

The Atmosphere of Worship

I have always enjoyed great smells. Some of my earliest childhood recollections take me back to all night drives from Washington D.C. to Little Rock, Arkansas, pulling over on the Sky Line Parkway of Virginia to inhale the floral freshness of the higher altitude – arriving at my grandmother’s house in time for breakfast. I can still smell the coffee, bacon and even the finely ground pepper on a small lake of “sweet milk” gravy in the middle of my plate and a steamy mist coming from the center of the table wafting the aroma of buttermilk biscuits. Then I recall being rocked by Mom with a faint smell from her Avon near where I lay my head as my siblings and I enter a nap before arising and beginning the day. Other scents such as honeysuckle caught my attention as we would come home from playing sandlot baseball. We would grab a handful of the bush on which it would grow, sometimes pulling the stem to suck the sweetness. Then after moving to Florida, I recall the unmistakable smell of fish near the ocean’s edge, mixing with the salty air. The smell of jet fuel at an air show. Two of the best scents I remember...orange blossoms perfuming the air from the groves that grew all around us and the delicious smell of oranges being processed for their juice from the nearby factories.

Now fast forward to my first date with Barbara. I cannot recall the perfume of other girls, but I still recall the “divine” scent of that first evening to this day. We went to a rescue mission in Chicago. She played the piano; I led the singing. We rode home past Lakeshore Drive, crossed the border into Indiana and on to her house. I still recall walking her to her door on that crisp autumn evening and catching one more whiff of that bouquet that nearly mesmerized me. To this day I keep her in stock with that fragrant memory. One small application and when she walks by...she is eighteen again.

In the Song of Solomon it says of the young lady, “*While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof*” (Song of Solomon 1:12). Then of the young man it reads, “*His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh*” (Song of Solomon 5:13). It is the tender things that seem to accompany falling in love. As the little things on a trip to Grandmother’s, a walk home from playing ball, a casual ride into the country. Those subtle sweet smells that arrest our attention and tell us to slow down, smell the roses.

When God ordained the ancient worship of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, smells were important as Exodus 30:35 says, “*And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy.*” It is as though God is saying, “I don’t want you to forget me; think of me and have reminders.” God did not allow graven images to remind us, but He seems to take delight in having the sweet perfume associated with worship to trigger our imagination. In Psalm 133:1,2 the Bible refers to the precious fellowship in Tabernacle worship with these touching words, “*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’ beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments.*” God took the liberty to say that the unity and happiness of fellowship is likened to the perfume of the anointing oil that covered the priests when they worshipped God and talked with one another. I can imagine the child hearing the laughter of the priest, the embraces and the smell arising from their garments as he or she is being schooled about God’s Word and God’s ways. Then I can imagine the child associating the fact that God hears and answers prayer whenever he or she smelled the incense as they came in for prayers: “*And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations*” (Exodus 30:8). The smoke that was reminiscent of prayers arising was always associated with the incense.

The Bible says, “*Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man’s friend by hearty counsel*” (Proverbs 27:9). The very making of perfume from flowers brings to our

mind what it takes to nurture the atmosphere of worship. I choose one of the choice flowers used by perfumeries, from the ancient world to today to illustrate the point: the jasmine.

1. This flower cannot be imitated.

Many other flowers and woods can be simulated, but not the jasmine. Neither can there be anything in our life that can substitute the presence of the true and living God in our worship. The activities, even wholesome activities, cannot substitute. When we are hurting, only God can provide the comfort. When we are blessed, only God can provide the blessing. *“Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?”* (Exodus 15:11).

In the world, even the religious world we live in today, there is much counterfeit that passes off for the “real deal.” However, for those who have enjoyed the manifested presence of God, it only makes real worship that much more precious. The Psalmist describes the angst of one who knows the real atmosphere of worship and will not settle for substitutes: *“My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God”* (Psalm 84:2).

2. The flower must be harvested conscientiously.

Growing and harvesting jasmine is not like growing and harvesting wheat. For one thing, children - not much taller than the jasmine bushes – often do the harvesting. The work is extremely delicate. Each flower must be picked so as not to bruise its petals; bruising starts a chemical reaction, which lessens the value of the flower's scent. Children, therefore, are particularly suited to the work because they use their thumb and two fingers, with just the deft touch essential to picking jasmine.

I am reminded that there are two words that should be taken in mind when it comes to worship: grieve and quench. These are both spoken of Holy Spirit. *“And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption”* (Ephesians 4:30). *“Quench not the Spirit”* (I Thessalonians 5:19). At the baptism of Jesus we hear these words: *“And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased”* (Luke 3:22). Here we find the Spirit is likened to a dove. It doesn't take much to frighten a dove away. We must understand that God, The Spirit is very sensitive and repulsed by our sin. When we entertain that which offends Him, He is grieved and His influence in our life is quenched. Like the gentle dove that lifts his wings and departs, we do not lose His Life... but we do lose the influence of the Holy Spirit. Without His overwhelming influence, our worship is empty and vain. *“... Be filled with the Spirit”* (Ephesians 5:18).

3. It is best to harvest early in the morning.

The jasmine flower opens at night and is tightly closed in the morning - the best time to harvest the delicate flower. The evening is when the jasmine fields smell so good, but you don't dare harvest the flower while it is open. You wait until the morning when the flower is tightly closed, encapsulating all the sweet fragrances that are waiting to be released when prepared.

God has so much to give us in the course of our day. But for me and probably most children of God, we will find that if we go early to God in prayer, meditation and Bible we can say with the songwriter, “I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.” *“O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee...”* (Psalm 63:1). Let us arise and go to our Lord before the pollutions of the day have left their mark with us. Come to the fresh air, yea the very atmosphere of worship.

- Pastor Pope -

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