

Prayer And The Incense Altar

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Please turn to Exodus 24. This chapter talks about the covenant between God and Israel, and its confirmation.

Exodus 24:1-2 (NIV) Then the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses is alone to approach the Lord. The others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him."

I want you to think about this: God calls four men by name to come before Him: Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu.

Exodus 24:3 (NIV) When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do."

That is what they said. And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, like all of them, also agreed to this: "We will do what You have said."

Exodus 24:4-8 (NIV) Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded [for the second time], "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses took the remaining blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Just as a side note, this blood was the first, or the forerunner of Christ's blood that now covers our sins. That is what that blood was all about.

Exodus 24:9-18 (NIV) Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank [in His presence]. The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them [for guidance]." When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on top of the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

What was it that happened the Israelites saw and were involved in? As we go through this, I want us all to think about everything that you and I have been involved in and we have seen in all the years we have been in the church.

Turn to Leviticus 10. This talks about the death of Nadab and Abihu.

Leviticus 10:1-20 (NIV) Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to His commands. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said, 'Among those who approach me I will be proved holy [This is what you and I are to be working

toward—becoming holy]; in the sight of all the people 'I will be honored.'" And, Aaron remained silent.

Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, and said to them, "Come here and carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary." So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp as Moses ordered. Then Moses said to Aaron and his two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, "Do not let your hair become unkempt and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the Lord will be angry with the whole community. But your relatives, all the Israelites, may mourn for those the Lord has destroyed by fire. Do not leave the entrance to the tent of meeting or you will die, because the Eternal's anointing oil is on you." So, they did as Moses said.

Then the Lord said to Aaron, "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink when you are to go into the tent of meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for generations to come, so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common [How are we doing with all that? Do we also distinguish between the holy and the common?], between the clean and unclean, so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses."

Moses said to Aaron and his remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, "Take the grain offering left over from the food offering prepared without yeast and presented to the Lord and eat it beside the altar, for it is most holy. Eat it in the sanctuary area, because it is your share and your son's share of the food offerings presented to the Lord; for so I have been commanded. But you and your sons and your daughters may eat of the breast that was waved and the thigh that was presented. Eat them in a ceremonially clean place; they have been given to you and your children as your share of the Israelites fellowship offerings. The thigh that was presented and the breast that was waved must be brought with the fat portion of the

food offerings, to be waved before the Lord as a wave offering. This will be the perpetual share for you and your children as the Lord has commanded."

When Moses had inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found it had been burned up, he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and asked, "Why didn't you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary? It is most holy; it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the Lord. Since its blood was not taken into the Holy Place, you should have eaten the goat in the sanctuary area, as I commanded." Aaron replied to Moses, "Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burned offering before the Lord, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the Lord have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?" When Moses heard this, he was satisfied.

I have gone through all this to lead up to the significance of the altar of incense. All of this ties together.

What was the significance of the altar of incense? The altar of incense is first mentioned in Exodus 30, and is one of the items inside the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. The top of the altar was square, one cubit per side. The whole altar was two cubits high. A cubit was about 20 inches or just under two feet. The altar of incense was made of acacia wood, and overlaid with gold. It had four horns, one at each corner, similar to the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard. Rings of gold were built into the altar so that it could be carried with the acacia wood poles that were slipped through the rings. The altar of incense was placed before the veil, which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. On the other side of the veil was the ark of the testimony where the presence of God was. Turn to Exodus 25.

Exodus 25:22 "And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

Aaron was instructed to burn incense on this altar each morning, and at twilight every day of the regular offering to the Eternal. (Exodus 30:7-8) God gave the recipe/formula for making the incense. It stipulated that no other incense was ever to be burned on the altar, except that particular incense. The fire used to burn the incense was always taken from the altar of burnt offerings outside the sanctuary.

Leviticus 16:12-13 Then he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, with his hands full of sweet incense beaten fine, and bring it within the veil. And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the Testimony, lest he die.

Nadab and Abihu did not do that. It cost them their lives. Aaron was instructed to burn incense on the altar each morning and at twilight every day as a regular offering to the Eternal. And God gave that formula to them. Never was the altar of incense to be used for a burnt offering, a grain offering, or a drink offering. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to put blood on the horns of the altar of incense to cleanse it. The altar of incense was called most holy to the Eternal. Of course, God's primary desire for the people is that *they* be holy. That is what He wants from us.

Simply going through the rituals required by the law, including the burning of the incense, was not enough to make Israel right with God. The Eternal wanted their hearts and lives to be right, not just the formalities.

During Isaiah's time, the people were disobedient to God. Yet, they still maintained the Temple life, and that is why God said through His prophets, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me."

Isaiah 1:13-14 Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them.

More important than burning the proper incense at the proper time, with the proper fire, with the proper implements, was *having a proper heart before God*. Nadab and Abihu failed to do this.

What about you and me? Are our lives supposed to be holy? Yes, they are. But how well are we doing in this? That is the question. Are we growing constantly and becoming more like Christ?

In Scripture incense is often associated with prayer. David prayed, "May my prayer be set before you like incense." You find that in Psalm 141:2.

In his vision of heaven John saw that those elders around the throne were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. (Revelation 5:8 and Revelation 8:3).

As Zacharias the priest was offering incense in the Temple in Luke 1:10, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. The altar of incense can then be seen as a symbol of God's people. Our prayers ascend to God as the smoke of the incense ascends in the sanctuary. As the incense was burned, with the fire from the altar of burnt offerings, our prayers must be kindled with God's grace. The fact that the incense was always burning means that we should always be praying. And that is mentioned in Luke 18:1.

The altar of incense was holy to the Eternal and was atoned for with the blood of the sacrifice. It is the blood of Christ applied to us that makes us and our prayers acceptable. Our prayers are holy only because of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are pleasing to God.

The altar of incense can also be seen as a picture of the intercession of Christ, just as the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard was a type of Christ's death on our behalf. The altar of incense in the Holy Place was a type of Christ's mediation on our behalf. Christ's work on earth and in heaven is what it pictures. The altar of incense was situated before the mercy seat of God on the ark; a picture of our Advocate's standing in the presence of the Father. The incense was to be burning continually on the altar of incense which shows the perpetual nature of Christ's mediation on our behalf.

Christ's intercession on our behalf is a sweet-smelling savor to God. It is a wonderful thing, is it not, to know that God considers the prayers of His people to be like a sweet-smelling savor because of Christ. We can now enter God's holy presence by faith with full assurance. We offer our prayers upon the altar, trusting in Christ, our Eternal, perfect, and faithful High Priest.

Please turn to Hebrews 10.

Hebrews 10:19-21 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, having an High Priest over the house of God, . . .

I would like to give us a little more about the altar of incense. The altar of incense in the wilderness Tabernacle reminded the Israelites that prayer must play a central role in the life of God's people. That still holds true for us! It is vital that we pray every day. God gave Moses detailed instructions for the construction of this altar, which stood in the Holy Place between the golden lampstand and the table of showbread.

That altar's construction was made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. It was not large, maybe 18 inches square by 36 inches high. On each corner was a horn, which the high priest would dab with blood on the Day of Atonement. Drink and meat offerings were not to be made on this altar. Golden rings were placed on both sides which would accept poles used to carry it when the entire tabernacle was moved.

Priests brought in the burning coals to the altar from the brazen altar in the Tabernacle courtyard, carrying them in a censer. God was uncompromising in His orders. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered unauthorized fire before the Eternal disobeying His commands. Scripture says fire came down from the Lord killing them both.

Now, there are two lessons for us in all this. One, we must always obey God's word, and when we are shown that what we are doing is something wrong and not right, we must repent and change. Two, God will not accept anything that is not holy, including us.

Priests would refill this special mixture of incense on the golden altar in the morning, and in the evening so that a sweet-smelling smoke issued from it day and night. Although this altar was in the Holy Place, fragrant smoke would rise above the veil, and fill the inner Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant was. Breezes might carry the fragrance outside into the court of the Tabernacle among the people offering sacrifices. When they smelled the smoke, it reminded them that their prayers were constantly being carried to God.

The altar of incense was considered part of the Holy of Holies, but because it needed tending so often, it was placed outside that chamber so the priests could care for it daily.

The meaning of the altar of incense: it was a sweet-smelling smoke from the incense representing the people's prayers ascending to God. Burning this incense was a continuous act. That is why we are to continuously pray without ceasing. Today, Christians are assured their prayers are pleasing to God the Father, because they are offered by our High Priest Jesus Christ. Just as the incense carried a perfumed odor, our prayers are scented with the righteousness of our Savior.

John tells us the prayers of the saints ascend before the altar in heaven—before the throne of God. As the incense in the Tabernacle was unique, so is Christ's righteousness. We cannot bring prayers to God based on our own false claims of righteousness. We must offer them sincerely in the name of Christ, our Mediator. That is why when we pray, we ask in Christ's name.

Now the golden altar of incense, which was straight ahead before the veil, the third piece of furniture in the Holy Place on which the holy incense was burned, made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, made higher than any other article of furniture in the Holy Place. It was about three feet tall. This altar tells us of the ministry of Jesus as our Intercessor whose prayers never stop being sent to God on our behalf. Jesus said, "I have prayed for you." He even prayed for Him when He was on this earth. He had constantly been praying for His disciples.

The four horns speak of Christ's ministry extending to the four corners of the earth. He will always pray for His own no matter where they are. He can

intercede on our behalf because of His perfect sacrifice. The incense was fueled by the fire from the altar. It is not just anyone praying for us, but the King Himself as represented by the crown of gold. That is why it was overlaid in gold. He knows our weaknesses and our failings, and He is praying for us always.

Now, I am going to show you several scriptures that shows His people just what our King and Savior Jesus Christ is doing for us as He sits at the right hand of the Father. Christ is working for all of us every day, all day long. But we also have a part in this with our prayers. Our prayers are the incense which Christ intercedes for, which is before God as a sweet-smelling savor.

John 17:9-10 “I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them.”

So, Christ is praying for you every day.

Luke 22:31-32 And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.”

John 17:15 “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.”

He leaves us in this world, and with everything that is going on here, but He keeps us safe from the evil one, because He prays about us continually.

I John 2:1 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses. For we know do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows

what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

The Holy Spirit within us even praying things we should be praying about, literally praying for us.

Psalms 121:4 Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

Since Christ's resurrection, He has never slept or slumbered. He is always there working for us.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Romans 8:34 . . . It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

That is why so many men, when they open with prayer or close with prayer, they talk about Christ being at the right hand of God the Father.

Hebrews 13:15 Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.

Luke 1:8-10 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

Here the incense is spoken of again!

Revelation 5:8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 8:3-4 Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand.

First off, we talked about the calling of Nadab and Abihu by name to come before God. God also called you and I out of this world. Think about the miracle of your calling. And it was a miracle. Think about Mr. Armstrong. He was called while trying to prove his wife wrong. Do you not think that was a miracle? Most people get mad when they are proved wrong. They do not make changes; they get mad at the people that proved them wrong.

Second, we talked about the covenant God made with Israel. God gave them His laws and told them what was expected of them. And Israel said that they agree with all that God said, and would obey Him, doing everything He said. You and I also agreed at baptism to keep God's laws and to live a wholly different life than the rest of the people of the world. How are we doing with that one?

Then Nadab and Abihu, who stood before God with Moses and Aaron, just willy-nilly sinned. They did what they wanted to do; not what God told them to do. They took the easy road.

How do you think the greater churches of God are doing along these lines? We all tend to do what we want come hell or high water from time to time, do we not? That is being human.

Then we talked about the significance of the incense altar in the Holy Place, a type of Christ's mediation on our behalf. He is mediating for you and me every minute of every day.

Then we went over a number of scriptures that shows just how involved Christ is with us. He is working on our behalf day and night.

Now, with all that, do you not think that we, as God's people, should put forth a little more effort in trying to overcome and become more like Christ—becoming more holy? Do you not think that we should learn to love the brethren better than we do now?

It is amazing to me, that even people within the church family hate each other. I know people who hate their mom, and dad, and their brothers, and yet they are all in the church of God. Do you not think we should get that under control? Whether hating, stealing, lying, cheating, or taking advantage of one another.

If we have an alcohol problem, do we not think it is time to quit? Or a drug problem? Or porn problem? What about adultery?

What about your prayer and Bible study? Do you pray and study every day? Christ is working for you and me every minute of every day. And we will not even give Him an hour or so each day? We should be trying to live by the laws of God to the best of our ability.

Brethren, we all have a lot to be thankful for in what God and Christ is doing for us. But we also have a lot to work on ourselves to become holy like Christ is. We need to be working that way and overcoming. We need to start right now. Not tomorrow, but right now.