

A Fragrant Offering

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Date: 17 August 2025

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- [0:00] From the opening pages of God's Word, we find this repeated description of God. That God sees, that God observes, that He takes notice of His creation, and He evaluates it.
- We have that very well-known phrase over and over again in Genesis 1, And God saw that it was good. And God saw that it was good. Then after the creation of man, what do we read?
- Indeed, God saw everything that He had made. And behold, another sight word, behold, it was very good. God saw the goodness of all that He created.
- But then sin enters into the world, and God saw something very different in His creation then. We read of this in Genesis 6, verse 5. The Lord saw the wickedness of man, and it was great in the earth.
- So God saw the utter sinfulness of man, that all men except Noah and his family were enemies of Him. Noah, though, was characterized as a righteous man.
- [1:05] Interestingly, God actually says to Noah, I have seen that you are righteous. There it is again, the emphasis on God's seeing. And so Genesis 6, verse 8 says, Noah found favor in the eyes of God.
- Whereas Genesis 6, verse 11, just a few verses later, says, the earth was corrupt in God's sight. And again in verse 12, God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt.
- So we see in Genesis 1, God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And we get to just Genesis 6, and we're already met with similar yet sad words.
- God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt. Now, of course, God doesn't actually have physical eyes as we do. God is spirit. This is what we call anthropomorphic language, meaning human attributes, human characteristics are ascribed to God.
- God does not have physical eyes, but that language helps us to understand something that is true of God. When He's described as seeing with eyes, we understand what's being communicated.
- [2:14] God is paying attention. He's paying careful attention. The sinfulness of man in Genesis 6 is not going unnoticed. God's eyes have seen the wickedness of humanity, and yet He's also seen the righteousness of Noah.
- Noah found favor in God's eyes. So Genesis 6 tells us that God sees. Then we get to Genesis 8. God has sent the floodwaters, destroying all people and animals on the earth except Noah and his family.
- And in Genesis 8, the ark has come to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The floodwaters have finally receded. Dry land has reappeared. So Noah and his family and all of the animals on the ark, they disembark.
- What's the first thing that Noah does when he comes off the ark? At least the first thing that Scripture tells us. He doesn't dance for joy. He doesn't hug his family. He doesn't kiss the ground.

He doesn't hop on a horse and take it for a joy ride. What does Noah do? Genesis 8:20 tells us. He builds an altar to the Lord, and he takes some of those very animals who were spared from the flood.

[3:28] These chosen animals who got to live. Out of the millions of animals on the earth, here were the select lucky few. They made it through a worldwide flood, and then they're sacrificed.

Some of the clean animals. Some of the clean birds. 370 days on that ark, they finally touch hard ground. They finally could perch on a tree again, just to disembark and be slaughtered.

But for good reason. For very good reason. Because Noah had built an altar. And he was offering burnt offerings to God on that altar.

Now, Genesis 8 also tells us how God received these offerings. And given how much we've seen that God sees, we might assume that the text would say something along the lines of, when God saw Noah's sacrifice.

But that's not what Genesis 8 says. Genesis 8 doesn't tell us what God saw. But for the first time, Genesis 8 tells us what God smelled. Beginning in verse 21, listen to what Genesis 8 says.

[4:54] So there's three things here that show us that God received Noah's offering with approval.

That he accepted Noah's offering. And we can work backwards in the text to see this. We see, number one, that God blessed Noah and his sons. The blessing followed the sacrifice.

If God had rejected the sacrifice, well, it would have been strange then that God would immediately bless Noah and his sons. And number two, we see that God purposed to never again wipe out all of humanity as he did with the flood.

Again, that kind of merciful response would have been somewhat out of place if God had just rejected that sacrifice. And number three, and I would say the clincher here, the aroma of the sacrifice was pleasing to God.

Again, this is anthropomorphic language because God smelled the pleasing aroma. It was as if the scent of that sacrifice had wafted up to heaven, as if it had filled God's nostrils with that wonderful smell.

[6:10] Better than a turkey in the oven on a Thanksgiving morning. Better than a freshly cut Christmas tree. Better than a garden of roses. For all my bookworms.

Better than that smell of a new book as you open the pages. Those bloodied sacrifices were a pleasing aroma to God. A fragrant offering that wafted up to heaven.

And it smelled good because it was offered in obedience. The obedience of Noah. The faith of Noah. That was pleasing to God.

So these sacrifices were said to be a pleasing aroma. And those sacrifices in Genesis 8 were just the beginning. The first of many sweet-smelling sacrifices to God.

As Israel came out of Egypt, God explained to His people that His presence would come to dwell with them in the tabernacle. Kids, do you remember the tabernacle from soccer camp?

[7:11] Do you kids remember the three words used to describe the tabernacle? To give you a hint, do you remember what we had out in the field? That temporary structure?

Can we say those words together now that I've given you a lot of time to think about this? God's special tent. That's what the tabernacle was. God's special tent.

And in that tent, God instructed the Israelites to put an altar. Not an altar for animal sacrifice. We hear altar, and we immediately think, okay, animal sacrifices.

Kill animals and offer them upon the altar. But here in the tabernacle, that's not what we have. In fact, the priests were forbidden from offering animal sacrifices upon this altar.

Along with grain offerings or drink offerings. They were not permitted either. God explicitly said, no, none of that on this altar. This wasn't an altar for those kinds of offerings.

[8:12] This altar, in the holy place of the tabernacle, was for incense. Every morning and every evening, the priests were to burn fragrant incense on it.

It was to be this sweet-smelling spices that the perfumer would blend together in perfect proportion according to the instructions that God had explicitly given in Exodus chapter 30.

This too, was to be a pleasing aroma to God. Again, because it was done in obedience to Him. In just the way that God had told the Israelites to do it.

And so the smoke from the incense, as it burned, it would actually float behind the curtain into the most holy place. You see, the priests were standing in the holy place where they were allowed to be.

But it was going into the most holy place where the priests could not just go whenever they wanted. In fact, only one priest could go one day of the year, the high priest on the day of atonement.

[9:16] But every morning, every evening, as the incense was burned, the priests would be able to see as it would go where they couldn't go, into the most holy place, into the place where God's presence dwelt.

And they would know God delights in this smell. The smell of those sweet spices blended together because God delights in our obedient worship.

And on that one day that the high priest could go into the most holy place, do you know what the high priest would do as he prepared to go in, to go behind the curtain?

God gave clear instructions. The high priest was not just to waltz into the most holy place. No, God had told him that there were precautions that he was to take so that he would not die.

Leviticus 16 tells us this in great detail. Here's what the high priest would do. Beginning in verse 12, this is what we read. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar.

[10:21] That's the altar of incense. So he's to take these coals of fire from the altar before the Lord. And two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small.

And he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord. That the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony so that he does not die.

Very clear instructions given. Very serious consequences consequences if those instructions weren't followed. So again, the high priest can't just go into the most holy place however he would like because the Ark of the Covenant was there.

We have a description of the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. That's the mercy seat that we just heard of in Leviticus 16. God had said before that in a special way, his presence would come to dwell on that lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

So before going in, the high priest would get incense from the altar of incense and he'd bring it in with him into the most holy place just that one day of the year that he could do that.

[11:30] And what would he do with that incense? Well, it would be burned so that the cloud of incense would cover the place where God's presence dwelt. A fragrant offering made to God.

This cloud protected the high priest, a sinful man, from dying and at the same time, this cloud was a delightful smell to God. But of course, it wasn't just incense that proved to be a delightful smell to the Lord in tabernacle worship.

The animal offerings, like Noah's offering, were as well. Over and over again in Leviticus, we read that these animal offerings were a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

Now let's pause for just a moment and think about that. dead animals and pleasant smells don't normally go together. It's not hard for us to conceive of the sweet spices burned on the altar of incense being a pleasing aroma to God.

I'd enjoy that. I like a sweet-smelling candle. But dead animals? I don't want any dead animals or their smells coming into my home. I don't want the cat that lingers around outside of our house bringing a rat into our house.

[12 : 46] Our family this year just bought a quarter cow for the first time and Case and the kids went to the butcher to pick it up. The kids thought that it was really cool. Casey thought it was all right because it reeked.

The butcher's place smelled so bad. Well, that's what you'd expect when it comes to slaughtering animals. It's anything but a pleasing aroma. It makes you want to pinch your nose, not breathe in deeply to enjoy the smell.

In fact, in the ancient world, incense, like the incense that was used in the tabernacle worship, was specifically burned to mask gross odors like dead animals.

And yet, over and over again, we read that these animal sacrifices were a pleasing aroma to the Lord. No less than 17 times in the book of Leviticus.

That's the constant refrain. A pleasing aroma to the Lord. It does paint a mental picture for us, doesn't it? Not of God pinching his nose and contorting his face in disgust the way I imagine Casey probably did at the butcher's.

[13 : 58] No, it paints this picture of God flaring his nostrils and coaxing the aroma with his hands. If he had hands. And breathing in deeply with delight and pleasure and satisfaction.

And what did this communicate to the people of Israel? That God had a strange sense of smell? Like people who like the smell of gasoline? Does God enjoy the smell of dead animals?

Of course not. This communicated a very important spiritual reality. Their sacrifice was accepted, not rejected. God received their offering.

And what was the result of that? Once again, their sins were temporarily atoned for, covered by the blood of bulls and goats and lambs.

That animal put to death in the place of sinners who themselves deserve to die. God's justice satisfied in the sacrifice of that animal so that then his mercy could be shown in despairing of that sinner.

[15 : 04] So indeed, their offerings were a pleasing aroma to God. And then finally, when Solomon would later build the temple, God ensured that the worship that continued there in the temple would continue in the same way only on a more impressive and grand scale.

So the altar of incense was there again in the holy place. The fragrant incense were burned there yet again as well. The bronze altar for offering burnt offerings.

It too was constructed in the temple courtyard but it was much larger than the altar that had been with the tabernacle. This one at the temple couldn't just be packed up and carried throughout the wilderness.

Now this was 15 feet high and 30 feet wide and 30 feet long. It was this massive structure elevated off the ground that a large fire would then consume the offerings.

And as that smoke billowed up to heaven the priests would have thought that that pleasing aroma is billowing up as well. What pleasure our God takes in these sacrifices made humbly and obediently to Him.

- [16:18] Yet for as pleasing as these sacrifices were we know they had to be offered again and again and again. no animal no matter how unblemished no matter how spotless no matter how clean it might have been no matter how pleasing the aroma was to God no animal could bring an end to these sacrifices.

Only the perfect sacrifice of the perfect God-man Jesus Christ would do. And how supremely pleasing His sacrifice was to God.

Ephesians 5:2 helps us to see this. In Ephesians 5:2 Paul says these words And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So here in this verse Paul actually leads with a command. He tells us walk in love. This is what we are to do. This is to be the pattern of our lives characterized by love.

And what's this love that Paul speaks of? Too often the word love gets thrown around. People speak of love all the time. But what's biblical love? What does God say that love is?

- [17:40] Well here we see it. Both in who showed it to us and in how He showed it to us. Paul says walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us.

So there we see love. There we see perfectly shown to us in the perfect Son of Man. The perfect God-man. We love as Christ loved us.

And how did He perfectly love us? He gave Himself up for us. He laid down His life the ultimate sacrifice. To love is to give of yourself for the good of another.

And Jesus did that in the greatest of ways. As He Himself said greater love has no one than this that someone lay down His life for His friends.

And that's just what the Lord Jesus did for us. He laid down His life. He died in the place of rebel sinners. The punishment that was to be ours He took that as He hung upon the cross.

- [18:44] He was the substitute. He was the sacrifice for us. And so Jesus brought an end to all of those sacrifices and all of those substitutes that came before Him.

All of those bulls and goats continually offered every year on that bronze altar. What could they never do? What were they incapable of doing?

The writer of Hebrews tells us two things in Hebrews 10. They could never make perfect those who draw near. They could never take away sins.

Impossible the writer of Hebrews says. Not just improbable not just unlikely not one in a million chances no flat out impossible. It could never happen.

For as pleasing as the aroma of those sacrifices may have been they could never fully suffice. they could never atone completely and finally for sins.

- [19:48] However fragrant the animal offering may have been no matter how pleasing the aroma that God smelled it simply would not have lasted. A perfect lamb was needed.

One whose sacrifice would be sufficient and the fragrance of that sacrifice sufficient to last forever. And that's just what we see in the person of Jesus Christ.

We see that perfect sacrifice a fragrant offering as Ephesians 5.2 says. Not just an offering that kind of got by not just an offering that was perhaps good enough no this offering was fragrant it was a pleasant pleasing aroma to God this offering more than any that had been offered before wafted with such sweetness to heaven bringing delight to God not because anything about his death smelled good but because his death was acceptable to God because here was the one and only perfect sinless sacrifice offered up to God in humble obedience the righteous one dying in the place of the unrighteous what a sweet smelling sacrifice our savior was God was satisfied his justice was satisfied because his wrath was poured out on his son in full on his son for the sins of his people a once for all sacrifice a sacrifice like no other before and the most willing of all sacrifices

Ephesians 5 2 says he gave himself up for us no one takes my life from me Jesus said but I lay it down of my own accord the Lord Jesus was bruised and beaten he was bloodied as he hung upon that cross and yet for as gruesome and as horrifying as his death was that sacrifice was a pleasing aroma to God a fragrant offering that had wafted up to heaven for us and it was for us he was offered up for us we were covered not in the blood of bulls and goats and lambs but in the blood of Jesus God's own son the lamb who takes away the sins of the world and our sins weren't temporarily covered no his blood took them away for good forever what a fragrant sacrifice made to God what a sufficient sacrifice made on our behalf so what should be our response this evening as we come to the

Lord's table together remembering that he loved us and he gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God what should our response be we in turn offer up a sacrifice but it's not an animal on the altar it's not incense brought into the most holy place but it's a sacrifice of praise to God just as the writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 13 15 let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name so we praise him with our lips for what he's done for our lives and we're to do this continually as Hebrews 13 15 says so when we gather for the Lord's supper tonight we bring the praises of God on our lips and those praises of God should flow from our hearts and then when we leave here we do just the same when we go home and we do just the same tomorrow morning we have the praises of God continually on our lips and those praises they too are a pleasing aroma to God our praises waft to heaven and he delights to receive them but they are only received through

[23 : 47] Jesus Christ they are only accepted through Jesus Christ because if we are outside of Christ there is nothing pleasing about us those outside of Christ are like the people of Israel as God describes them in their empty worship in Isaiah 65 God says in verse 5 they are a smoke in my nostrils a fire that burns all the day if you are outside of Christ you are more than a stench in God's nostrils you are like smoke from a burning fire in his nostrils smoke is unbearable smoke can't be tolerated if you sit around a campfire and the wind blows in a very specific direction really quickly you will find I cannot sit here this smoke is truly unbearable coughing sputtering you are unable to breathe can't bear it how much more unbearable is the unrepentant sinner to the one and only holy

God if you are outside of Christ tonight if you've been going your own way if you've been living life on your terms turn from your life of sin trust in Christ cry out to him have mercy on me a sinner trust in him believe that he died on the cross for your sins that you might be forgiven and you will no longer be a smoke in God's nostrils that smoke will be replaced with the sweet aroma of Christ and God will delight in you as he delights in his son for us who are in Christ we can't forget then that we only bring our praises to God tonight through Jesus Christ without Christ our offering of praise would be no better than smoke to God it's only fragrant because Christ was offered up for pleasing aroma because Christ's death was first a pleasing aroma listen again to

Hebrews 13 15 but listen to how it begins through him that's Jesus Christ through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name so only through Christ can we continually offer up a sacrifice of praise only through Christ will our praises be received and accepted in the throne room of heaven in 1st Peter chapter 2 we're described as a holy priesthood and what are we doing as these priests not offering up animal sacrifices again and not burning incense every morning and evening in the holy place of the temple no we are offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God well how do we know that those sacrifices are acceptable to God because 1st Peter 2 tells us we offer those spiritual sacrifices through

Jesus Christ God delights in our praise because he has delighted in the sacrifice of his son that sacrifice more than any other before was a fragrant offering to God more pleasing than the sweet spice of incense in the holy place more pleasing than the animal offerings burnt on the altar in the courtyard The most pleasing the supremely pleasing sacrifice of all!

So let's come to the Lord's table tonight let's come remembering that offering on Calvary let's bring our own offering now of praise and thanksgiving with great joy Christ died for me so that I might live to praise God his offering was a pleasing aroma and now through him so was my offering so was your offering all who are in Christ God is glad to receive our praises so let's bring them as we come to the Lord's table tonight