



THE CHRISTMAS TREE—THE
BLESSING AND BANE OF
THE SEASON. WITH EVERY
PASSING YEAR THE PROCESS OF
SELECTING AND PURCHASING
A TREE BECOMES MORE
BURDENSOME AND, LIKE THE
ITEM ITSELF, MORE ARTIFICIAL.

MEMORIES OF CHRISTMASES are perhaps the most vivid of all childhood recollections, for they are, for many, those most filled with wonder and joy. Candlelight services on Christmas Eve, followed by soup and sweet fruit and nut breads at home—and maybe the opening of just one, small present as appetizer before the morning’s feast. Building a snowman on the front lawn, or carving out a cave-like fort in the deep snow drifted in next to the driveway. Huddled beneath multiple blankets in our cold bedroom, straining to hear Mom and Dad playing “Santa” through the closed door. And at the center of it all, the decorated tree.

It was our practice, back in those halcyon days of yore, to select our tree about a week, perhaps two, before Christmas. On one side of the courthouse square, in the middle of downtown, a vendor would string bare light bulbs between rickety poles and fill the temporary enclosure with fresh-cut spruce and fir trees. Even as we trudged through the compacted snow in our buckle boots, from the parking lot on the south side of the courthouse, we caught the aroma of the sylvan congregation. And the fragrance only intensified as we drew nearer, passing from the early twilight into the blazing illumination surrounding the trees. It was the fragrance of Christmas.

After much deliberation over style, size, quality, and price (for we had to be careful with every dollar), we would make our selection, tie it to the roof of the car, and conduct it home. Once the tree was in its stand, and positioned in its place of honor before the living room window, its rich aroma would permeate every room of the house. And even after the special day itself, the now-drying tree would exude its earthy perfume. For a small boy, it was the perfume of Christmas.

Absent Aroma

Alas, today's small boy may not even know that a Christmas tree is *supposed* to have a fragrance. The tightly wrapped bundles, stacked, spindled, and compressed, leaned against the grocery store's exterior wall since before Thanksgiving have no direct lineage back to the Christmas trees of my youth. They are already brittle, desiccated husks upon arrival from whatever farm was the site of their birth. Separated from their roots far in advance of their ultimate purchase, they are devoid of any natural aroma, and artificially colored with something vaguely bluish-green in a sad effort to extend their usefulness.

Even trees we cut ourselves—fresh, drawing life from the soil just moments before—have had mysteriously removed that rich, evergreen scent that once permeated the modest domicile of my childhood. Where has it gone? What diabolical Scrooge stole the natural fragrance of Christmas?

Living to the Full

As much as we may lament the passing of something as natural as the fragrance of a Christmas tree, we should lament all the more the passing of our own—fragrance, that is.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16a NIV

Where has it gone? What has happened to the sweet and penetrating aroma that accompanied the youthful days of our faith? Has it evaporated, leaving behind only a brittle, desiccated husk? Have we been too long separated from our roots?

A believer's life is to be a "sweet savor," first to his God, then to those sharing this plane—both those who are perishing, and those who are being saved.

But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

Philippians 4:18

The Christian life is to be *lived*. As the vivacious and formidable Auntie Mame said so well,

Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death.

Jesus was no shrinking violet, and the Christian life is meant to be lived to the fullest extent. Packed to the gills with the quickening Holy Spirit, it is meant to be productive, to count for something, to exude the spirit and vitality of Christ.

Those in close proximity are to know that we have a Lord, that we worship Him, that we serve Him gladly and wholeheartedly. We are to bear the penetrating aroma of unapologetic truth, the fragrance of kindness, the sweet, yet sincere perfume of grace. They are to know that we live by the truth of God's word—and that we do it with joy. They are to know that we walk by the Spirit—that our grace is not of ourselves, but of He who dwells within. They are to know that while we are far from perfect, we are forgiven—and they are to know *how*.

Living for Him

For the believer, the occasion of Christmas is not just a time for sweet-smelling trees, for tinsel and caroling, eggnog and presents. Nor is it just a time to remind ourselves of the historical Jesus, His humble birth and ultimate sacrifice.

Christmas is a time for the believer to be reenergized for a Spirit-filled life. As we gaze upon the child lying in the manger, the joy in that moment is to be translated into every corner of our life. And as we worship and serve Him—gladly, unabashedly—we send up a pleasing fragrance to God.

And *this* is our praise: the sweet savor of a life lived for Him.

Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all;
He is my strength, from day to day,
Without Him I would fall.
When I am sad, to Him I go,
No other one can cheer me so;
When I am sad He makes me glad,
He's my Friend.

Jesus is all the world to me,
My friend in trials sore;
I go to Him for blessings, and
He gives them o'er and o'er.
He sends the sunshine and the rain,
He sends the harvest's golden grain;
Sunshine and rain, harvest of grain,
He's my Friend.

Jesus is all the world to me,
And true to Him I'll be;
Oh, how could I this Friend deny,
When He's so true to me?
Following Him I know I'm right,
He watches o'er me day and night;
Following Him, by day and night,
He's my Friend.

Jesus is all the world to me,
I want no better friend;
I trust Him now, I'll trust Him when
Life's fleeting days shall end.
Beautiful life with such a friend;
Beautiful life that has no end;
Eternal life, eternal joy,
He's my Friend.

Will L. Thompson