

Smelling like Heaven in a smelly world

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[0 : 00] Well, smell is an amazing sense, isn't it? Think about it. We often take it for granted, the sense of smell.

But if you had COVID and it affected your smell and taste, you would have realized what an important sense it is. But it is an amazing sense. It's very practical. It warns us.

The sense of smell warns us when our milk is off or when our food is rotten or when there is a gas leak in our house or when maybe you've stepped in something.

Your sense of smell warns you about those things practically so you can remedy them. But do you know the main reason we have a sense of smell is for pleasure. Did you know that 80% of the flavor you get from food and drink is actually not through the sense of taste but through the sense of smell?

Smell elicits emotions like no other sense can. And smell is the sense that is most strongly connected to memory.

[1 : 08] It's interesting, isn't it, how often you smell something and it elicits a memory. It takes you back. And certain places have particular smells that just increase the enjoyment of that place.

Think of walking through a pine forest. When I go out for a walk or a run in nature, I love running through where there's pine trees because that smell, that fresh pine smell just enhances the whole experience.

But I want to ask you a question this morning, maybe something you haven't considered. What do you think heaven smells like? What do you think heaven smells like?

Have you ever wondered? Have you ever even thought what does heaven smell like? Probably not. Because we don't tend to think of heaven in physical terms.

But we should. Because apparently it smells really good. And that's one of the points God is wanting to make here in Exodus 30, which is all about how he wants the tabernacle to smell.

[2 : 20] That's really, there's a lot of stuff going on in this chapter, but the main thing of Exodus 30 is how God wants the tabernacle to smell. And he has a particular smell that he wants it to have.

And remember, we've been seeing in Exodus the tabernacle that God has caused to be planned, to be built here in the middle of the wilderness where Israel is camping after they've come out of Egypt.

The tabernacle is such a special place because it is a bit of heaven on earth. It is one of those few spaces in the biblical story where heaven and earth literally touch.

Where heaven and earth occupy the same space. And when that happens, we've been seeing over the past few weeks when heaven touches earth, it is a real and tangible experience. It is not some flying off and sitting in the clouds.

It is real. It engages the senses. You know, we've been seeing over the past few chapters the gold, the sounds, the tastes of the bread and the sacrifices.

[3 : 22] And everything is very visceral. It's very real. It's very sensual in the true sense of the word. And we see in this chapter, it also has a certain smell.

And I think as we look at this chapter together and we study it, we see that God wants to tell us something very important about how he wants the realities of heaven to be experienced on earth. And particularly how he wants the people who represent him to smell like heaven in the midst of a stinky world.

So that's the title of my sermon really. Smelling like heaven in a stinky world. The first point that we get from this chapter, the first thing we realize is that God wants the world to smell good again.

God wants the world to smell good again. So in this chapter, let's look at it. God commands a number of things. But he commands the making of two substances, an anointing oil, which is going

to be sprinkled on the whole place.

[4 : 31] Every piece of furniture, the tent, and the priests themselves are going to have this special smell, this anointing oil. And then God also commands an incense to be made, which is to constantly burn in the tent of meeting.

And he gives very specific recipe for both of these substances. So look at verse 23 to 25. And the anointing oil.

Take for yourselves the finest spices, 12 and a half pounds of liquid myrrh, half as much of fragrant cinnamon, six and a quarter pounds of fragrant cane, 12 and a half pounds of cassia, and a gallon of olive oil.

Prepare from these a holy anointing oil, a scented blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be a holy anointing oil. And then from verse 34. Take fragrant spices, stacte, onica, and galbanum.

These are really exotic. Like some of us, some of them we don't even know what they are. The spices and pure frankincense are to be in equal measure.

[5 : 43] Prepare an expertly blended incense from these. It is to be seasoned with salt, pure and holy. Grind some of it into a fine powder and put some in front of the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you.

It must be especially holy to you. Okay, so God is giving these commands and He's really insistent that they make the place smell good with the specific recipe He's given.

Now, as we read these, we realize they are very exotic spices. It would have taken the Israelites a lot of effort to find them and to get them.

But what we get from them is they're actually what the Israelites were meant to understand from them, like the rest of the tabernacle, is to remind them of the Garden of Eden.

They're reminiscent of Eden's fruitfulness and blessing. Just like everything else in the tabernacle, we'll remember, was a reminder. There were these reminders sprinkled throughout the tabernacle of Eden and the first place where heaven and earth overlapped and where there was abundance, where humans lived in right relationship with God and they received from His hand all that they needed and there was life and there was blessing and there wasn't this brokenness of sin that we have and God wanted to remind people through the smell of that abundant life again.

[7 : 10] And as they would have smelled that coming near the tabernacle, you can imagine the contrast with how the wilderness smelled or their camp. If you've ever been camping for a long time, more than like three or four days, you'll know that it can get quite smelly.

And when you've got tens of thousands of Israelites camping and they've got all these sacrificial animals that they've got to keep and there's no refuse removal and there are no showers, you know, you can imagine the place gets pretty pungent.

And so, you've got that horrible smell in the wilderness but then you come close to the tabernacle and it's just transformed and it's just this beautiful, amazing, God-given scent that just stands in contrast to the world outside.

But, what we also read in this chapter is that not everyone could use it. It wasn't for general use. It was very exclusive. God gives a lot of warnings in these chapters.

You can't make this outside of the tabernacle and use it, you know, to perfume your tent. Only the tabernacle and the priests could use it. So, verse 32, for example, it must not be used for ordinary anointing on a person's body.

[8 : 34] And you must not make anything like it using its formula. It is holy and it must be holy to you. So, in other words, it couldn't be used anywhere outside the tabernacle.

Only there where heaven and God were present could you have this particular smell.

It was to be associated exclusively with the heavenly space and with those who worked in it. And so, what God is proclaiming through this whole process, I mean, He didn't have to make the place smell nice, but He wanted people to smell it.

He wanted people to get this experience of this heavenly presence through all their senses. And what He's telling them is that He's proclaiming here that He wants humans to experience the blessings of Eden again.

And He's been proclaiming it throughout the building of this tabernacle. It's God saying, I want you guys to experience real life. The real life that humans once had in Eden.

[9 : 44] God wants humans to experience the abundance of Eden which is symbolized in this smell. But He's also saying to them, it's not found out in the world.

This abundance that I want you to experience is only found where I am present. in my place. It's only found by coming near to God. That's what He's proclaiming through this.

And that is a very important message. It's a very important message that the abundance that God made us for, the life that God wants us to experience can only be found by coming close to Him. It's an important message that Jesus was trying to teach as well when He was here. When He came from heaven to earth, listen to what He said.

John 10 verse 10. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.

[10:49] Think about that. Jesus is saying He wants, God wants humans to have the life that He made us for.

Real life. Abundant life. Good life with plenty and with pleasure. God wants that. He made us for that. He gave us a sense of smell.

He gave us taste buds. Why do you think He gave us taste buds? For pleasure. He wants us to experience all the wonders and the things that He's made in creation for us to enjoy. But sin stops that.

Sin has cut us off from that. But Jesus comes and says, I have come so that they may have that again that humans may have abundant life. You know, all the things that we seek out there in the world but never truly find and yet keep thinking we can find them out in the world.

Plenty and pleasure and peace. In a way, we're all trying to recapture Eden. All humans are actually trying to recapture Eden in their own personal lives.

[12:08] Trying to get a little bit of heaven on earth in their homes, in their lives, a place of peace, a place of plenty, a place of pleasure. And that's really what all humans are trying to work towards is just trying to recapture the blessings of Eden but they're looking everywhere but where they can truly be found which is in relationship with the God who gives all those things.

It is ironic, isn't it, that people are all trying to find the very things that God wants us to have but we're looking everywhere else except for God, except in God for those things.

And here Jesus comes and says, I've come that you may have them. I've come that you may have real life, true life, the life God made you for but only by coming close to Him.

That's what Jesus is saying. Just as what God is saying here in the wilderness, I want you to experience good life, abundant life but only by coming close to the tabernacle, only by coming close to me.

Jesus is saying the same. He's saying, I'm the tabernacle and it's only by coming close to me, to Jesus, our tabernacle, the place where God dwells that we can experience at all the life that He has planned for us.

[13:34] And the reason that Jesus is the only place where we can find that abundant life is because what Jesus alone did to make that possible for us sinners who shouldn't be able to have that life.

And that's the next thing we see in this chapter in Exodus 30 and that is the sweet smell of sacrifice. Look again at Exodus 30 and how it begins.

And one of the surprises in this chapter is the place where God wanted this sweet smelling incense to be burned. Did you notice where He wants it to be burned?

On an altar. Now that's strange because an altar is a place of sacrifice. In fact if you read the description, so look at verse 1 and 2, it's very reminiscent of the altar that's outside that we've already read about in previous chapters.

You are to make an altar for the burning of incense. Make it of acacia wood. It must be square, 18 inches long and 18 inches wide. It must be 36 inches high. Its horns must be of one piece with it.

[14:53] We've heard this before, haven't we? If you've been with us already, we know there's an altar outside the tabernacle where the sacrifices for sin are made. And it's also, it's the same design, but this is a smaller version.

So there's a smaller scale model in the tabernacle of the sacrificial altar outside where the sacrifices are made.

And as we read on and we look at Leviticus, we realize that the priests burned the incense in this small altar inside, which is in the heavenly space inside the tabernacle, at the same time as the sacrifices were being made outside.

And that's very important because what it's telling us, as these sacrifices are made outside that God commanded on this bronze altar in the courtyard, the incense is being burned inside in the incense

altar in the heavenly place.

That's telling us how the sacrifices outside are actually being received in heaven, as a sweet smelling aroma. And as we look in Leviticus and we see the details of these sacrifices, so often the sacrifices that are made are described as a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

[16:14] Sacrifice smells sweet to God. Sacrifice smells sweet to God. Why do you think that is?

Why does sacrifice smell sweet to God? Well, I'll tell you why. Because sin stinks.

Sin stinks in God's nostrils. And sacrifices at the altar are what pays for sin.

It atones for sin. It cleans the stink of sin away. And it's satisfying to God when the stink of sin is cleaned away.

Just as much as it's satisfying at home when you clean up a stinky room. Right? You might go into the bathroom and maybe, I don't know, you're coming back from two weeks of camping and it's just, it's ough.

[17:15] And there's grime. And you know how in the bathroom, behind the toilet and stuff, it just gets grimy and stinky. And then you just put on your rubber gloves and you take all the detergents and stuff and you just attack that room.

And you spend like all morning just scrubbing and cleaning and just making it spotless. And then you stand up and it's just such a pleasurable, when all that stink is gone and you smell that sweet smell of cleanliness in that room after all that back-breaking work, it's a very pleasing sense, isn't it? That you've done away with the dirt, that's how God feels when sacrifices for sin are made. The dirt of sin in His creation is being cleaned away.

It's a pleasing aroma to God. And that's why the sweetest smelling moment in history was the death of Jesus.

When He on the cross died and fulfilled what all of these Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to, when He died for the sins of His people.

[18:35] We've been reading Ephesians in our growth groups. Do you remember just from a couple of weeks ago how the death of Jesus is described in Ephesians 5.2?

If you don't, I'll read it again. Walk in love as Christ also loved us, and listen to this, and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.

That's how the New Testament describes the death of Jesus, as a fragrant offering to God. Do you remember in the Gospels there's this very touching scene a few days before Jesus died.

He's having supper at a house, and this woman comes and brings a perfume. You know what I'm talking about?

Let me read it to you. Matthew 26 from verse 6. While Jesus was at Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman approached Him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume.

[19:49] She poured it on His head. The word is literally anointed Him. As He was reclining at the table, when the disciples saw it, they were indignant.

Why this waste? They asked. This might have been sold for a great deal and given to the poor.

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, why are you bothering this woman?

She has done a beautiful thing for me. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. By pouring this perfume on my body, she has prepared me for burial.

Truly, I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. And so you've got the scene where, and John describes it, and Luke describes it, it's in all the gospels, actually a version of this account, and indeed Jesus was right when He said, wherever the gospel is preached, this moment will be recorded and this moment will be told.

Because it's a very significant moment where when this woman, breaks this expensive jar of this beautiful smelling perfume and pours it on Jesus, His disciples say it's such a waste because this is expensive stuff, but Jesus responds and basically says to them, no, this is the most appropriate sign to prepare for my death.

[21:24] Because He knew that His atoning death, His sacrifice, was going to smell sweet in heaven. It was going to take away the stink of sin.

That's what His death achieves. Only His death can achieve that. It can take away the stink of sin, your sin. That's what Jesus' death can achieve if you truly believe.

Because your sin stinks to God. it stinks. But Christ's sacrifice for those who trust in Him is a pleasing smell in heaven that washes away the stink of the sin of His people.

And so come near to Christ. Come near to Christ so that the stink of your sin can be washed away. If you haven't yet.

But if you have, if you have recognized the sweetness of Jesus' death just as it is recognized in heaven, if it is a sweet smell to you, that's how Paul describes the gospel actually.

[22 : 38] In 1 Corinthians he says, you know, we are an aroma of life to those who are being saved. We are the sweet smell of heaven to those who are being saved. We are the stink of death to those who hate us.

But to those who are being saved, the gospel is the sweet smell of life. And if that is you, if you love the gospel and you love Jesus and what he's done, it's the sweet smell of heaven to you, then you in following him have actually become the means for spreading that sweet smell in earth, on earth. You've become the means for spreading the sweet smell of heaven on earth. That is what God's people do. they spread the smell of heaven.

What's interesting as we come back to Exodus 30 though, is that it was, how was it that the smell could come about?

So, in the middle of this description of the incense altar, at the beginning of the chapter, and the anointing oil at the end of the chapter, and the ingredients for the incense, kind of in the middle of the chapter, from verse 11 onwards, is God commanding his people to make an offering.

[24 : 02] So, what's interesting is that it was only through the offerings, the giving, the sacrificial giving of God's people, that this heavenly scent could be experienced on earth at all.

So, verse 14, each man who is registered 20 years old or more must give this contribution to the Lord.

The wealthy man may not give more, and the poor man may not give less than half a shekel when giving the contribution to the Lord to atone for your lives. Take the atonement price from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting.

It will serve as a reminder for the Israelites before the Lord to atone, for your lives. Now, we need to understand that the giving of the Israelites didn't literally wash their sins away.

That's what the sacrificial system was for, which was fulfilled in Christ. But what it means to atone for their lives is to recognize that their lives are ransomed, that their lives belong to God, that He's taken them out of Egypt, that He keeps them from being destroyed in His presence by these sacrifices, and so their lives are totally belonging to Him.

[25 : 19] That's what it means here. And they recognize that by giving of what they had, as if to say, this is God's anyway. All I have is God's.

My whole life is God's, and all my possessions are God's, and therefore to give is just a recognition of that. It's a reminder to myself that my life belongs to God. That's what He wanted His people to do on a regular basis.

Yeah. But what's interesting is that if you look at verse 16, it was because of these offerings that the temple service, the tabernacle service could happen at all.

Take this from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting. And that's true today as well. Very true. It's only when God's people are willing to sacrifice in recognition that all they have actually belongs to Him, that He has bought them for a price, and that they are His, and therefore everything they have is His, and they give of that to Him.

It's when that happens that heaven's smell can be experienced on earth. When God's people are willing to sacrifice, just like here. Firstly, because the sacrifices of God's people practically keep the work of the tabernacle going today.

[26 : 46] The work of the tabernacle is to maintain a place where heaven and earth touch, where heaven and earth meet. Where is that place today? It is in Jesus, in the gospel of Christ, in what we are doing as a church, proclaiming that gospel.

And so, when people, when God's people give so that the church can function and work and do that job, they are making it possible for heaven's scent to be smelled on earth.

They are maintaining the work of the tabernacle. We need, the church needs the sacrifices of God's people. We don't get any money from outside. The only way this building was built, the hall upgrade, everything we do, the salaries that pay for the staff so that we can do this, we can prepare sermons, all of that comes from you.

It comes from sacrifices of God's people. And so, without the sacrifices of God's people, none of this could happen. The church requires the sacrifices of God's people to do what it's meant to do, to

keep going.

And not just the sacrifices of money, it does require that, but also, the sacrifices of time and energy for the church to function well.

[28 : 10] God's people need to make sacrifices of time to come here earlier to join our prayer ministry, to get involved in what we're doing. You know, we don't, oh, it's a Sunday morning, it's cold, I want to stay in bed.

No, sacrifice that because it's through those sacrifices that the work of the church can happen.

Those little sacrifices that Christians make throughout their week, throughout their life.

Or just the sacrifice of showing up, which sadly is a sacrifice in a world which is so self-absorbed, just coming and supporting whatever the church is doing, even when you don't feel like it, that's a sacrifice which keeps the work of the church going and it keeps the place where God meets with humans open.

And it's a pleasing aroma to God when you make those kind of sacrifices. when you make those sacrifices on earth for him, for his work, in heaven it is a pleasing aroma.

You know, we prayed earlier, you prayed these words in our confession. Grant that we may please you in our words and deeds.

[29 : 26] Do you really mean that when you prayed it? Do you want to please God in your words and deeds? sacrifice? Well, you know what pleases God?

You know what is a pleasing aroma to him? It's sacrifice. When you sacrifice money, time, effort for him. That's what pleases him.

But another reason that God wants his people to give here in Exodus and today. And it's why he commands, did you notice, he commanded all to give.

Even if you don't have a lot, the rich and the poor, whoever you are, must at least give something.

And the reason is not just practical. It's not just because God needs it.

God doesn't actually need it. He can, you know, he owns the sheep on a thousand hills. He can get money from where he wants. But he wants you to give. He wants you to give for you. For your own spiritual well-being.

[30 : 34] And to be an effective Christian, to live the new life we're called to live that we've been reading about in Ephesians, requires sacrifice because the attitude of sacrifice itself, a sacrificial heart, smells sweet, not just to God, but out in the world.

when the world out there experiences the sacrifices of God's people, it is the sweet smell of heaven in a stinky world.

You see, because when we learn to sacrifice, and that's essentially what God was doing, is training his people to give, to sacrifice, to develop, to nurture the sacrificial spirit like he had.

God's heart is a heart of sacrifice. He demonstrated that in the gospel. At the core of who God is, the whole plan he made before the beginning of time, right in the middle of it was the deepest, most costly sacrifice God himself made because God himself has a heart of sacrifice and he wants his people to as well.

And when we do, when we begin to mimic the heart of God and learn how to sacrifice what we have, our time and our energy and our resources, you know what it does?

[31 : 49] It creates the smell of heaven on earth and it is a good smell. Sacrifice is a good smell. Let's be honest. On earth.

Think of in your family. In your home. When everyone in your family is just thinking of themselves, what's it like? It stinks.

It does. It's unpleasant. Everyone is just selfish. Everyone is just getting on each other's nerves.

Everyone is just wanting different things. But when people learn in a family situation to put others first, to put their brothers and sisters or their husbands or wives before themselves and they serve each other, no, no, let me wash the dishes tonight.

Wow, thank you. What is that like? It's sweet. It smells good. Right? It creates a heavenly space on earth.

Or in a marriage. You know, when spouses in a marriage, I do a lot of marriage counseling and like 90% of the time I'm just convincing marriage partners to stop being so selfish.

[33 : 09] That's where your marriage problems are coming from. just think of each other first. Do what the Bible says. We're going to be reading that in daily devotions this week, so pay attention.

But in a marriage when spouses are each thinking of just what they want from the other one, how they can get what they want from the other person, what's it like?

It stinks. It's a selfish earthly space. That's all it is. But when they are each putting each other first, they create a heavenly space.

in their home. Or out there, in work, or in school, where the idea of willing sacrifice is just so foreign because we live in a world where everybody is just looking out for themselves.

But when we are out there as Christians in those spaces, in those, in the world, and we follow, we actually follow Jesus. You know, we say we follow Jesus. Yeah, I'm a Christian, I follow Jesus.

[34 : 08] But you know, Jesus says, okay, you want to follow me? Bear your cross. Put your cross on. Get into the pattern of sacrifice. You really want to follow me?

Look what I did. I gave my life. So don't say you follow me and never be willing to sacrifice because then you're not really following me. if we follow Jesus, really, and we put aside our own wants, and we take on the attitude of God, the thing that is sweet smelling in heaven, and we sacrifice for others our time and effort.

We go out of our way to the point that it costs us to serve others out there. You know what it does? You know what it does out there? In our workplaces?

In our schools? When we show the true nature of Christ in our lives, by being willing to sacrifice out there, it creates a sweetness that covers over the pungent stink of selfishness that everyone is so used to out there.

But it is so contrary to our nature to do that, isn't it? Every fiber of our earthly flesh wants to be selfish. And so this call to be like God and to sacrifice, it seems so foreign and so impossible to do.

[35 : 34] Maybe for five minutes we'll do it after the sermon, and then we'll forget. That's if we're trying to do it in our own strength. Because this call to sacrifice is so contrary to our nature, we can only do it, you can only do it, if you truly have the life of Christ dwelling in you.

If you are putting on the new self and taking off the old self through the Holy Spirit that gives you power to live a new life. Do you?

Do you have the life of Christ dwelling in you? Well, that will be seen in sacrifice. sacrifice. Are you making sacrifices that enable the sweet smell of heaven to be experienced on earth?

And so think. Think of what sacrifices you will make in the week ahead that will spread heaven's scent in a stinky world.

Let's pray. Lord, you want the world to smell good again.

[36 : 49] And Lord, it is through your people that you are making heaven's scent experienced on earth.

And Lord, we feel that it is so above us to be that heavenly scent in this world. We know that it demands sacrifice and we admit that we are unwilling to give.

We want it for ourselves. We want our lives and our time for ourselves. But we also realize that that is our sinful nature talking. And we pray that you would fill us with the life of Christ.

You would fill us with your Holy Spirit that will not just make us willing to sacrifice, but will make it a joy. And that as we do those sacrifices, that we as we make those sacrifices throughout our lives, not only would we enjoy serving you in that way, but that it would be a pleasing aroma in heaven. For your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.