

CREATOR

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SONGS OF A-SCENT

Part 2

*Shout with joy to God, all the earth!
Sing the glory of His name;
make His praise glorious (Psalm 66:1-2)!*

In our last issue of **CREATOR**, we briefly explored how our Lord Jesus fashioned our sense of smell, how animals detect odors, and what odors animals produce. In this issue, we will investigate the many scents found in the vegetable and mineral kingdoms and how Christ uses these fragrances to “sing praise” to His Father.

PLANT FRAGRANCES

It has been suggested, by those who study such things, that we identify odors in a manner similar to the way we recognize someone’s face. Some odors greet us gently like a faithful friend. Other smells burst into our lives as a cantankerous boss might first thing Monday morning. Most scents, however, pass us by like countless people crowding a busy city street. The truth is, we hardly notice them.

Of all the smells on Earth, the vast majority are manufactured by green plants. Vegetation regularly releases a complex mixture of pedestrian chemicals into the air we breath. The sheer number of these odors is bewilderingly diverse, all to the praise of our Creator. Yet, we mortals can sense only a few at a time.

Consider the tomato plant. It produces 400 volatile compounds,¹ but our noses can detect just 16 of them. What about the remaining 384 tomato chemicals we can’t smell . . . why did God create these? It is possible that other creatures, such as insects, are attracted to these fragrances. Although, recent studies have shown that bees smell the same odors we do.

This much is certain—God created all 400 “aromi pomodoro” for a reason, and ultimately the tomato pleases Him and brings Him glory,



¹ Volatile compounds are chemicals that rapidly evaporate into the air.

Unity in Diversity

Only our Triune God—the One who is Unity in Diversity—could fashion two vastly different creatures, human beings and bees, capable of smelling the exact same odors. He is amazing!

whether we can smell its whole bouquet or not. Likewise, roasted coffee contains over 800 volatile chemicals, but again, only 16 are needed to produce the aroma we find so pleasing. Coffee possesses hundreds of odors we simply cannot smell.

I am personally convinced that our Lord Jesus Christ “hears” the full range of sweet praise “sung” by all the flowers and spices in His creation. And if we see natural odors as a form of worship, then we must conclude that God is extravagant in this means of praise! I truly believe that plants were originally created to make a “joyful odor” to the Lord (see Psalm 100:1). And I am so thankful that He permits us to enjoy a few of their “hymns.”



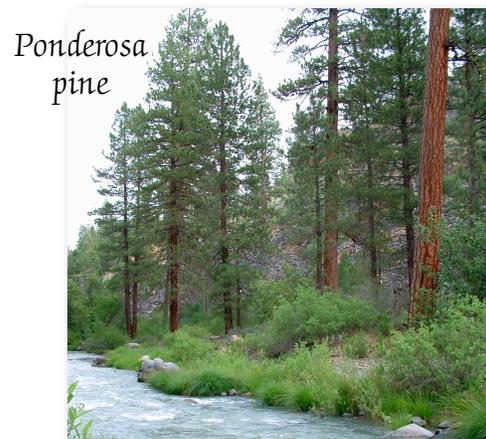
The fragrance of most plants is an amazing smörgåsbord of smells blended together by our Lord Jesus to create each plant’s unique and melodic aroma. Let’s look at a partial list of chemicals found in basil, an herb commonly used in cooking. Please note how many of these chemicals are found in other plants as well:

Basil Scents

- citronellol (found in geraniums and roses)
- linalool (found in coriander)
- myrcene (found in bay leaves)
- pinene (the oil that gives pine its scent)
- ocimene (a chemical found in many fruits)
- terpineol (the foundation of turpentine)
- linalyl acetate (a scent found in lavender)
- fenchyl acetate (the smell of fir trees)
- trans-ocimene (found in many fruits)
- cineole (found in eucalyptus)
- eugenol (the main ingredient of cloves)

Rarely is a single odor encountered in nature. We see that the scent of basil leaves is a composite of many odors. Our Creator fashioned the special aroma of basil by bringing together just the right combination of biochemicals—chemicals that are commonly found elsewhere in creation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ frequently highlights a scent throughout nature. Vanilla is an example. Natural vanilla is produced by the



vanilla orchid (*Vanilla planifolia*), a native flower of Mexico grown in the West Indies and Central America. Its delightful smell and taste come from vanillin,² a chemical also found in

² The chemical name for vanillin is 3-methoxy-4-hydroxybenzaldehyde.

oak wood, which is one reason why oak furniture smells so good! The ponderosa pine forests of the Rocky Mountains advertise this aroma—the pine’s bark contains vanillin as well. Jesus tweaks or slightly changes the molecular structure of vanillin forming the equally-wonderful fragrances of ginger, cloves, cinnamon, bay leaves, and nutmeg³ found elsewhere in creation.

“WHAT’S THAT STENCH?”

The different smells of field and forest, hearth and home, are just waiting to be discovered. Indeed, some odors are delicate and pleasant, like those tucked away in the seed pods of the vanilla orchid; others, such as hydrogen sulfide, lurk as malodorous monsters in the bowels of a swamp and tend to have an “in-your-face” stench. All of these odors—pleasant or putrid—are powerful notes performed by a grand orchestra of smells directed by Christ. We may not like every “movement” of creation’s symphony, but each scent that Jesus has formed communicates the character of God in its own special way.

• • •

I was standing, somewhat precariously, in the middle of a gentle brook, photographing late-spring dragonflies. A soft, black silt covered the creek bottom downstream. I was trying to avoid the mud, but the urge to catch a shot of a multicolored damselfly just out of camera reach was just too great, so I took the step. “Squish” came the cry of my shoe as it sank deep into the gummy, black ooze. Immediately a question shot into my mind, “Oh, what is that awful smell?” A rancid odor of rotten eggs bit at my nose. It didn’t take me long to realize that I had just encountered the

³ It’s interesting—and a bit scary—that one can die from eating a small handful of nutmegs! We must be careful when dealing with the things of God.

acid gas hydrogen sulfide.⁴

• • •

Were the modern-day stenchs of Earth present before the Fall of mankind? Only our Creator and Savior knows for sure. There is a bizarre and exotic plant called the corpse flower that gives off a “perfume” of rotting flesh when it blooms. It is laced with putrescine (PEW - tress - seen) and cadaverine (kuh - DAV - uh - reen), two chemicals also found in decomposing animals. Its odor is rather repulsive to people, but a “plaisir sucré” to flies.



Rafflesia flower

Rafflesia (raf - FLEE - shah) or stinking corpse lily—the world’s largest flower and infamous as one of Earth’s stinkiest plants—is another organism that Jesus has providentially bestowed with a “reek factor.” Its blooms produce the rancid smell of rotting flesh that proves irresistible to some insects, who unwittingly cross-pollinate the flowers.

Many other plants can be identified by their awful fetor: the crushed seeds of ginkgo trees smell like vomit, the clasping-leaf sugarbush wafts with the odor of dirty feet, and the Bradford pear tree has the eau de cologne of a locker room. There’s also the skunk cabbage, dead horse arum, and carrion flower.

⁴ Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) is a nasty odor produced by the anaerobic bacteria in the creek’s black mud. It smells like rotting eggs.

Their names say it all.⁵

Plants, of course, are not the only sultans of stink. On warm, humid days, swine happily flaunt more than 300 volatile chemicals, yet only four typically account for the stench of a pig sty. We ought to see Christ's kindness in this! He could have applied any number of the remaining 300-plus chemicals to further enhance pig stink. He didn't.

Other pig-like animals, such as javelinas (hah - vuh - LEE - nuh), actually band together to increase their "stenchability." A solitary javelina can make one's eyes water; but put



a whole bunch of javelinas together and "Woo-wee—watch out!" This tactic actually helps protect them from predators.

FRENCH FRIES

A smell does not necessarily have the same effect on one creature as another (the smell of manure attracts flies and repels people). So what makes us prefer one odor and not another? It largely depends on our upbringing and personal preferences. The scent of root beer and wintergreen are two of the most popular fragrances in the United States, but the people in Great Britain often find them rather repulsive.⁶

⁵ Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), clasping-leaf sugarbush (*Protea amplexicaulis*), Bradford pear (*Pyrus calleryana*), skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*), dead horse arum (*Helicodiceros muscivorus*), carrion flower (*Amorphophallus titanum*)

⁶ *Times of London* (January 2004)

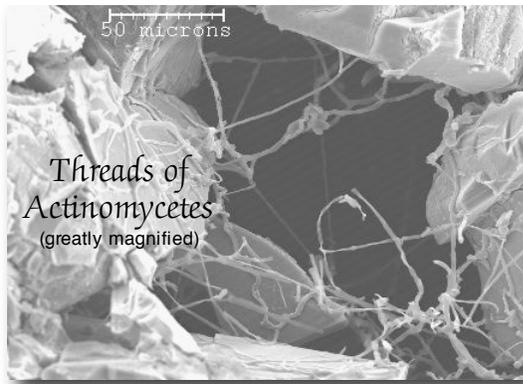
The human nose has a difficult time distinguishing between different odors blended together. Research has shown that people can identify and name only one or two, at the most three, odors at the same time. A mixture of scents, whether good or bad, tends to present itself simply as a single aroma.

Did you know that of the 19 chemicals forming the aroma of french fries, one of them—methyl mercaptan—is also the odor of a frightened skunk?⁷ (I'll bet you're glad I told you that!) So, why do we like the smell of french fries as much as we do? Apart from our Lord, no one really knows. In Ethiopia, people love the odor of cows . . . go figure. And recently, the U.S. military tried to develop a "stink bomb," a device theoretically so vile that it would disperse any crowd. They failed. What is the moral of the story? At least as far as smells go, you can't offend everyone at the same time!

OTHER ODORS

OK, enough of stink. What about the distinct aroma of an approaching rain storm? Who hasn't enjoyed that? But when people say, "It smells like rain," what are they sensing? We know that increased humidity helps saturate the air with odor molecules suspended in it. This, in turn, heightens our ability to smell. If a threatening storm produces lightning, we may also experience the scent of ozone (O₃) being formed when oxygen molecules (O₂) are split and recombined by the storm's electrical discharges. In addition to all this, we are greeted with the wonderful odor of actinomycetes (ak - tin - oh - MY - see - tees)—a fungus-like bacteria—rising up from the soil everywhere as it rains. Thunderstorms, therefore, often present themselves as three-part dramas in the theater of God's glory.

⁷ See *Hidden Treasures* Volume 3 Number 4.



UNUSUAL MINERAL SMELLS

It's not just plants and rain that contribute praise to our Creator. A mineral prospector recently told me that tellurium mines are saturated with an odor of garlic bread. Minerals containing arsenic often give off a hint of garlic. Fetid barite, another type of rock, reeks of rotten eggs when scratched with a nail or a metal file. And astronauts who landed on the moon have usually described the smell of the dust tracked back into their spacecraft as that of "wet ashes in a fireplace" or "spent gunpowder." Fascinating!

"TASTE AND SEE..."

It's well known among chefs that much of food's flavor comes from its aroma. The next time you get a head cold, briefly close your eyes as you eat (unless you're driving a car). You don't taste much, do you? One research study showed that people suffering from a stuffy nose cannot identify the following normally-powerful scents—cherry, apricot, coffee, pineapple, chocolate, and garlic.

Our sense of smell is a lavish gift from God and it daily leads us to the richness of our Maker's character. In the treasury of the 34th Psalm, David urges us to "taste and see that

the LORD is good!" God's design of our sense of smell communicates to the world His sweetness, care, protection, warnings, provision, comfort, and kindness. Sadly, we do not often stop to "smell" and "savor" the sweet aroma of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15). I suspect this is primarily because our lives are clogged with worldly pursuits. We frequently live as though we have "spiritual colds."

THE SMELL OF LIFE...AND DEATH

Most of Earth's fragrances are directly connected to the life and death struggle of God's creation. As we have seen, various aromas might be understood as nature's shouts of praise (the sweet smells) or cries for relief (the foul smells). Plants and animals struggle amid the corruptions that our sins have unleashed upon them, by no fault of their own (Romans 8:20-21). Might our Great Teacher be using the odors of disgust, which emanate from sewers and dead things, as pungent reminders that our transgressions are foul offenses before Him, literally "stinking to high heaven"? If so, then we should "breathe deeply" and let this message sink in! Christ's kindness also reminds us that He uses these same odors to lovingly care for the animals that struggle for existence in this fallen world . . . remember the javelina.

For most of history, stench has permeated society. Even churches once stank from the people buried in nearby cemeteries. I daresay that most of us would find this a bit distracting in our church services today. But civilized culture aside, miasma⁸ remains a normal part of daily life in many regions of the world, and could be said to be a more honest advertisement of how sin has affected our planet. In highly-developed countries, cleanliness and perfume mask these malodorous effects of the Fall.

⁸ "Miasma" is the awful smell of something decaying.



I have no way to prove it to you, but I suspect that when our Lord Jesus first created everything there probably were no offensive odors. What happened? Sin happened. After wickedness entered our world, things started to die (Genesis 3) . . . and rot.⁹ Something new was added to Earth's climate—spoiled chicken and rotten potatoes, and the awful smells that accompany them. The plant we call stinking goosefoot may have had a rather pleasing aroma in the Garden of Eden, but it now festers with the signature of decomposing fish!

Most of the odors we come across daily either attract or repel us. The Apostle Paul saw a great spiritual lesson here, applying this principle to the Gospel itself. He likened the righteousness of Christ—the righteousness imputed to His people—to an aroma that either attracts or repels the world of man (2 Corinthians 2:14-15). The Cross has a dual effect—it reminds us that our sins, like spoiled meat, are foul before the Lord. The Cross is also a “powerful perfume”—those being saved are drawn to its fragrance of Eternal Life.

Maybe Jesus chose the washing of feet (John 13:1-17) as an emblem of Christian love because feet smell bad . . . and so does our sin. God offers forgiveness for our sins through the washing of our filthy lives with the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:14).

Many false gospels say to the poor sinner, “Oh, your feet don't stink”—in other words, “Your sins aren't so bad!” That's a lie (Isaiah 5:20)!

⁹ Gehenna (the place near Jerusalem that represented hell—Isaiah 66:24) was a place of decay and stench.

God finds even our best efforts offensive (Isaiah 64:6). Why? Because apart from Christ, we can do nothing good (John 15:5). There is truly nothing in your life to commend you to God (Romans 3:10-18). There is good news though. Christ's Father desires to transform you from that of a stinky corpse (Ephesians 2:1, 5) into one of His beautiful living children who possess the sweet aroma of His Son, Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15), for all eternity.

“Oh, Father in Heaven, I confess that I have lived my life in rebellion against You, and that this is foul sin before You. Please wash me clean by the blood of Your Son, Jesus, and forgive me because of His death on the cross—not because of anything I have done. Jesus, please come into my heart right now. I embrace You as my all-powerful God, my sweet Savior, and my Eternal Life. Show me how to live the way You want me to live, so that I might express a wonderful aroma of worship before You for all eternity! In Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.”

. . . live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2).



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