

The Altar of Incense

Exodus 30:1-10, 34-38

The instructions for building the tabernacle describe a very sensory place: bright and heavy gold, burning lamps, beautiful cloth, radiant stones, ringing bells, cooking meat, and fresh bread and wine. The altar of incense adds a sweet smell, and represents the prayers of Israel which ascend to delight the Lord.

NOTES:

Overview of the Text

The altar of incense is made of acacia (*shittim*) wood, eighteen inches wide and long, and thirty six inches high with horns at the four corners (vv1-2). The entire thing is covered in pure gold with molding around the sides and rings for carrying poles (vv3-5). It is set centrally in the holy place, in front of the veil before the ark where God will meet with Israel (v6). When Aaron tends the lamps every morning and evening, he burns incense on it, “a perpetual incense before Yahweh throughout your generations” (v8). The idea is that Israel is praying all the time and will continue to seek the Lord for generations to come (cf. Ex. 20:4-6). No strange fire may be offered on it, nor ascension, grain or drink offerings (v9). Aaron will make atonement every year for it on Yom Kippur by applying blood to the horns. This altar is most holy to the Lord (v10). Sweet spices of stacte, onycha, and galbanum compose half the mixture and the other half is pure frankincense for a specific mixture preserved by salt, pure and holy (vv34-35). God’s covenant was “of salt”, meaning that it endured whole, faithful, and savory (2 Chron. 13:5; Num. 18:19). The incense may only be burned at the tabernacle, a most holy offering, and none of it could be manufactured for home use (vv36-37). To do so would be to worship another god and be put out of Israel (v38).

Incense as Prayer

The Bible gives a clear picture of the meaning of incense. David prays, “Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). In Revelation, the twenty-four elders worshiping the Lamb have “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8), and an angel offers “the smoke of incense, with the prayers of the saints, [which] ascended before God from the angel’s hand” (8:4). Zechariah is on his priestly duty to burn incense at the temple, as “the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense”, when the angel of the Lord appears to him “standing on the right side of the altar of incense”, telling him his prayer is heard and his wife Elizabeth will bear a son who will be named John (Lk. 1:10-11, 13). The sin offering on the bronze altar signifies atonement. The ascension offering portrays the transformation of the worshiper. The peace offering is rich fellowship between God and His beloved people. But here on a separate altar right in front of the Lord is the prayers of the saints coming by smoke into His presence, right to the throne of grace where He meets with them (v6). This altar teaches to pray.

Constant Prayer

Much like the morning and evening sacrifices are ever-present, so the incense renewed every morning and evening means that sweet prayer ought to be constantly before the face of God. Israel is forming as a nation and headed to Canaan soon, so by “sweet” we

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don't mean simply "nice". Sweet prayer can be found in the Psalms and on the lips of God's people like David, Hannah, Mary, and Simeon. True prayers lift our deepest desires, fears, hopes, and of course our sins, to God the Father Almighty. Much like the meat of the sacrifices, God doesn't need our prayers. He knows our needs and desires, sins and follies, our end from our beginning and yet He tells us to pray. We are to ask, seek, and knock persistently (Matt. 7:7-12; Lk. 18:1-8). Sometimes it's hard to reconcile these two truths: God is exhaustively sovereign, in total control and omniscient of my needs, and yet He requires me to seek Him constantly as if everything depends upon it. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan sends Polly, Digory and Fledge the horse on a quest across Narnia. One evening comes when they have nothing to eat: "Polly and Digory stared at each other in dismay. 'Well, I do think someone might have arranged about our meals,' said Digory. 'I'm sure Aslan would have, if you'd asked him,' said Fledge. 'Wouldn't he know without being asked?' said Polly. 'I've no doubt he would,' said the Horse, (still with his mouth full). 'But I've a sort of idea he likes to be asked.'" It's not that God needs to know what we need, but it is the case that we need to rely on Him rather than taking Him for granted, and this faithfulness comes through prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray the Lord's Prayer every day: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. In this manner, therefore, pray" (Matt. 6:8-9). We know it's daily because of daily bread, which also seems to make it a morning prayer that leads to others: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). This constant prayer is easy and smells good.

Perfected Prayer

It's striking that the altar of incense has to be cleansed with blood every year (v10; cf. Lev. 16:18-19). The ministry of prayer, apart of Christ, is damnable. This is the good news to those who don't trust in themselves: you don't save yourself by praying! Like any religious action done without true humility (the only kind that God gives), prayer can make you terrible. The Pharisees are the prayer warriors of the New Testament, and on the face of it their prayers sound great: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector" (Lk. 18:11). "It's all of grace!", they would say, full of self-righteousness, unable to see the answer to every prayer right before their eyes. You've seen the ungodly desires of others: people jockeying for position at work, trying to impress the boss in all the wrong ways; kids manipulating parents to get what they want; politicians. Can you imagine what many of our prayers sound like to our holy God? The altar of incense was picture looking forward to an atonement that would not bring Israel into an earthly tabernacle by smoke, but to God Himself in heaven. Jesus ascended to right hand of the Father where He ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). We come to the Father through the Son, and all of our prayers have His name on them: "In Jesus' name, Amen." To try to come to God through anyone else or in our own strength is to bring strange fire like Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2; 2 Chron. 26:16-21). Pray to God morning and evening, offer Him the sacrifice of praise, come to Him boldly knowing He remembers your sins no more and delights to receive you at the throne of grace.

Exodus Sermon Series

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