

MAKINGSCENTS

OUT OF SUFFERING

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Making Scents Out Of Suffering

by Gene Pensiero

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*Mark then, Christian, Jesus does not suffer so as to
exclude your suffering.*

*He bears a cross, not that you may escape it, but
that you may endure it.*

*Christ exempts you from sin, but not from sorrow.
Remember that, and expect to suffer.*

Charles Spurgeon

Before you start reading,
count to sixty.

Or set a timer for one minute, then come back to this book.

Back? In that minute you set aside, in Africa, a child died from malaria.

A total of fourteen children worldwide died from malnutrition or some related disease.

Two more children were sold into the global sex slave trade which affects some four million persons every year.

In less than that minute, fifty-six seconds to be exact, a person in the United States died from cancer. A new case of breast cancer is diagnosed in

the U.S. every two minutes.

Every fifteen minutes a person commits suicide. In that same fifteen minutes someone dies senselessly from an alcohol-related traffic accident.

Right now over one billion people on our planet are hungry - not knowing where their next meal is coming from. Some of them will die from that hunger.

Every minute of every day, day after day, unspeakable evil and horrors are being experienced all over the world. If you wanted to make a movie about our world it would have to be a horror story.

In the recent blockbuster film, *World War Z*, a CDC doctor fighting the outbreak utters the terrifying line, "Mother Nature is a serial killer. No one is better, or more creative."

Disasters. Diseases. Death. If there is a God, what is He doing about all of this suffering?

It's sometimes called the Problem of Pain.

Others ask, "Where is God When it Hurts?" It's a common criticism nonbelievers level against the God of the Bible. Especially in the shadow of their own sufferings.

I say we ask Jesus to answer the problem of pain. Let Him make sense out of suffering.

One place to ask Him about suffering is in the ancient city of Smyrna. You see, His saints in that city were not only suffering; their suffering was going to get much, much worse.

Jesus wrote a letter to them; dictated it, really, to the apostle John who was himself suffering exile, sentenced to hard labor on the island of Patmos.

Jesus will make **scents** out of suffering.

You'll see what I mean as we get into the text of His letter.

*“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:*

*“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 syna-
gogue of Satan.*

*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.*

*“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.” ‘*

Revelation 2:8-11

Every celebrity seems to have their own fragrance. Some are calling the trend “the sweet smell of success” or “bling-bottled.” Among the celebs in the scent business:

1. Beyonce, with *True Star*.
2. Jessica Simpson, with *Taste*.

3. Jennifer Lopez, with *Glow*.

Celebrity men want some of the fragrance market. I must admit, some of their fragrances seem strange to me. I mean, ladies, would you wear *Carlos Santana for Women*?

Some celebrities have multiple fragrances. J-Lo has a total of six fragrances. Paris Hilton has seven; so does Antonio Banderas. But the one who (currently) has the most is Britney Spears with *eleven*.

The letter Jesus dictated to Smyrna has a fragrance about it. Smyrna was the 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 synagogue. It turns out that they were exempt from offering incense to Caesar. They seized on the opportunity to vilify the Christians to the Gentile citizenry and Roman authorities.

That's why Jesus describes them in verse 9 as "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Those Jews were fanning the flames of persecution into a firestorm of slander, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

Smyrna: The Port Of Myrrh

Myrrh is one of those things that we may not use in our daily lives, but it's immediately recognizable to us from its various appearances in the Bible.

The symbolism of how myrrh is extracted is suggestive. The gum resin would be collected from the tree by making an incision in the outer bark so it could bleed out. 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.

They were making *scents* out of their suffering.

This is one of seven letters to seven first century churches from the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The plural, “churches,” expands the message of each letter beyond its initial recipients.

His words to any of the churches were applicable to all seven of them. And they are applicable to all churches throughout the history of the church.

That means that this letter was written just as much to you as to the saints in Smyrna. If you are suffering, or wrestling with the problem of pain, you’ll want to pay attention.

Each of the seven letters opens with a

description of Jesus from John's vision of the risen Lord in chapter one. The seven descriptions all differ from one another; taken together, they make up the complete account given in chapter one of "One like unto a son of man."

Each time Jesus describes Himself His description is also His prescription for the dangers or difficulties or dilemmas that the particular church is facing.

In Smyrna their danger was from persecution. Jesus' prescription for them: See Him as dead and risen from the dead.

*"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:'"*

Revelation 2:8

"The angel of the church at Smyrna" is not a reference to a guardian angel. It's not a supernatural being. God doesn't dictate letters to men in order to communicate with His angels.

“Angel” is the word messenger. While it is often used of a supernatural messenger - an angel in our understanding of the word - it is also used both in the Bible and in Greek writings to refer to human messengers. (*Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52*).

It refers here to the pastor of the church through whom the message would be read to the congregation.

I like the idea of the pastor being a messenger. It's simple and focused. Though a pastor must wear many hats, his primary responsibility to the Lord is to deliver His message.

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 the book of Isaiah:

Who has performed and done it, Calling the generations from the beginning?

*'I, the LORD, am the first;
And with the last I am He.'
Isaiah 41:4*

*Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
'I am the First and I am the Last;
Besides Me there is no God.
Isaiah 44:6*

*Listen to Me, O Jacob,
And Israel, My called:
I am He, I am the First,
I am also the Last.
Isaiah 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.

The phrase, “came to life,” is better translated by the word “lived.” Jesus became dead, humanly speaking, but He lived. The not so subtle teaching here is that if a believer becomes dead he or she nevertheless lives.

For whoever desires to
save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life
for My sake will save it.
Luke 9:24

Consider His description in light of the suffering in Smyrna. The believers there, as you 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. He wanted them to see Him crushed for

them.

When He was crushed He emitted a sweet fragrance of salvation to all mankind - especially those who believe. In a similar fashion, the Smyrnans could emit a sweet fragrance as they were crushed.

Not only were they already being crushed, it was going to get worse, and for at least some of them it would result in death by martyrdom. He told them, simply but powerfully, to look to Him in His suffering to be strengthened in theirs.

Really? That's the answer?

The Lord saw their suffering and instead of stopping it He predicted it was going to *worsen*?

Yes.

Suffering bothers people. They wonder what kind of god would allow suffering, especially suffering of the worst kind.

The problem, in a nutshell, is that if God is all-powerful, it seems He must have the ability to stop evil if He wants to. And if God is love, it seems He would want to. Yet evil persists.

Any talk about this problem must begin in the Garden of Eden. That's where it all went horribly wrong for mankind.

Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Genesis 2:16

God gave Adam and Eve free will in the Garden. The purpose of this freedom was that they might choose to remain in a loving union with

God. But because it was a union of love, it had to be possible for Adam and Eve to reject it. Love cannot be forced; it must be free to choose.

They chose badly and immediately realized it; but it was too late. Their sin brought death to them and upon all their offspring after them.

God began immediately to resolve their sin. He promised to come to the ruined world of men, as a man, to solve the sin problem. He indicated plainly it would require He suffer in our place.

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel.”
Genesis 3:15*

It's taken about 6,000 years to get to where we are now. Seems a long, long time, involving a lot of suffering from evil; but, remember, with The Lord a thousand years is like a day.

I don't say that to minimize anyone's suffering. Any suffering is awful. But in order to redeem and restore what Adam forfeited in the Garden of Eden it will take precisely the amount of time God has set - not a second more and not a second less.

In order to redeem and restore God had to come in human flesh. He had to be virgin born of a particular woman, of a particular lineage, to a step-father of a particular lineage, through a special nation. All of it took, and is taking, time.

We can have assurance that God is on time in His plan. The apostle Paul spoke of God's perfect timing when he said:

“When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law”.

Galatians 4:4

Appealing to the free will of humans and angels explains why evil in general still exists. But it doesn't explain why any particular evil occurs.

For example, early in the story of the church in Jerusalem, James, the brother of John, was arrested and beheaded by the authorities. Seeing it pleased the Jews, Herod arrested Peter and planned to kill him similarly. He was in a cell, chained, and guarded by sixteen highly trained Roman correctional officers.

In the middle of the night an angel was dispatched to Peter's cell. He broke him out of jail - set him free - and Peter went on to have a long career serving Jesus. (That is, of course until he too was martyred, reportedly by being crucified upside-down).

Why was James beheaded but Peter set free?

There can be no final answer to that question and, I would add, there can be no final explanation to most of the questions we might have about why bad things happen to some people and not to others.

Maybe we are taking the wrong approach to the

issue of suffering. We want to *explain* it when we are called upon to *endure* it.

Indeed we count them
blessed who endure.

James 5:11

Jesus was addressing a group of dearly loved saints who were going through awful suffering and who could expect things to get much, much worse. I'm sure they were struggling with the problem of pain; we can almost hear them asking, "Why, God?"

His 'answer' was for them was to see a particular facet of Himself. He didn't offer an apologetic for why God allows suffering. He offered *Himself*.

They were counseled to look beyond their suffering to see Jesus having suffered for them. They were encouraged to endure.

Do you look for Jesus? You can look to the

Word of God but miss seeing The Lord unless you are specifically looking for Him.

The writer of the book of Hebrews, probably the apostle Paul, said that Jesus came “in the volume of the Book” (Hebrews 10:7). He meant that the entire Word of God speaks about Jesus.

The book of Hebrews also says that God, in these last days, speaks to us most profoundly by His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:2).

Author Gregory Boyd wrote,

“The wholeness and vibrancy of our relationship with God depends on letting God define Himself for us in Christ... Christ is our center, and everything in life must be viewed in relation to Him. Our reading of Scripture must be carried out without looking even for a moment to the right or left of Jesus Christ.”

How does this help us when we are suffering?
Boyd goes on to say this:

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus transforms our understanding of God’s attitude toward evil. The fact that Christ suffered... death on Calvary shows us that God is willing to experience judgment and death to bring evil to an end.

God is not a heavenly spectator looking down on human misery. Nor is He a secret accomplice behind evil activity, though He is always at work to use evil to His and our advantage. Short of abandoning His plan to allow people to freely love Him, God has done and is still doing everything possible to remove evil from his creation. And we are assured of His ultimate victory.”

The enemies of the believers in Smyrna, the Jews, were being influenced by Satan. The mention of his name reminds us that we are engaged in a cosmic conflict with a terrible enemy. No talk about human suffering is accurate if it doesn’t take into account the rebellion of Satan against God.

Satan is called “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is described as “the prince of the

power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

The apostle John goes so far as to say this when describing the devil: “The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19).

Jesus three times in the Gospel of John referred to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (12:31, 14:30 & 16:11).

God is not, and He is never, to blame for the suffering we see all over this planet. He is instead able to redeem your suffering, to make all things work together for the good for those who love Him. But He is not the source of it. The devil is its source as he goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

The devil seeks only to rob and kill and destroy (John 10:10). That’s a pretty good summary of conditions on our planet.

Wait a minute...Didn’t Jesus defeat Satan

once-and-for-all on the cross at Calvary?

He sure did!

Then what's going on with the world?

Lately I've been using the example of D-Day in World War II. It's not original with me; it's an example that's been around awhile because it's a good one.

The invasion of Normandy by the Allied forces effectively ended the war. It would strike a death blow to the Nazi's that they could not recover from.

The Allied Commanders knew that there would be heavy casualties in the operations leading up to D-Day. They knew there would be great loss of life when the troops hit the beaches of Normandy.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower gave the D-Day order on June 6, 1944. During his speech said:

"Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well

trained, well equipped, and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.”

They realized that the campaign itself, though called D-Day, would go on for some period of time longer than a day and they knew that their adversaries would not go quietly.

All of the losses surrounding D-Day were deemed *acceptable* by the Allied Commanders because they also knew it would end the war - which it did just short of one year later.

Satan has already been defeated at the cross in his long war against God but he fights on - like the Axis Forces after D-Day.

In the mean time, there are severe losses as people on the earth continue to suffer.

I would never say anyone's suffering is "acceptable," but I would say that because God waits in His longsuffering with sinners, suffering is inevitable.

The Lord is not slack
concerning His promise,
as some count slackness,
but is longsuffering
toward us, not willing that
any should perish but
that all should come to
repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

Let me put it another way. In order for suffering to end, God's longsuffering with sinners must end. Right now His longsuffering waits for more and more people whom Jesus died for to come to salvation. As God waits for them, evil continues on our planet.

If you are saved, when did that happen? When did you receive Jesus Christ? Whenever it was, God's longsuffering waited for you. He could have

ended suffering in the world prior to your getting saved, but then where would you be? Where would your loved ones be if God ended suffering right now?

One day God's longsuffering will end - but with it ends the opportunity for sinners to live forever with God in Heaven rather than in the Lake of Fire.

Smyrna was an outpost of dear saints in the spiritual conflict between the cross and the coming of Jesus Christ. They were counseled to look beyond their suffering to see Jesus Who suffered for them.

You can always be sure of the character of God as it is revealed in the love of Jesus Christ for you. And you can know with certainty that all things really will work together for your good because He that has begun a good work in you, of conforming you into the image of Jesus, will complete it.

The believers in Smyrna 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,

“Christ ... loved us and [gave] Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.”

Ephesians 5:2

Isaiah spoke of Jesus being crushed:

“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.”

Isaiah 53:10 (NIV)

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. 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.

At His burial, Jesus was anointed with myrrh according to the burial customs of the time.

The crushing of Jesus, represented in the Scriptures by myrrh, released the sweetest fragrance the world has ever or will ever know.

But He was pierced for
our transgressions; He
was crushed for our
iniquities.
Isaiah 53:5 (ESV)

Jesus' 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:

*“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.”*
Isaiah 60:6

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.

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.

Something Jesus says at the beginning of verse nine is comforting. In fact He says it twice in verse nine.

He says, *"I know."*

He knew everything about them. He knew their suffering, their crushing. Author John Phillips said of these two words, "there is no sob, no tear, no heartache, pain, or fear that The Lord does not share."

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 troubles.

As you suffer for Jesus, as you are crushed, you emit your signature fragrance.

Maybe we could call it Myrrh-Man or

Myrrh-Maid.

The “angel” of the church at Smyrna, God’s myrrh-man in the second century, was Polycarp. He was a disciple of John’s. He had been in the congregation when this letter was first read. Little could he know how literally it would affect him.

At age 86 he was ordered to burn incense at the altar of Caesar. He refused and was sentenced to death on Saturday, February 23, 155AD. Even though it was the Sabbath and unlawful for them to do so, Jews came to watch him be put to death. Synagogue of Satan indeed.

Here is the account of his final crushing as told in Fox’s Book of Martyrs:

After [being] apprehended... he desired an hour in prayer, which being allowed, he prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul, condemned, and [taken to] the market place [for execution].

The proconsul then urged him, saying, "Swear, and I will release thee; reproach Christ."

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"

At the stake to which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he [had] assured them he should stand immovable, the flames... encircled his body, like an arch, without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire.

He died, then was placed upon a fire and burned. The smell of the burning [according to eye witnesses 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."

Polycarp didn't struggle with the question of evil or the problem of pain.

He did what Jesus had told the church at Smyrna to do in their suffering - look to Him.

Martyrdom isn't some ancient procedure that has gone away now that we live in more 'civilized' times. Christians all over the world, right now, are being crushed to the point of martyrdom.

A conservative estimate is that 105,000 Christians are killed every year for their faith in Jesus.

You and I have not resisted to the shedding of blood; but it doesn't mean we aren't sometimes crushed in other ways by suffering.

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

"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. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who

are perishing.”
2 Corinthians 2:14-15

If you are suffering, or the next time you are,
think of Smyrna. Think of Polycarp.

Look to Jesus.

Be a Myrrh-man or Myrrh-maid for Jesus
Christ.

Recommended Reading

I'm listing a few books for further reading on the subject of suffering. While I may not agree with everything each author says, they at least have entered the arena and are willing to wrestle with this important subject from a biblical mindset.

They are in no particular order, by the way.

Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People, by Warren Wiersbe.

Is God to Blame? Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering, by Gregory A. Boyd.

The Problem of Pain, by C.S. Lewis.

When God Weeps, by Joni Eareckson Tada

