it was carried from church-to-church.

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 described Himself, His description was also the comfort or the correction to the dangers or difficulties that particular church was facing. Here Jesus identifies Himself as "the First and the Last."

"First and Last" is a title for Almighty God in the Old Testament.

Notice what He couples together with this description of Himself: "Who was dead and came to life."

When Jesus says He was dead, it means that He "became dead."

- ⇒ Jesus came as God in human flesh and was crucified on the Cross at Calvary.
- ⇒ Jesus rose from the dead three days after His crucifixion.

Some of them were going to "become dead." But, like Jesus, they would rise from the dead. It was and is the perfect word, is it not, for someone facing death?

Death stinks... Literally. One of my favorite lines in the Bible was uttered by Martha. Jesus ordered them to "take away the stone" from the tomb of her recently deceased brother, Lazarus. "Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been *dead* four days" (John 11:39).

In my support of law enforcement as Chaplain I've smelled the stench of death. Sometimes the cops light-up cigars to keep from being overwhelmed.

Jesus changed all that for believers. The crushing of Jesus released the sweetest spiritual fragrance the world has ever, or will ever, know. It is the fragrance of eternal life.

#2 - You Release The Fragrance Of Eternal Life As You Are Crushed For Jesus (v9-11)

Would you knowingly go to an unlicensed doctor?

Under Domitian, emperor worship was made compulsory.

Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar while saying, "Caesar is Lord." They would then be issued a certificate attesting to their loyalty.

Think of the certificate the way we do licenses.

Christians could not, in good conscience, burn incense and declare that Domitian was god. Thus in verse nine,

Rev 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 majority of Bible scholars say the word "works" is not in the best surviving Bible manuscripts. The three difficulties the Smyrnaean believers faced were tribulation, poverty, and blasphemy.

- ⇒ Why poverty? You're a believer. You can't offer incense to Caesar. But you don't want to disobey the government, and you can't work without a license.
- ⇒ Why tribulation? Maybe you take the position that you are going to remain working without a license. When the authorities find out, you're in deep, deep trouble.

How were the authorities finding out? Jews - who, by the way, were exempted from emperor worship - would rat you out on account of their hatred for Jesus and His followers. They "blasphemed" you to the authorities.

"Those who say they are Jews and are not" is a description that has garnered lots of speculation from commentators. End of the day, Jesus was referring to the physical descendants of Abraham who faithfully attended synagogue. Jews. They were "not" Jews to Jesus because of their unbelief.

Once when He was on the earth, in a tense confrontation with Jesus, the Jews accused Him of being Mary's illegitimate son. Jesus replied, "You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (John 8:44).

Regardless their claim to be descended from Abraham, Satan had taken over their synagogue, and they were doing his bidding in blaspheming all those who were in Christ.

Jesus said of the mistreated believers, "but you are rich." They were rich in the spiritual currencies of Heaven.

You are wealthy beyond your wildest imagination.

Nowhere was life more dangerous for a Christian. If I'm in Smyrna, I'm looking to evacuate before things get any worse. Seems like I'd be safer in any of the other six cities. I have to think some of the believers had already fled. Maybe to Arkansas. (That's the new Eden for Californians relocating, BTW).

Rev 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.

As of the writing of the Revelation, no one had been imprisoned or martyred. Not yet.

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.

Read verse ten carefully and you realize that Jesus was telling them to stay put...to submit to imprisonment...to submit to "death" as His martyrs.

Jesus understood evacuation. When just a child, Joseph and Mary were told to flee to Egypt with Him to avoid His being murdered by King Herod.

But Jesus also knew blasphemy, false imprisoning, and death for His testimony.

Jesus got very specific. He told them they would have "tribulation ten days." There are all kinds of interesting theories about what "ten days" means, e.g., it

means a long but definite period of time; or it refers to ten successive future periods of persecution through the centuries.

It most likely means ten days...ten 24hr days

Limited periods of persecution are common in biblical history. For example:

- ⇒ Genesis 7:4 "... I will cause it to rain on the earth **forty days and forty nights**, and I will destroy from the face of the earth all living things that I have made."
- ⇒ Numbers 14:33 "And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness **forty years...**"
- ⇒ Jeremiah 29:10 "For thus says the LORD: After **seventy years** are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place."

How long is the future Great Tribulation going to last? Seven years; no more, no less.

Then there was that time in Persia... Wicked Haman lobbied the King to pass a law saying it was legal "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, **in one day**, on the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth *month*, which *is* the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions" (Esther 3:13).

That potential one-day of infamy was the time Queen Esther stepped-up to save the Jews in Persia from annihilation. Haman's plot backfired big time.

No reason to take the ten days as anything but literal days exists.

Jesus said, "that you may be tested." Listen to this quote:

"The same word refers to the demonic attacks destined to befall unbelievers on earth during the future hour of trial, but here its sense is that of testing by persecution. It does not mean a trial for the purpose of proving them, but a

trial by way of enticing them to fall away. **The prominent thing is the declared role of Satan in soliciting Christians to sin by renouncing their faith."**

This wasn't a trial from God; this was an assault by the devil. We trip all over ourselves theologically trying to understand or explain why God permits such things.

It's not really that unusual. Maybe this illustration will help. Let's say it's a time of war. To achieve the greater good, you and your fellow soldiers are commanded to hold your position at all costs. Your valor will save thousands of lives; but it will most likely cost yours, and your men's.

We see that as heroic. We honor those men with medals.

We are in a war - a cosmic, spiritual war - and there will be casualties.

Why do we think an earthly military war requires the ultimate sacrifice, but that the cosmic struggle for souls should not?

We are soldiers. We are not privy to understand all of the Lord's strategies in the war. The Smyrnaean believers were told to stay put and endure the test, even unto death.

Not everyone in the church would die as a martyr, but each one should be willing to.

Literally Jesus said, "Stop being afraid."

Johnny Fontane was denied the lead role in a movie. Talking about it to his godfather, he began to weep. Don Corleone rose to his feet, grabbed him by the hands, and shouted, "You can act like a man!" Then he slapped him, saying "What's the matter with you?" He went on to mock his crying.

While I don't recommend the Godfather's *methods*, his *message* was spot-on.

We need to quit whining and act like believers.

John had appointed Polycarp bishop in Smyrna. Polycarp was burned at the stake and pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense. Church history has it that on the day of his martyrdom, Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."

Foxe's Book of Martyrs 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."

Some of the sources I searched say it is likely Polycarp was in the meeting when the Revelation was read. Do the math:

- ⇒ Polycarp was born in 69AD and he died in 155AD at age 86.
- ⇒ The revelation was written somewhere around 95AD. Polycarp would have been in his late 20's, or early 30's, at the time of its circulation.
- ⇒ The apostle John, who wrote the Revelation, died around 100AD.

If, as church historians hold, John appointed Polycarp bishop in Smyrna, he was likely there to hear the letter. In fact, he may have been the "angel" who read it aloud.

The various pagan temples scattered around Smyrna were called "the crown of Smyrna."

It was similar to the volcanoes scattered around our region that we call "the ring of fire." In a play on words, Jesus promised them the crown of life.

This is the type of crown given to those who were victorious in an athletic competition. It is more what we would call a *garland* or a *wreath*.

There are various other crowns available to us. You can look them up. Yes, we will toss our crowns at Jesus' feet in heaven (Revelation 4:10). *But that only makes me want them all the more.* Their use as an object to honor the Lord increases rather than decreases their value.

When you graduate from high school or college or an academy you toss your cap up into the air. It represents the achievement, but also the joy of its completion. You're gonna want a crown or two in Heaven.

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." '

⇒ "He who has an ear" makes everything in these letters applicable to any Christian anywhere at anytime.

⇒ "To the churches" makes everything in each letter applicable to any church anywhere at any time.

The "second death" is explained later in Revelation, in verses eleven through fifteen of chapter twenty.

The second death is the judgment of all nonbelievers from all of time. Having rejected eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they are cast alive into the Lake of Fire - into Hell - to suffer for eternity.

Christians need have no fear of death, especially of the second death. Death for the believer is a departure for home. They will never stand before the terror of the Great White Throne. Instead they will stand before their Lord at His reward seat.

⇒ Christians die once - *or maybe not at all*

⇒ Nonbelievers die twice

We talked previously at some length about what it means to be an "overcomer."

It doesn't only apply to super-Christians. It is synonymous with being saved. If you are born of God, born again, you are an overcomer.

Satan has his strategies. No one is better at counter-strategy than is Almighty God.

My strategy in Smyrna would be to have all the Christians evacuate. At that moment in history, the Lord determined that his troop of saints could do the best witnessing by dying as martyrs.

We need reminding that while what God permits may make no sense to us, it is wisdom in the warfare.

No Bible study about the believers spiritual fragrance would be complete without referencing Second Corinthians 2:14-16,

2Co 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.

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

2Co 2:16 To the one *we are* the **aroma of death leading to death**, and to the other **the aroma of life leading to life**. And who *is* sufficient for these things?

I'd say the chances are pretty good none of us will die as martyrs. But according to the apostle Paul, we are nonetheless *diffusers* of the fragrance of eternal life in our daily witness.

Let's go out into the stench of the world with the scent of a witness.