

# THE SMELLS OF CHRISTMAS

## PSALM 141:1-2

LORD, I cry out to You; make haste to me!  
Give ear to my voice when I cry out to You.  
Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of  
my hands as the evening sacrifice.

*“It’s beginning to **smell** a lot like Christmas...”*

Have you noticed that not only does Christmas have its sounds and tastes and sights, it also has its own distinctive smells? *What does Christmas smell like?*

If we had a “scratch n sniff” book, what would be in it?

Well, I came tonight with a Top Ten List. It’s my Christmas gift to you... **The Top Ten Christmas smells.**

**10) Roasted chestnuts.** I don’t have a lot of actual experience roasting chestnuts, but thanks to Nat and Natalie Cole I sing of it each year.**[AUDIO]** *Which leads me to...*

**9) Open fires.** For according to the song, chestnuts are roasted on open fires... The rustic smell of wood burning in the fireplace is a definite smell of Christmas...

**8) Turkey and all the fixings.** The last few years we’ve fried a turkey which certainly gives off a distinctive smell.

**7) Peppermint.** Peppermint is the candy of Christmas. It’s the smell and flavor of Christmas candy canes.

**6) Egg Nog.** Here’s a strange smell from a strange Christmas drink. It’s thick and yellowy and half its letters are “g.” And we

only drink it at Christmas time. Break out some eggnog in April and people will think you're nuts.

The 5) Christmas smell is Freshly-baked cookies. If you only bake cookies once a year, chances are it's at Christmas time, and nothing smells better than a pan full of cookies coming out of the oven on Christmas Eve. *And speaking of cookies, my all-time favorites are...*

4) Gingerbread. Thanks to gingerbread, we build houses out of cookies. Gingerbread houses are a Christmas tradition brought to America from Germany.

The 3) Christmas smell is Cinnamon. At Christmas, my wife boils cinnamon sticks on the stovetop. Their fragrance permeates the house. It's a Christmas treat.

2) The smell of Snow. Since it seldom snows in the South, especially as early as Christmas, you might not have this one on your list. But northerners will tell you that a Christmas snow has a distinctive smell. Actually, when the temperature nears freezing, molecules in the air slow down and normal odors are less noticeable. It's the absence of other smells that create the smell of snow.

And the number 1) Christmas smell is that of Evergreen Trees. A Christmas tree of spruce or fir can fill the whole house with a pleasant fragrance. My wife's family lives in Oregon, the Fraser Fir capital of the world, so they often send us fresh sprigs that Kathy situates around the house. The evergreen smell is a sure mark of Christmas.

*Roasted chestnuts, open fires, turkey, peppermint, egg nog, baked cookies, gingerbread, cinnamon, snow, and fresh spruce are all smells that over the years have been associated with*

Christmas. *But even the first Christmas had distinctive smells.* Christmas began as a smelly event, and it's gotten smellier and smellier since!

In fact, Christianity in general is a smelly theology.

Author Ted Harrison writes, "Christianity can be an olfactory faith." Orthodox, and Roman Catholic, and more liturgical Protestants demonstrate this when they employ the burning of incense in their worship.

But Evangelicals like us who love to study the Bible should also know this truth. From Genesis to Revelation, over 200 passages speak of perfume, odors, fragrances.

Throughout God's Word, the author uses smells and our sense of smell to convey to us vital spiritual truths.

God, our Creator, made life (and the world around us) with smell, and He made humans with a sense of smell.

Scientists tell us the average person recognizes up to 10,000 separate odors. The world around us releases odorant molecules into the air. These odorants get trapped by the olfactory cells in our nose. Those cells have tiny receptors that send signals to the olfactory bulb, which relays them to the cortex of our brains.

*And that's about all we know of our sense of smell...*

We can measure light and sound by the length of the waves it produces, but there's no calculation for smell. Odorant molecules vary in composition and shape. In other words, our sense of smell is shrouded in mystery.

It's interesting, we have a vocabulary for color - we speak of red, blue, and yellow. We describe sounds and their volume by decibels - in fact, Vernon has a gizmo that measures the decibel levels of music in the room.

Yet there's no specific language or scale for smells.

To describe a smell, we use crude metaphors like, "It smelled like a skunk" or "It was pleasant as a rose." We lack precise descriptions for smells and end up resorting to analogy. We get more vague in referring to smells.

And this is what makes our sense of smell resemble our faith. More than the other four human senses: *sight*, *taste*, *touch*, *hearing* - our sense of smell is faith-like.

You don't see, or *taste*, or *actually touch*, or *audibly hear* the God we worship. He comes to us more like a smell. God's Spirit wafts toward us undetected at first.

Like a smell, God and His blessings are intangible and invisible. But for a smell, there are cells in your nose that are sensitive to the molecules you can't see, and when that smell gets close enough to trigger those cells, a process of recognition takes place. And this is similar to the mystery of faith. The spirit in us is triggered by God.

The presence, and power, and peace, and glory of God's Spirit remains unknown until our faith perceives. It's through faith that an all-powerful God we didn't realize existed suddenly becomes real and strong in us.

And like God's Spirit, smells can provoke powerful emotions. A newborn baby recognizes his mother by her smell. The whiff

of a pipe reminds you of grandpa. Or a perfume conjures up memories of a former sweetheart.

And so it is with faith. Divine experiences occur when God's Holy Spirit and the intangible blessings that He conveys, *like a spiritual smell*, are sensed by our faith.

I love the Song of Solomon. It's a love poem where two lovers convey their feelings for each other through pleasant aromas. She says, "My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blooms." And "The king is at his table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance." Love flows back and forth between them through **smell**, and similarly, our love for God and His love for us is conveyed through **faith**. Our sense of smell operates a lot like our faith.

And realize the correlation between our sense of smell and our sense of taste. The wide range of flavors we enjoy in our foods is largely due to our sense of smell.

Our taste buds only identify four sensations: **sweet, sour, salty, bitter**. All the other flavors and combination of flavors we enjoy come from our sense of smell. That's why a stuffy nose can cause our food to taste bland.

I'm sure you know one of the symptoms of Covid-19 is the loss of smell and taste. The virus first suppresses your ability to smell, which in turn diminishes your taste.

This reminds me of the fellow who stepped into the Uber he'd ordered. The driver apologized to him, "I'm sorry Sir, but if my car stinks it's because of all the hand sanitizer and disinfectant I've been using. I'm trying my best to keep from being exposed to the coronavirus."

The passenger replied, *"Oh, that's okay, it's no problem at all. I haven't smelled anything for days now."*

One of the disasters of getting the Rona at Christmas time is it robs you of the season's pleasant smells.

Yet the same occurs when doubt replaces faith. Faith is what allows us to sniff out God's blessings. Without faith, we end up with no taste for the good things of God.

I think it's interesting that the most smell-repressed of all God's creatures are human beings. Perhaps our sin stunted our sense of smell. Smell plays a far greater role in the life of animals and insects than it does in humans.

Take your dog for example. A dog relies on odors to *locate food, recognize trails, mark out territories, identify kin, even find a receptive mate.* That's why his snout is always sniffing. **[MOTION CLIP]** A dog's world is dominated by smells.

Yet the person in the universe with the most acute sense of smell is God! God is spirit and thus has no body *or literal nose*, but apparently, He does have a sharp sensitivity to aromas, and smells, and scents.

In Genesis 8:20, when Noah offered God a sacrifice, we're told (v. 21) *"the LORD smelled a soothing aroma."*

Throughout Leviticus, the animal sacrifices the Jews offered were termed *"a sweet aroma to the LORD."*

The ultimate sacrifice was the cross of our Lord Jesus. And in Ephesians 5, we're told the love that nailed Jesus to the tree was to God a *"a sweet-smelling aroma."*



Even the service we do, and money we give, and time we spend for God, is referred to in **Philippians 4:18** as “a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.” Obviously, God is sensitive to smells.

So it's no surprise that the coming of God's Son to Earth was accompanied by a host of significant smells.

Luke's Christmas story occurs primarily in two locations - **in the Temple** and **in a stable**. And both were smelly places. For very different reasons, pungent and powerful odors emanated from both locales.

When you put both sets of smells together, it provides us interesting insights into the meaning of Christmas.

In fact, let me go ahead and spill the beans. Here's the big thought in my message. If you're looking for *the takeaway*, here it is: **God answers our prayers, but He doesn't always answer them in the ways we think He should.** Let me repeat that. It's an important truth. **God answers our prayers, but not always as we'd like.**

Realize, Christmas began **in the Temple**, but not just in the Temple. Luke is more specific; in Luke 1:10-11, the angel, Gabriel, meets Zacharias in the Holy Place of the Temple, on the right side of the **altar of incense**, at the exact **hour of incense** - probably the evening sacrifice, 6 PM or so. The angel visited **at the hour** and **at the altar** of incense, *in the midst a strong and smoky smell*.

Just outside the Temple's inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, sat a small table. It was 18 inches square by 3 feet tall. On it an

incense burned that sent a smoke and smell behind the curtain into God's very presence.

Only the High Priest and once a year could enter the Holy of Holies, but twice daily, the smell and smoke of the incense penetrated beyond the veil into God's throne room. And on this day, Zacharias was the special priest given the task of sprinkling the incense over the coals.

Three priests entered the Temple that day to tend to the altar of incense... One priest cleaned up the ashes from the last session. The second priest lit the flame and prepped the coals. Once they had exited, that left the third priest all by himself. This was Zacharias.

His job was to sprinkle the sacred incense over the burning coals, which created a plume of smell and smoke that represented the prayers of God's people - **a prayer plume** that ascended before God's throne.

And Zacharias' own wife, Elizabeth, had added to those prayers. She had prayed desperately for a son in her old age. Her prayers, like the incense, had ascended to God - and Gabriel had been dispatched to tell the couple they would have a son named John, who would be the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah or Savior.

Exodus 30:34 tells us about the composition of the incense burned by Zacharias in the Temple. At least four spices went into the compound. It was salted and beaten into a fine texture. And it included "pure frankincense."

The prefix "frank" means "highest quality," so "frankincense" was the top grade of incense available. This wasn't just a mild



spritz; it released a strong smell and heavy smoke. You could call it **a sacred stench!**

Five verses in Exodus 34 describe this high-grade incense, and three times it's called "holy" or "special."

In fact, Exodus 30 warns that it was reserved only for God. If the priest took home a pinch for his own enjoyment he would be cut off from the people. Exodus 34:37 tells us, "It shall be to you holy for the LORD."

God treated that incense as precious and valuable for that's how He smells our prayers. What are you praying for this Christmas? *Is there someone sick in your family? Maybe a loved one with a terminal disease? Have you lost your job or had to shut down your business? Are you staring at mounting bills? Are you lonely this Christmas? Have you been betrayed by someone you love? Or maybe you're praying for a wayward child?*

Please take a whiff of this truth... your prayers are precious to God. This is how Christmas begins...with the smell of holy incense burning in the Temple, *which speaks of our heartfelt prayers.* As David said in our text, Psalm 141, **Let my prayer be set before You as incense.**

Your prayers are precious to God and ultimately what Christmas is all about. The coming of Jesus is the answer to our prayers - all our prayers - every prayer.

God became a man - and not just a man, a lowly man, a baby. The Almighty became *everyman*. He came as low as He could go to identify with the least of us.

He came into the world to experience our plight. Hebrews 4 speaks of Jesus as our priest. It reads, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses...” Having been one of us, He can now empathize with us. He now knows what we need.

He came the first Christmas to bear our burdens, shed our tears, feel our hurts, even suffer our injustices - *so that He can more effectively answer our prayers.*

In Revelation 5:8, when the Apostle John peers into heaven, he sees golden bowls full of incense. John identifies the incense as “the prayers of the saints.”

In heaven today, Jesus holds in His mighty hands the bowls of incense that are “the prayers of the saints,” waiting for God’s time when He’ll answer them all.

Remember the three gifts the magi gave to the baby in Bethlehem... They gave Jesus gold for a king. Frankincense for a priest. And myrrh, which was an embalming spice, because He was a man born to die.

How ironic that the promised Child was given high quality, priestly-grade incense. For one day, all the prayers ever prayed in His name will be answered in God’s time and in God’s way.

**God answers prayer.**

This year let the Christmas smells remind you *that behind the veil separating us from God - the curtain between heaven and earth - that which divides the spiritual and physical - there’s a God who smells our scents, prayers we send in Jesus’ name.* He came to show us that He cares and will one day answer every prayer.

But here's the second half of tonight's big thought and another truth the smells of Christmas teach us. Though God will one day answer our prayers, He doesn't always do it in the way we'd might like or even think He should.

For not only does Luke's Christmas drama play out in **the Temple**, the narrative quickly moves to **the stable**. There you find another different set of pungent smells.

You certainly know the story. Bethlehem was crowded for the census. There was no room in the inn. The only place Joseph and Mary could bed down was a stable...

And we usually think of a stable as a big red barn on a picturesque horse farm - all warm and cozy and colorful. A structure built to protect animals from the bite of winter.

But this shelter was not the stable you've imagined. It was a cave on the outskirts of town: *cold, wet, damp*.

On our tours of Israel, we usually go to the Shepherd's Fields outside Bethlehem - in the Jerusalem suburbs - and visit these caves. They reek with the stink of manure.

The walls and ceilings of the dark, gloomy caves are coated with layers of soot from countless campfires. The smells and smoke in these caves can be suffocating.

So often we take the stable of Bethlehem and turn it into a sanitized petting zoo - *that's certainly not the way it was*. Shepherd hygiene and flocks of sheep, as well as other barnyard animals, don't go together with pleasant aromas. It all combined for an atrocious stench.

Author Geoffrey Bull once visited an Oriental Inn. He wrote to describe the primitive stable he found behind the hotel, "As I walked into the stable to feed the horses and mules, my boots squashed in the manure and straw. The horrible smell of the animals was nauseating, and I thought, "to think Christ came all the way from heaven to some wretched, Eastern stable, and what is more, He came for me." It is indeed a sobering thought.

But it wasn't just the animals and shepherds and mud and soot that added to the smell of the stable, there were also human aromas of blood, birth waters, and sweat.

Ever gotten a whiff of an operating room after a birth? It's not a pleasant aroma. A good disinfectant and air freshener gets used immediately. *It's Lysol to the rescue.*

Hear the description of a baby's birth from a modern midwife, "Does it smell? Sure it does. People fart, poop, burp, puke, and pee during labour and delivery. They also spend long periods of time without eating solid food, showering, or brushing their teeth. People sweat profusely. Amniotic fluids smell like bleach. Since newborns are unable to regulate their body temperature, delivery rooms are always warm, which further putrefies the smells, etc. etc." I could go on, but you get the point.

Each year at Christmas we sing "**Away In A Manger.**" "The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes." *Says who? Seriously...*

"The cattle are lowing..." are you kidding? More likely the sheep were bleating, and the cows were mooing - probably disturbed by the strangers around them...

And “no crying He makes,” *you sure?* I’ve witnessed the birth of four babies, and they all screamed bloody murder when they arrived. It’s healthy for a newborn to cry - it clears out his or her lungs. I’m sure Jesus cried.

Then Mary put her baby “away in a manger” - but a Middle East manger is not what you think. It’s a dirty, fly-invested, saliva-stained feed trough. I never knew it until I went to Israel, but mangers aren’t made from balsa wood and lined with soft hay, **they’re cut out of stone.** Literally, a manger is as hard as a rock... The birth of the baby in Bethlehem was nothing like what we’d expect.

And this is how God often answers our prayers. He has an answer, and His answers are always good, but they can also be difficult - *at times as hard as a rock...*

God doesn’t mind putting us in *sweaty situations* and *smelly circumstances* in route to answering our prayers.

Ironically, when there’s a hard lesson our Father has to teach us, God uses smells and smoke to clear the air!

When Jesus was born, as monumental as that was, there were even bigger issues at stake. In **Philippians 2 Paul later writes, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus... who made Himself of no reputation, taking the form a servant, and coming in the likeness of men... He humbled Himself...”** Paul knew that *how Jesus was born* was as much the will of God as *that He was born*. God had a purpose for the manner of His birth.

By enduring the rigors of the stable, the birth of Jesus set an example of humility, servanthood, and empathy.

If given the choice, Joseph and Mary would've opted for better conditions - **certainly nicer smells** - but when the stink in the air is put there by God, you go with it...

It was Thomas Aquinas who wrote, "God writes straight in wavy lines." In other words, God has a purpose. He carves a predetermined path from A to B, but because we don't always see and understand all His intentions, the lines He draws appear a bit wavy to us.

Did you know that the smell of gas is artificial? Natural gas doesn't have a smell. When you have a leak and smell gas you're actually smelling a chemical that was added to the gas. Mercapton has a strong and distinctive odor. Most folks think it has the aroma of rotten eggs.

If gas was sold without a smell, it would be dangerous. Since it's not seen, how would you know you had a leak? The distributors add a smell so we can recognize it as gas. Mercapton is referred to as "the smell of safety."

And this is how we often identify God. After you've walked with Him a while, you realize He loves to work through trials and difficulties, thus when we get a whiff of a hardship or a messy situation, it should tip us off that God is with us. Emmanuel has come into our situation.

I began tonight's message, *it's beginning to smell a lot like Christmas...* And the smells of the first Christmas have lingered, both the Temple incense and the stable stink. Both smells infuse great meaning into Christmas...

God answers prayer, and God works through difficulty.



In short, **God answers our prayers, but He doesn't always answer them in the ways we think He should.**

I hope this Christmas you'll use your spiritual sense of smell - your faith - and sense what you cannot see - the Lord is present... And make sure you take your prayers to God this Christmas, for that's ultimately why Jesus came into the world, ***so you could!...*** Trust God to work His will as He sees fit, not just as you think He should...