

The Sweet Fragrance of Prayer

by J.R. Miller

True prayer is fragrance to God, and it must be offered in dependence on Jesus Christ, our High Priest in heaven.

Scripture: Psalm 56:8, Exodus 30:34, Revelation 5:8

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Intercession of Christ"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes that true prayer is a sweet fragrance to God, likening it to the golden incense offered in the Old Testament, which symbolizes the heartfelt supplications of believers. He illustrates that our prayers are preserved in heaven, akin to golden bowls filled with incense, demonstrating God's attentive care for our desires and sorrows. Miller reassures that no prayer is lost, and while answers may be delayed, they are treasured by God and will be answered in due time. He also highlights the necessity of approaching God through the atonement of Christ, as our prayers are made acceptable only through His sacrifice. Ultimately, Miller conveys that sincere prayers, even when imperfect, are transformed into beautiful fragrances by Christ's intercession.

Transcript

True prayer is fragrant to God. This was taught in the Old Testament, in one of those emblem-lessons which, when read in the light of the gospel, mean so much. The golden incense-altar, was the altar of prayer; just as the altar of burnt-offering, was the altar of atonement and consecration. So every believing, loving heart, is now a golden altar from which rise up to God sweet fragrances, bathing his very throne in fragrance. In John's Apocalyptic visions, we find again the emblem of incense as a feature of the heavenly state. The redeemed are represented as "holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." Revelation 5:8. The meaning is not that the saints in glory offer up prayers to God. Rather, the thought seems to be that earth's supplications rise up into heaven as sweet incense--that while humble believers in this world are engaged in offering up prayers and supplications, holy fragrances are wafted up before God. The picture seems designed to show us the heaven-side of earth's true worship--how our hearts' breathings of desire appear within the veil.

For one thing, it shows that the prayers of believers are not lost. Some people tell us there is no ear to hear, when we speak our words of request and desire--that our petitions merely float off into the air, and that is the end of them. But here we get a glimpse inside heaven, and find our prayers caught and preserved in golden bowls. The thought is very beautiful.

In one of the psalms there is a similar hint regarding the tears of God's people. "You put my tears into your bottle," cries David. In ancient times tear-bottles were sometimes used. When a man was in some sore distress, his friends would visit him, and, as he wept, would gather his tears and put them in a bottle, preserving them as sacred memorials of the event. Something like this appears to have been in David's thought when, in sore distress, he made the prayer, "You put my tears into your bottle." The words suggest the precious truth--that God does indeed take notice of all our sorrows, and that he treasures up the remembrance of our griefs. Our very tears he gathers, and as it were--puts them in bottles, that they may not be lost or forgotten. This is one of those incidental allusions, which show us how deeply God loves us and how tender is his care.

The picture of the golden bowls in heaven containing earth's prayers, shows us like precious regard in the divine heart, for the desires and supplications which believing ones put up to God. As they rise in holy breathings or in earnest cries, he receives them--every sigh, every yearning, every pleading, every intercession of love, every heart-hunger--and puts them all into golden bowls, that none of them may be lost! Often our prayers may seem to remain long unanswered, for some blessings are so rich that they cannot be prepared for us in a day--but we may be sure that they are not lost nor forgotten. They are sacredly treasured and are always before God, and in due time they will receive gracious and wise answer.

The picture of the incense in the golden bowls in heaven shows, also, that the prayers of believers are very precious in God's sight. Burning incense made a most grateful and delicious perfume. Frequently in the Scriptures, acceptable prayer is described as producing before God a sweet fragrance. "The Lord smelled a sweet savor" is the Bible way of saying that God was pleased with the worship rendered to him.

There is an exquisite beauty in the thought that true prayer is fragrance to God as it rises from the golden altars of believing, loving hearts. The pleadings and supplications of his people on the earth--are wafted up to him from lowly homes, from humble sanctuaries, from stately cathedrals, from sick-rooms and from the darkened chambers of sorrow--as the breath of flowers is wafted to us from rich gardens and fragrant fields.

"There was a fitness, in the nature of things," says MacMillan, "in incense being regarded as embodied prayer. Perfume is the breath of flowers, the sweetest expression of their inmost being, an exhalation of their very life. It is a sign of perfect purity, health and vigor; it is a symptom of full and joyous existence--for disease and decay and death yield, not pleasant--but revolting odors--and, as such, fragrance is in nature, what prayer is in the human world. Prayer is the breath of life, the expression of the soul's best, holiest and heavenliest aspirations, the sign and token of its spiritual health. The natural counterparts of the prayers that rise from the closet and the sanctuary, are to be found in the fragrant breathings, sweetening all the air, from gardens of flowers, from clover-crofts or thymy hillsides or shady pine woods, and which seem to be grateful, unconscious acknowledgments from the heart of Nature--for the timely blessings of the great world-covenant, dew to refresh and sunshine to quicken."

This thought is very beautiful--that the fragrance which rises from garden, field and forest--is earth's prayer to God. But still more beautiful is the thought that true prayer is itself fragrance to God, that he delights in it--as we delight in the perfume of sweet flowers.

There is also rich instruction for us concerning prayer, in the way the incense was prepared and offered. For one thing, the ingredients for the incense were divinely prescribed: "Then the LORD said to

Moses--Take fragrant spices--gum resin, onycha and galbanum--and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred." Exodus 30:34-35. The priest might not prepare any sort of mixture he pleased--but must use precisely what God had commanded. Any humanly-devised compound, was an abomination.

In like manner, are there divine instructions concerning the elements that must mingle in acceptable prayer. It must be the prayer of faith. There must be penitence and contrition in it. It must contain thanksgiving and submission. It must be the kind of prayer that God has commanded, or it will not rise to heaven as sweet incense.

The incense did not give forth its perfume--until it was burning, and the only fire allowed to be used in kindling it was holy fire from the altar of burnt-offering. This intimates that mere cold words do not make prayer. There can be no incense-prayer without fire--the fire of love; and the fire must be kindled in the heart by coals from the altar of Calvary, by the love of God shed abroad by the Holy Spirit!

There is another rich suggestion concerning the incense, as used in the ancient service. At the same time that the incense was burning on the golden altar within--the sacrifice of atonement was burning on the altar of burnt-offering in the court without. The fire was carried from the sacrificial altar--to kindle the incense. No other fire was permitted. The incense-odor would have been an abomination to God--had not the smoke of the burnt-offering mingled and ascended with it.

The teaching is, that there will be no sweet savor in our prayers, no acceptableness before God, unless they are cleansed by the merits of Christ's atonement. We can approach God only in the precious name of Jesus Christ, and in dependence on his sacrifice for us.

There is another Apocalyptic picture, which has also an interesting suggestion: "Another angel came and stood over the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints, upon the golden altar." The teaching is that the prayers of believers, even of the holiest saints, are not in themselves acceptable to God. At the best they are imperfect and defiled, because they come from imperfect and defiled hearts. The "much incense" that was added to the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar--was nothing less than the fragrances of the precious sacrifice and ever-availing intercession of Christ, "who has given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God, for a sweet-smelling savor."

If we would pray acceptably, it must be, therefore, in dependence on Jesus Christ, our High Priest in heaven, who shall take the petitions from our stained and unholy lips, cleanse them of their sin and fault and defilement, and then add to them the pure incense of his own holy offering and intercession, and present them to the Father. That is what praying in the name of Christ means. Praying thus, our prayers are sweet fragrances to God. The thoughts and words that leave our hearts and lips spotted and unholy, without any beauty or sweetness, when they come up before God, have become precious perfumes.

Earth's sighs of faith and love and heart-hunger, though without beauty or sweetness or worthiness in themselves, float upward and are caught by the listening Intercessor, and in his holy, radiant hands, bearing yet the nail-marks, are transformed into lovely and fragrant flowers, and pour their perfume throughout all heaven's glorious mansions!

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