

The Crushed Fragrance of Christ Followers

Special Delivery – Part V

Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

Over the past few weeks, I have received numerous emails and messages copied to me about persecution in the world against Christians.

I received this email from one missionary statesman in India:

I write this letter with an urgency to request all of you to please pray for our church planters in the state of Orissa.

One of our church planters from Orissa called us yesterday morning to share with us that seven of our churches were ransacked and burned in two districts of Orissa. The church planters in these districts were threatened for life and forced to leave the villages. The church services were not allowed to take place and the believers were prevented from attending the worship service. There is a lot of violence and riots taking place.

The threats are continuing and escalating into violence. Our pastors constantly go through harassment from anti-Christian movements and believers' privileges are withdrawn and they are forced to leave their homes and villages. We just need your prayers!

Then, this second email arrived from him:

Dear Friends, I write this with mixed feelings of joy and heavy heart. The reason for our joy is to know that 157,000 people responded to the Gospel and 396 new churches were planted in 2007 – praise the Lord!

*My heavy heart is because of the pain, the beatings and threats that our church planters go through right now in Orissa. But we thank God for the hope in Christ and we join with Apostle Paul in saying, “**We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone; we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus...**” (II Corinthians 4:9-10)*

Even as I am writing this letter, I received a urgent phone call from a pastor who said two trucks full of people have arrived to destroy the church building.

We know that the persecution is going to increase but we also know that it will result in thousands turning to Christ and hundreds of churches planted as we have experienced throughout this year.

This is the time for us to develop men and women who know they are not standing alone and cannot be knocked out in the midst of persecution, which Christ has said we will experience and that we will rejoice in affliction because we experience the power of Christ.

This past week I was copied by our friend and fellow pastor to the Pokot people in Kenya; specifically in Kapenguria. Chumum reports of the growing violence and his own escape from near certain death. The destruction of churches by anti-Christian movements and the bloodshed is escalating.

Our partner, Pastor Inez, in Kenya and Build the Village are in difficult straights. In fact, one of the churches built by Build the Village and our missionary Damon Davenport has already been burned to the ground.

One of our missionaries to regions in the Middle East has sent several emails this past month revealing the ending of peace for the Algerian church. Persecution at the hands of Muslims is now beginning to increase. The Algerian government and media are now pressuring Christians to stop evangelizing. Laws have been recommended making conversion to Christianity criminal. Authorities are looking for any possible excuse to close Protestant churches that preach the gospel. Church leaders are headed toward prison sentences.

Travel on to Nigeria, where I read news releases this past week that reveal the murder of Christians at the hands of Muslim extremists. One Christian book store owner in Gaza was shot and stabbed multiple times. He also served as a youth leader at the Gaza Baptist Church and had been threatened many times before. He is survived by a pregnant wife and two small children.ⁱ

I learned this past week that Vladimir Putin, the Russian leader, gave orders that effective January 1, 2008, the Russia broadcast organization was to remove all Christian programs from the two Russian networks in Mayak and Yunost that TWR (Trans World Radio) uses. These networks include over 700 local stations. TWR has also had to close the Moscow program production office and they are now searching for locations outside of Russia where they can broadcast back into Russia.

We can clearly hear the creaking sound of the massive Communist doors beginning to close once again to all evangelical influence. But, the church will continue on – because persecution does not handicap the church, it multiplies the church.

I could go on and on with current news of the suffering, persecuted church.

Ladies and gentlemen, according to the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 480 Christians are martyred somewhere in our world for Christ, every single day.ⁱⁱ

By the time I finish this sermon, nearly twenty people will have entered heaven because they refused to abandon Christ.

However, this was the promise of Christ.

In John 15:18, Christ promised,

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.

Behind the scenes, it is Satan, the ultimate anti-Christian, who hates the church. He knows that Christians will one day occupy the throne room that he so desired.

We will co-reign with Christ over the universe and Satan longs for that glory. But when we rise enthroned in heavenly places with Christ, Satan will merely experience one more downward plunge.

Satan was first hurled from heaven to earth (Isaiah 14), then he will be cast from earth into the abyss for a thousand years (Revelation 20:3), and after a brief release, he will be hurled into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10).ⁱⁱⁱ

Satan knows of his never-ending downward plunge and he knows of the Christians' rise to never-ending glory. And how he hates Christians; how he hates the bride of Christ who will reign with Christ forever and ever.

So for twenty-one centuries, Satan has attacked and schemed, plotted and murdered, belittled, slandered, frustrated, and even tortured the church. If the Christian will enter the glory he coveted, as far as Satan is concerned, the Christian will enter it having suffered as greatly as he can possibly suffer.

However, God uses this to build up the Christian and bring glory to Himself, and even to advance the church.

Satan just ends up hurting himself – for persecution does not stamp out the church, it spreads the church. Suffering does not paralyze the church, it purifies the church and promotes the church and propagates the gospel of the church to the world, which wonders how the church can suffer so and still sing and speak of Christ.

Tertullian, the church father who lived in the midst of persecution said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."^{iv}

In other words, when the blood of a Christian is spilled, it just seems to sprout new believers and new churches. This is true in the twenty-first century, in places like Orissa, India, Algeria, Russia, and Africa, and it was also true in the first century.

Crush the life of a believer and a sweet fragrance is emitted that simply draws more people to Christ (II Corinthians 2:14).

Now, of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 that received a special letter from Christ, only two of them heard not one word of criticism from their Lord. The next church

we are about to study was one of them. And not surprisingly, it was a church that was suffering.

Let us open the letter together in Revelation 2:8-11.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for 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 will not be hurt by the second death.”

Commendations of Christ to the Suffering Smyrna Church

In this letter, our Lord commends this church in Smyrna in at least four areas. He says, “Listen, I know all about you . . .”

1. First, Jesus says, “I know you are bearing up under great pressure.”

Look again at Revelation 2:9a.

I know your tribulation . . .

The word “tribulation” is “thlipsis (θλιψις),” which means, “trouble or pressure”.^v

This is a Greek word that was used in that day for a man being tortured to death by being slowly crushed as a huge boulder was dropped down upon him.^{vi}

Jesus Christ is saying, “I know the crushing pressures in your life.”

What was it about life in Smyrna that was creating such pressure?

Without a doubt, the pressure in the Smyrna church was two-fold:

- the hatred they endured by the Jews who lived in their city, which we will look at later;
- the predominance of Caesar worship.

The great Roman Empire had brought peace to its citizens. A person could conduct his business,

provide for his family, send his letters, and take his journeys in security thanks to the strong hand of Rome. The seas had been cleared of pirates, the paved Roman roads were kept cleared of thieves, and people no longer lived under the changing winds of barbarism.

It was not difficult to turn patriotism and loyalty to Rome into a form of worship. This gave birth to the worship of Dea Roma, the goddess Rome.

At first this was spontaneous and voluntary, but over time, there arose the belief that there was indeed a person who embodied the spirit of Rome and that one man was the emperor. In him, the spirit of Dea Roma was incarnated.

At first, worship to him was simply accepted; later on it was made official and the emperor was viewed as the incarnation of deity.

Is this not amazing? How much like the gospel the enemy of the church moves mankind to create their false religions.

To make matters worse, toward the end of the first century, Domitian, the Roman Emperor at that time, made Caesar worship mandatory. Once a year, the citizens of Rome were to burn a pinch of incense to Caesar. It was not as much an act of religion as it was an act of loyalty and good citizenship.

Anyone who refused to burn his little pinch of incense was rendered an outlaw. However, when someone burned their incense to Caesar, they received a certificate from the priests.

We even have, from historical records, the writing on these certificates. They simply read, “We, the representatives of the emperor have seen you sacrificing.” The priests would sign the certificate and date it. The people could then go back to worshipping and sacrificing to the god of their choice.

Can you see the problem with this?!

Any idolater had no problem offering his incense and declaring that Caesar was Lord. Caesar was just one of many gods – big deal.

However, the Christian could not do this. They could not compromise in this two minute task. They could give to no man the name of their Messiah – He alone was Lord.

The words of Paul rang in their ears, when he wrote,

. . . for us there is . . . one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. (I Corinthians 8:6)

Without this certificate, persecution, imprisonment, and suffering were liable to break out at any moment.^{vii}

To make matters even worse, Smyrna was so dedicated to Caesar worship that they were the first city in the world to build a temple to Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome. And, in A.D. 26, they competed with six other prominent cities for the right to build a temple to the godhead of Tiberius, the reigning emperor, and they won the bid.

For a person to enter the church in Smyrna was to lay their life down. They never knew when the boulder was going to drop. They lived and worked with the prospect of a crushing, tortuous death at any moment.

I found it fascinating to discover that the Greek word “Smyrna” means “myrrh”. Myrrh was a fragrant spice used as perfume. It was obtained when the flowering myrrh tree – or thorn bush – was crushed. The sticky, fragrant resin was collected and then used as perfume. It was also used in preparing the dead for burial.^{viii}

When the magi visited Jesus Christ, they brought symbolic gifts to Him:

- gold – a gift reserved for royalty;
- frankincense – used by the priests in the Old Testament as part of their priestly service of intercession;
- myrrh – a sweet perfume used to embalm the dead.

This gift of myrrh was symbolizing Christ’s own death – the suffering Savior who would die for the sins of the world.

Now Jesus Christ says to the saints living in the city of myrrh, “I know what it means to live under a death sentence; I understand everything you’re facing.”

We cannot imagine what it meant for these believers to hear the Savior say, “I know your tribulation; I know the pressure of despair and death – I sweat drops of blood over it! I know!”

It is encouraging, is it not, when facing some dark hour of trial, to have a friend take us by the hand and say, “I know; I understand – I’ve been there.”^{ix}

- “I’ve had that illness – I know what you’re facing.”
- “I know what it’s like to lose a relationship because of personal conviction.”

- “I know what it’s like to lose a promotion because of integrity and honesty.”
- “I know what it’s like to bury a child.”
- “I know what it’s like to be abandoned by family.”

Listen to Jesus Christ say to us, “I know the burden on your heart and spirit. You may not have a boulder lowered down upon you; you may not have problems with Caesar worship in your culture, but you’ve got a rock in the pit of your stomach; a heaviness in the middle of your chest – I know all about it.”

How incredibly encouraging it is to a suffering believer to *know* that Jesus Christ *knows*.

This is very much like our children. When they are hurt, they run to Mommy. They want to be held, but even more, they want to know that Mommy knows and Mommy cares. I do not know about your kids, but when my kids were hurt, they ran to Mom – and when they were broke, they ran to me. They wanted Mom to know.

Even over the past Christmas break, when our three college kids were home, our daughter got sick with the stomach flu one night. Around 3 o’clock in the morning, she came into our bedroom to let us know she was sick. I was fine without knowing; I did not need to know, but Marsha cared. At 3 in the morning, our kids know she acts more like Jesus than I do. They want her to know.

Jesus Christ says to the suffering saints in Smyrna, “I know you are experiencing great pressure.”

2. Secondly, Jesus assures, “I know you are enduring deep poverty.”

In Revelation 2:9, Jesus says,

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) . . .

I love this phrase.

He says, “You are poverty stricken.”

This was no doubt owing to the fact that their jobs and homes and livelihoods could be taken away. Many of the believers in Smyrna probably endured similar acts to that which the Jews suffered in Nazi Europe. Their homes were vandalized in broad daylight. Their shops were broken into and all the goods stolen. They were left destitute and poverty stricken.

Jesus Christ adds this insightful phrase,

. . . but you are rich . . .

Is He like some blind optimist?

Let me explain this with an example.

Suppose you are a very poor person. Some of you are probably thinking, “This does not require an imagination.” I mean you have nothing in your bank account. You do not have money for gas, food, or utilities, and the bank is going to foreclose on your home.

However, suppose I am a millionaire – and with three kids in college, that will require an imagination. I come to you and say, “Listen, Suzy – or Fred, or John, or Cindy – I’ve been doing some research on my family tree and you’ll never believe this, but your great-great uncle was my great-great-great grandfather’s nephew. We’re actually way distant cousins. And, as is my custom, I give every family member of mine one million dollars. So here’s your check for one million dollars.”

I hand the check to you.

Now what do you do – after waxing my truck?

You run to the bank.

However, before you get there, let me ask, “Are you poor, or rich?”

Keep in mind that you have not deposited this money in your bank account yet, but you are going to the bank as fast as you can.

You would answer, “I’m rich!”

You would call your spouse and your parents and your boss on the way to the bank and shout, “We are millionaires! We’re rich!”

Oh? All you have is a piece of paper in your hand. Ah, but you know the signature is good and that this piece of paper is supported by the wealth of your donor. And you are related to him and he has promised to give every family member one million dollars.

You are rich. Even as you drive your bucket of bolts to the bank and walk in wearing threadbare clothing, with your stomach rumbling because you have not had anything to eat in twenty-four hours – you are rich.

Friends, you have a check, effectively written with your name on it. And the riches of heaven are your inheritance.

You might be poor on the way to the bank, but at the same time, you have the riches of God in Christ Jesus – His inheritance, His righteousness, His kingdom, His throne, His splendor, His new heaven and new earth – all promised to you, and to all those who are in His Father’s family.

The writer of Hebrews said this of believers like those living in Smyrna,

. . . you . . . accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. (Hebrews 10:34)

It will not be long before we all will arrive at the bank.

Jesus Christ says to the church in Smyrna, “I know how you are bearing up under great pressure; I know how you are enduring deep poverty.” He then gives a third commendation.

3. Thirdly, Jesus says, “I know you are suffering unfair provocation.”

Notice Revelation 2:9 again. Christ says,

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

In other words, these people do not represent a synagogue of God, but truly represent a synagogue that does the will of Satan.

The Christians were enduring a smear campaign by these Jews who refused to follow after Christ.

Historical records tell us what these slanderous accusations were.

- Because the Christians refused to worship the gods and visit the temples, they were accused of being atheists and infidels.
- Another more severe provocation was that since Christians celebrated communion and talked about partaking of flesh and blood, they were accused of cannibalism; they were accused of killing and eating their own in strange rituals that, of course, provoked great horror in the minds of the average citizens of Rome.
- Christians were also known to speak of loving one another and being the members of one another, and thus the accusation was developed that Christians actually engaged in sexual orgies within their communities of faith.^x

All of this slander enabled much of the persecution faced by these early Christians.

Finally, the Lord informs the believers in Smyrna of their future.

4. Fourthly, Jesus says, “I know some of you will face a future in prison.”

Look at Revelation 2:10.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. . . .

In other words, “To make matters worse, some of you will be separated from your families; some of you husbands and fathers will be imprisoned and your already impoverished family will have to make it without you.”

What a crushing blow this would be.

Like some of the Albanian and Uzbekistan pastors and believers I read about this week who are awaiting prison sentences, only because they refuse to stop believing and propagating the gospel.

Now, what does John mean when he writes, . . . ***you will have tribulation for ten days. . . .***

Some believe this is simply an idiom for a short period of time.

I believe this is a reference to the ten edicts of persecution against Christians that will be delivered by ten Roman emperors. The first was issued by Nero in A.D. 54 and the last would be issued by Diocletian in A.D. 284. These were ten crushing edicts that brought untold suffering and hardship to the believer. Behind it all was the devil,

. . . the god of this world [who] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (II Corinthians 4:4)

This is the one who will assault the church. But, Christ promised,

. . . the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 KJV)

Challenge from Christ to the Suffering Smyrna Church

Now notice the challenge from the Lord to this church in Smyrna.

Look at Revelation 2:10b.

. . . Be faithful until death . . .

G. Campbell Morgan, a pastor and author from a century ago, pointed out that this word “faithful” is from the same Greek root which means to be convinced; to be convinced in His power and His grace and His will and His plan.^{xi}

In other words, remain convinced even in the face of death that Christ is worth following and faithfully follow Him.

Just two years ago, the Voice of Martyrs ministry delivered to the west an incident of child-like faith in Christ deep inside communist China.

Chinese officials burst into an unofficial church meeting where around thirty children were having Sunday school. They herded the children into a van and took them away to the station. Their parents raced after them. Even though it was frightening for the children, one of them began to sing. Soon the van was filled with their songs about Jesus.

Upon arriving at the police station, the children marched bravely into an interrogation room, still singing to the Lord. The Chinese officers attempted to force the children to write, “I do not believe in Jesus,” telling them that they had to write it 100 times before they would be allowed to go home. Instead, the children wrote, “I believe in Jesus today; I will believe in Jesus tomorrow; I will believe in Jesus forever.”

The officers were exasperated with the courage and faith of these children. They called their parents back to the interrogation room and threatened them. Some of them denied Christ, scooped up their children and left. Others refused. One widowed believer absolutely refused to deny Christ when she was brought back to pick up her twin sons. The officers threatened her, saying, “If you do not deny Jesus, we will not release your twin sons to you.”

She replied with a touch of humor, “I guess you will just have to keep them, because without Jesus, I can’t raise them.”

With no avenues left open to them, not expecting this kind of resistance, they simply said to her and the others, “Take your children and go.”^{xii}

This is the challenge from the Lord.

Compensation from Christ to the Suffering Smyrna Church

The Lord provides not only a challenge, but reminds the church in Smyrna of a portion of their compensation.

Jesus promises, in Revelation 2:10b,

. . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

The word used in this verse for crown is not “diadema” – the crown of royalty, but “stephanos” – the victor’s crown.

This could better be translated “wreath”. It was:

- given to athletes who won the contest – this was their version of Olympic gold;
- given to those who served their community faithfully, advancing the city as a good citizen;
- worn at weddings and other festive occasions of great joy.^{xiii}

So:

- Christ reminds these suffering, impoverished believers that there will come a day when they will be given the wreath as victorious athletes who ran the race and finished their course.
- Christ will give this special crown to them, and us, as we celebrate in the wedding feast as the bride of our Kinsman Redeemer.
- Christ will also give to them, and us, the wreath as good citizens who advanced the cause of the eternal city of God.

Our affliction is indeed light, when compared to the eternal weight of glory which is beyond comparison.

(II Corinthians 4:17 paraphrased)

This is their compensation from the Lord.

Confidence in Christ by the Suffering Smyrna Church

Now notice the confidence in the Lord by this church in Smyrna.

The letter ends in Revelation 2:11.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

It is interesting that the letter began with a reference to overcoming death and now it ends with the believer overcoming death. This is appropriate, is it not, being written to a body of believers who will suffer martyrs’ deaths?

“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death” is a reference to the eternal separation from God in the lake of fire.

Just as the first death does not bring about the extinction of the spirit – in fact, we are more alive than ever after physical death – so also, after the second death, those who are condemned to hell will be forever more alive than ever.

How do we escape this second death? By faith in Christ alone.

One must be born again . . . not of the flesh, but of the Spirit (John 3:3-6 paraphrased)

If you are born physically and by faith spiritually, you will only die once.

If you have never been born again by placing your trust in Christ alone as your Savior, you will die any day now and then, you will be eventually judged, according to Revelation chapter 20, and you will experience death eternally.

In other words, if you have been born twice, you will die only once. If you have been born only once, you will die twice.

How do we know we will be saved forever? This is our confidence in the Lord, as Revelation 2:8b says,

. . . who was dead, and has come to life . . .

You may be crushed, but from the crushing of your life comes the sweet aroma of the fragrance of faith and trust in the One who rose from the dead.

Conclusion

Let me give one last thought.

Polycarp was the leader of the church in Smyrna fifty-five years after this letter was written by John. Polycarp had been a student and a disciple of John the apostle.

There was a festival in the city and the fever pitch of Rome’s glory was blazing. Someone recommended they seize Polycarp and make him declare his loyalty to Caesar.

He was brought into the arena and told to either confess Caesar as Lord or die. Jewish leaders led the mob by slandering his name. They cried out, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.”

Polycarp was given the choice – sacrifice to Caesar or be burned to death. We have his immortal answer recorded and protected over the centuries. Translated for us, Polycarp said to the hushed mob, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior? I fear not the fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished . . . why do you delay? Come, do your will.”

In a matter of moments, he was burned to death and the words of Christ came true for him – he received the crown of life.^{xiv}

Let us sing:
*It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus.
Life's trials will seem so small, when we see
Christ.*

*One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrows will
erase,
So bravely run the race, 'til we see Christ.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/10/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Israel My Glory, (Jan./Feb., 2008), p. 9.

ⁱⁱ World Magazine, (Feb. 9/16, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 49.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 4.

^v Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 812.

^{vi} William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches (Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 35.

^{vii} Ibid., pp. 28-31.

^{viii} Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation (Zondervan, 1971), p. 44.

^{ix} Phillips, p. 46.

^x Ray Stedman, God's Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 39.

^{xi} Lehman Strauss, Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1964), p. 46.

^{xii} thevoice@persecution.com, www.persecution.com, Nov. 8, 2005.

^{xiii} Barclay, p. 38.

^{xiv} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 74.