

**THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE—
THE PLACE OF PRAYER
EXODUS 30:1-10**

INTRODUCTION:

We have spent five weeks in the tabernacle. We have visited the two strategic places in the outer court and two of the three strategic places in the holy place. Tonight, we come to the golden altar of incense, the sixth of these strategic places.

When you approach the golden altar of incense you are aware of the colorful veil that hangs just behind it. On the western wall of the Holy Place is this beautiful, beautiful veil that hangs as a separation between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Just outside of the Holy of Holies is this impressive piece of the sacred furniture — the golden altar of incense. It is made of gold and acacia wood. It stands about three feet high and is eighteen inches square. Around the top of it there is a crown of gold with a golden horn on each of the four corners. When you look closely at the four horns, you will see evidence that blood has been sprinkled on the four horns. On top of this little altar, there will be a little grate with burning incense. It is placed there in the early morning hour by the attending priest and then is placed there in the evening by the attending priest. From the altar there will go forth a satisfying fragrance. You will see the smoke from the burning incense as it ascends from the altar.

It is easier to determine the significance of this altar than any of the other pieces of furniture. There is more said in Scripture about the significance of this altar than either of

the others. We read in Revelation of the heavenly version of this altar and it gives us insight into the significance of the altar. In Revelation John describes it like this: "another angel, who had a golden censor, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censor, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake" (Revelation 8:3-5). So, it is clearly indicated that there is a direct connection between the golden altar of incense and the prayers of the saints. Indeed, this connection continues into the world to come where the prayers of the saints there are offered on a golden altar of incense.

So, when we come to this beautiful little altar we are to see significant lessons about prayer. It would be appropriate to see it as symbolizing the prayer ministry of the Lord Jesus. Many beautiful lessons are included in this altar with reference to the prayer ministry of our Lord. Many beautiful lessons are included in this altar with reference to the prayer ministry of our Lord. Tonight, however, I want to focus upon your ministry of prayer. I want us to learn everything we can about maintaining a personal prayer ministry from this golden altar of incense.

I. THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE DEMONSTRATES THE NATURE OF PRAYER.

What is prayer? God wants you to understand the nature of prayer. This descriptive word that we have concerning the golden altar of incense and the incense that is burnt upon that altar demonstrates for us some very important truths about the nature of prayer.

1. Prayer is spiritual.

In the ritual of the tabernacle, the priest came twice a day and sprinkled on the fire that was on that golden altar a collection of incense. As the incense burned there on the altar, a little trail of smoke would be seen ascending from the altar. The little trail of smoke would reach up as it were toward heaven. This is an indication that prayer is an activity that originates in the spirit of man. The spirit of man is ascending toward the eternal God who is spirit. In a real way, genuine prayer is communication between the eternal Spirit—God—and the finite spirit of man. As a person, God endowed you with spirit. This spirit set you apart from the rest of creation. You have a capacity to offer incense, to commune with God, to reach out to God, which belongs to no other part of the creation. So, we need to learn the lesson that prayer is a spiritual activity.

It is possible for one to be engaged in an activity of prayer and it is nothing except physical and emotional activity. If the activity is simply the movement of your lips and the utterance of your tongue and it does not originate in the depth of your spirit, then it is not acceptable prayer. If it originates only in your emotions and does not originate in the depth of your spirit, then it is not authentic prayer. Authentic prayer is always the spirit of man reaching out toward God who is spirit. This means that the physical posture one uses in prayer is optional. The thing that matters in the prayer is your inner spirit.

2. Prayer is in the Spirit.

Praying "in the Spirit" is a New Testament concept. This New Testament concept is illustrated in the activity at the golden altar of incense.

The attending priest would bring a coal of fire from the brazen altar in the courtyard. He would place this burning coal of fire on the golden altar of incense. Then he would sprinkle the incense upon that burning coal of fire. As the incense is consumed on that burning coal of fire, and sends its smoke upward, it is symbolizing this important lesson about prayer. There is no burning incense without the fire. In prayer, the fire is the Holy Spirit.

The role of the Holy Spirit in prayer is significant. We pray in the Spirit when it is the Spirit who originates and enables the prayer. This moves it out of the realm of the natural. It moves it into the realm of the supernatural. Oh, how we need to welcome the work of the Holy Spirit as fire in our hearts. It is His ministry in our hearts as fire to create within us the desire to pray. It is also His ministry within us to create within us the strength and the guidance that we need in prayer and all acceptable prayer is prayer in the Spirit. If you are guilty of quenching the Spirit or grieving this Spirit then you will be hindered. You may sprinkle incense on the altar, but there will be no fire there to ignite the incense and to make it acceptable before God.

3. Prayer is a delight to God.

This is one of the lessons about prayer that is confirmed through the use of incense throughout the scriptures. David recognized this truth and stated it clearly in the Psalms. "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141:2). David recognized that like incense a prayer is set before the Lord. This is a reminder to us that the incense was not burned in the Holy Place for the pleasure of the priests. Rather, it ascended up as a reminder that prayer is moving Godward. And the sweet smell of that fragrant incense was for the pleasure of the God who is being addressed in prayer.

We must not misunderstand — God does find delight in the prayers of his people. In the Hebrew letter when he writes about our prayers of praise and thanksgiving that we offer to God continually, he reminds us that with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Anytime there is coming from your inner spirit by the enablement of the Holy Spirit words that are being lifted toward God, the God of the heavens, the eternal Father finds special pleasure in that moment. Some times the prayer may not even contain or be expressed in words. The prayer may come forth from the inner spirit as simply an agonizing sob before God or it may come forth from the inner spirit as a joyful shout before the Lord. In either case it is a sweet-smelling incense that brings pleasure to the heart of God.

So we learn about the essentials, the nature of prayer by observing the activity of the golden altar of incense.

II. THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE EMPHASIZES THE PREPARATION FOR PRAYER.

As you observe the location of each piece of furniture in the tabernacle, you will learn some important lessons about prayer. These need to be a part of the foundation upon which you build your prayer life.

1. There must be redemption, then prayer.

When you entered the tabernacle, you stopped first at the brazen altar. We have already learned that the brazen altar is the place of sacrifice. No priest would ever come to the golden altar until he had stopped at the brazen altar. There the sin offering and the burnt offering were offered to God. His approach to the golden altar was always in the confidence that his redemption, his atonement had been established at the brazen altar.

So it must be with us. No one is prepared to approach God in prayer until their sins have been atoned and their redemption has been established at Calvary. The cross is our brazen altar. The writer of Hebrews tells us that it is through the blood of Jesus Christ that this new and living way has been opened up into the presence of God. We come to prayer as redeemed men and women.

2. There must be cleansing, then prayer.

After passing the brazen altar, the priest came to the brazen laver, the basin. There at the basin which was full of water, any defilement was washed away. He did not go into the holy place to stand at the golden altar until he had washed his hands and his feet at the

laver. This gives emphasis that always when we come to God we must come not only as persons who have been redeemed, but also as persons who have known immediate and up to date cleansing from any defilement that we may have picked up along the way. We must be prepared to lift up to God clean hands. This is a part of the preparation for prayer. David recognized the truth of this. He wrote: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me when I pray." If we come to the golden altar and our hearts are dirty, no prayer will be heard by God. It is our lack of preparation in cleansing from sin that keeps us from being heard when we come to the altar to burn the incense of prayer.

3. There must be meditation, then prayer.

In the careful instructions that Moses received for the golden altar, you will find instructions concerning the mixing of the incense to be burned. In the last section of this 30th chapter of Exodus, the ingredients to go into the incense are spelled out. Four different fragrant elements were to be mixed to make up the incense that would be burned on the golden altar of incense.

There are a number of lessons that we could learn from the mixing of this incense that is to be burned. The lesson that I carry away from it is a reminder to us that we do not rush into the presence of the Lord hastily or without forethought. I find my most effective times of prayer are times after I have spent considerable time reading and meditating upon the Word of God. It is out of my reading and my meditation on the Word of God that I find my heart prepared to stand in the presence of the Lord. It is out of that time of meditation and study that I become aware of the things that I need to present before the

Father. It is out of that time of meditation and prayer that my heart is made aware of matters of thanksgiving and praise that need to be offered to God. So the golden altar incense is a reminder to us of the need for careful preparation through meditation. You collect the different elements that are to make up your thanksgiving, worship, and prayer that you are to present to the Lord through that time of spiritual meditation. No wonder our prayers are so ineffective! We spent far too little time pulling together through meditation that which we are to present to the Father.

III. THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE ENCOURAGES THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER.

In this, we touch on something that is very instructive and practical. The thing that was outlined for the people with reference to the use of the golden altar of incense encouraged the practice of prayer.

1. It encourages having specific times for prayer.

In the instruction given to Moses, we specifically learn that incense was to be burned at special times. "Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at the twilight so incense will burn regularly before the Lord for generations to come." So it was a regular practice, done twice a day.

There must be those specifics set aside times when we turn our face toward the Lord for meaningful prayer. It is interesting how many references there are in Scripture to having specific times. We learned from Daniel, governmental official in Persia and in Babylon

discovered that Daniel set aside three times a day. He opened his windows toward Jerusalem in the early morning, at noon, and in the evening. So regularly Daniel as a matter of practice offered his prayers to God, burned his incense before the Lord. Some of us have been negligent about this. We pray from time to time but we have no regular time for prayer. The ritual of the golden altar of incense would encourage each believer—priest to have a time in which they approach the Lord consistently and regularly.

2. It encourages the continual practice of prayer.

Dr. Alexander Maclaren in his notes on this particular passage calls attention to this. It is true that the priest laid the burning coal on the altar in the morning and then sprinkled the incense on it. But not all of the coal and incense were burned up in that moment. Even after the priest left the holy place, the coal on the altar would continue to smolder.

Whenever you went in to that holy place through out the day, there would still be fragrance of the incense filling the place. So, it is to be in our prayer lives. Even though we are to have our special, specific times when we meet with God, there will be the overflow from those times of prayer that allow prayer to become a continual experience in our lives. If you keep those regular vigils with God, you will find your heart turned toward God in all kinds of circumstances throughout the day. It will just be instinctive. You will find yourself thinking thought-prayers toward God, offering expressions of thanksgiving without any forethought. It just seems to be the natural thing because it has been cultivated as you laid the coal on the altar with the incense early in the morning or late in the evening.

When you lay it there late in the evening before retiring for the night, when you wake up in the middle of the night, you will find your heart instinctively turned toward the Lord with a word of praise and thanksgiving, with a word of petition.

3. It encourages the careful practice of prayer.

There are words of caution set forth in this passage more than once. In the instructions to Aaron and his sons you find this word of caution, do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it" (Exodus 30:9). And then another word of caution concerning the incense, "Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; considerate it holy to the Lord. Who ever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from His people" (Exodus 30:37-38). This word of caution needs to be a reminder to us that when we are engaged in prayer we are engaged in serious business. It is not a time for selfish indulgences or for sinful pleasure. You are approaching the eternal holy God who is consuming fire while He is our heavenly Father and so anxious to hear our prayers, He is also the eternally holy God.

I trust that you see the lessons clearly. Every believer - priest is to minister at the golden altar of incense daily. There is no way your life can be pleasing to God or powerful in its influence if you are not regularly and acceptably standing before God in prayer. Prayer is an essential in the life of the believer. Let this be an encouragement to you to give attention to your prayer life.

