



The Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

"Scent Of A Witness"

Can you ID this jingle?

Hint: Their slogan was The Mark of a Man.

It's *Old Spice*, from the 1960s. In a TV ad, off-camera the narrator approaches a handsome, debonair gentleman, three piece suit, having a Scotch, smoking a cigarette. In other words, a real man. He asks him, "Dave, what are your reasons for wearing *Old Spice*?"

Dave thinks for a minute and then he answers wistfully, "Well, there's Julie... and Debbie... and Ruth.... and Connie... and Phyllis."

This is meaningful to me because every Christmas that I can remember from elementary school through junior high my brothers and I would get *Old Spice*. I didn't quite know where my parents were coming from. Were they urging me to date at a young age? Or would it have the opposite effect and be a turn-off to puppy love?

It is anyone's guess how many perfumes and colognes and fragrances are on the market. For sure it is in tens of thousands.

Scents, as in S-C-E-N-T-S, are crucial to understanding the Lord's letter to His Church in the Asia Minor city of Smyrna. In particular, the *Scent of a Witness*.

Rev 2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna..."

"Angel" translates to *messenger*. In this context, it refers to a human messenger. Most likely that person would be the pastor-teacher of each Church. In Smyrna, that was Polycarp. He was a disciple of the apostle John who may have taken oversight of the church during John's exile on Patmos.

"Smyrna" translates to *Port of Myrrh*. It was so named because of the export trade in **myrrh**.

Myrrh is a hardened gum - a resin - that comes from making incisions in the bark of certain trees. Exposed to air, it forms into small reddish-brown tears or droplets. When burned or crushed myrrh yields a strong fragrance.

Myrrh was burnt & crushed; believers were being burnt & crushed!

I say this slightly tongue-in-cheek, but you might want to consider the name of a city before retiring there.

There is a Hell, Michigan... a Hades Hollow, Indiana. Several cities have the word Devil in their name. Then there's Misery Bay, Grave Creek, Bloody Basin, Slaughter Beach, etc., etc.

What were those city fathers thinking? I'm looking at houses in Joy, Illinois.

Rev 2:8 "... write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:'

"First and Last" is a title for Almighty God, and *only* Almighty God, in the Old Testament.¹ Jesus is unequivocally declaring that *He is God!*

A real-quick fact about the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It contains more than 800 references to the OT. It isn't the impossible book to read or understanding. It simply requires a lot more familiarity with the OT to really 'get' it. *You gotta read it!!!*

¹ You can find it, for example, in Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12.

When Jesus says He was “dead,” He was saying “I *became* dead.”

- Jesus “became dead” when He came as God in human flesh and was crucified on the Cross at Calvary.
- Jesus “came to life” when He rose from the dead in His physical glorified forever body on the third day after He had become dead.

Jesus’ death & resurrection are the pivotal events of human history. If you do not believe the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, then you are *not* a Christian.

Myrrh pointed to Jesus’ death: It signified He was born to die; He refused myrrh mixed with wine at the cross to fully bear suffering; and His body was anointed with myrrh at burial.

Among the Seven Churches, Smyrna stands out as the earliest example of organized pressure and government-recognized persecution against Christians, leading to martyrdom.

The enemy was launching an offensive against the Christians in Smyrna. We can call it, *Operation Public Pinch*.

Smyrna was a major center of emperor worship. In 26AD it was chosen to host a temple to Tiberius, and each year it was mandatory that citizens offered a small pinch of incense, while declaring, “Caesar is Lord.” It seemed minor - just a brief act, no forced worship or devotion - but it carried great significance for Christians.

I’d be grateful to never have to face troubles like that. Never have to stand, as Daniel’s buddies did, while an entire nation was bowing to the image of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Of course, in one sense we *do* face troubles, but largely on a smaller scale - but huge to us.

We must be wary of the small compromises. In the first century it was “Caesar is Lord.” Today the pressure is subtler. The enemy rarely needs a loud denial - just a little concession that slowly changes who (or what) we set our affections upon.

If you can, for a moment, think of the letter as a separate, stand-alone correspondence. Doesn't it read like a military briefing? The enemy established a powerful beachhead; he conscripted an army; they have status with the government; they were already destroying the lives of Christians. Imprisonment and martyrdom would follow.

Modern Israel has mandatory military service for most Jewish citizens. After their time in active duty, most continue as reservists ready to suit-up and fight. In the days following October 7, 2023, more than 300,000 reservists were called up in the first few days.

In Smyrna, Jesus was calling upon believers to meet Satan's assault as an army of the Lord.

Jesus was launching *Operation Make Scents out of Suffering* to counter Satan.

Most of you know that the word for "martyr" is *witness*. *Every martyr is a witness, but not every witness is a martyr.*

Smyrna was the Tip of the Spear; Smyrna Leads the Way; Smyrna First to Fight.

Rev 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich);

The majority of Bible scholars say the word "works" is not in the best surviving Bible manuscripts. The three fronts of warfare the believers faced, then, were tribulation, poverty, and blasphemy:

1. This word for "tribulation" means *to be crushed*. It described a man slowly pressed to death under a heavy stone.
2. "Poverty" refers to destitute beggars, forced to *beg* and *busk* to try to survive.
3. Their Jewish neighbors hated Christians and took every chance to accuse them to Rome.

"And *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan."

“Synagogue of Satan” means exactly that. They didn’t know it, but they were Jewish unbelievers yielded to malevolent forces in order to wreak havoc upon the Christians.

Jesus declares the believers “rich.” He was not talking about their status in the world, or primarily about future rewards. Jesus said to them, and He says to us, “You **ARE** rich.”

The moment we trust Christ, everything changes: We are forgiven and declared righteous, adopted as God’s children, made spiritually alive, and permanently indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. We are set apart as holy, united with Christ, enjoying all His blessings forever.

Satan’s strategy was simple: Use the unbelieving Jews to report the Christians to the authorities that they were committing treason. Rome would do the rest.

In Smyrna the counter strategy was going to be the release of the fragrance, *Scent of a Witness*.

The apostle Paul provides the following insight:

“For we are to God the **fragrance** of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 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?”²

Burned. Crushed. The believers would suffer tribulations, poverty, and blasphemy; then imprisonment; then death. But they would smell like God doing it!

Rev 2:10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer...

The 10,000 losses on D-Day, with roughly 4,400 killed, was worth it for what the Allied forces gained.

What does God gain when we are persecuted?

² Second Corinthians 2:15-16

In 197AD Tertullian observed that every time Christians were executed in public squares, crowds came to faith, asking, "What kind of hope makes a person die singing?"

You've probably heard Tertullian's famous quote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Martyrdom can be called a "forced win." A forced win is a situation in a game where one player has a sequence of moves that guarantees victory no matter how the opponent responds.

When the believer gives his life for Christ, the enemy has no countermove left. It is a forced win for the Gospel.

Rev 2:10 ... 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.

You are **about** to suffer, the devil is **about** to throw some of you into prison, you **will have** tribulation. Should I get outta Dodge? In the case of Smyrna, the answer was "No."

"Tribulation ten days" most likely means ten 24-hour days. It is reminiscent of Esther in Persia. Haman the Hebrew-hating, heart-hardened, hate-filled hypocrite tricked the king into declaring there would be a particular day, a 24hr period, during which the Persians could despoil the Jews.

Rev 2:10 ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

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."

Jesus promises "the crown of life" as a special reward for those faithful unto death. It's a reminder they stood where God wanted, wearing the martyr's crown instead of a material one.

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." '

Do you have at least one ear? Can you hear? Then this letter is for **us** as much as it was for Smyrna. *All* the letters are for *all* Christians.

When Adam & Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they died three ways:

1. They died spiritually because sin separated them from the Holy God.
2. They died physically in that sin brought death to God's creation.
3. They would die eternally, after dying physically.

The LORD promised He would come as a man, fully God & fully man, to pay for our sins and restore all things.

"The Second Death" refers to the final, eternal separation from God experienced by the lost. The Second Death is conscious punishment in the Lake of Fire.

On Saturday, February 23, 155AD, the angel of the Church at Smyrna, Polycarp, "became dead." 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.

Foxes 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."³

Scent of a Witness isn't reserved for martyrs. All believers give-off scents. The scents of our witness are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If you find yourself in a difficult situation, say, for example, you are pressured to compromise your faith - the Lord will choose a proper scent for your witness.

³ p. 24.

In the animated, *Monsters, Inc.*, the monsters put on *odorant* (instead of deodorant). I throw out to you that we oftener than not choose odorant. Anytime we fight the flesh with something fleshly, it is odorant. As we say, "It stinks to High Heaven."

We should not smell like teen spirit; we should smell like *Sent-Spirit*.

I'll end with this observation: "Their love for Jesus outweighed fear of death. And that is the great secret of unstoppable faith: When Jesus Christ is our treasure, the world loses all its leverage. The enemy can take our comfort, our property, even our life - but he cannot take our joy in Christ. And a person who cannot lose their joy **cannot be defeated.**"