

Text: Exod. 30:1-10, 34-38, 37:25-29

Title: "The altar of incense and our prayers"

Time: 2/5/2023 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Every January I try to attend the Arch Ministries fellowship in Florida. This past year one of my NH friends, Taigen Joos, was there again, and he shared a blessing with the group related to why the fellowship time meant so much to him. He said that unlike many of the other conferences we all attend, the Arch fellowship intentionally schedules many times of prayer together. I think everyone in attendance agreed with our brother's assessment of one of the keys to the blessing of the Arch week.

Jesus was very intentional and disciplined about prayer. Those closest to Him knew this to be the case. "And it came to pass, that, as he [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). That was the occasion at which the Lord taught His disciples what came to be known as "The Lord's Prayer." Jesus knew how to teach His disciples to pray.

The Old Testament believer was given a similar lesson in God's design of the altar of incense, the piece of tabernacle furniture we have described in our passages this morning. David wrote of the symbolism of incense in terms of his prayers (Psalm 141:1-2, "Lord, I cry unto thee: make haste unto me; give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto thee. *Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.*"). The times in the morning and evening, when the priest entered the temple to dress and refuel the lamps of the candlestick and to place more incense on the golden altar, were the hours of prayer

(Luke 1:9-10, "According to the custom of the priest's office, his [Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist] lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. *And the whole multitude of the people were praying without, at the time of incense.*").

When God designed the altar of incense, He was teaching His people about prayer and how to pray. To build the altar of incense is to write a book on prayer. To study the features of the altar and its incense is to read God's book on prayer. I believe that book has at least five chapters that I would like us to examine together this morning.

I. Chapter 1: Prayer and Our Intercessor (30:1-5, 10).

Application: This first chapter begins with the physical description of this little altar. It is made of shittim wood overlaid with pure gold. We know when we see those materials combined in this way, we are looking at the nature of the God-man. As one piece of furniture composed of two distinct and unmixed materials, the incense altar symbolizes the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. The durable shittim wood represents His indestructible humanity, and the pure gold symbolizes His heavenly deity. God became man without ceasing to be God, when the virgin conceived a child through the miracle of the Holy Spirit.

And so on the cover of this book on prayer we find a picture of Jesus Christ praying as the intercessor for His people. He prays for us. He prays for us always according to God's will, and so He prays effectually and powerfully for us. He prays the prayers of John 17 for us, for our unity and sanctity. Charles Wesley's great hymn rejoices in this truth:

"He ever lives above, for me to intercede:

His all-redeeming love, His blood availed for me,
His blood availed for all our race,
His blood availed for all our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

“Five bleeding wounds He bears, received at Calvary.
They pour effectual prayers. They strongly plead for me.
‘Forgive him, O forgive,’ they cry.
‘Forgive him, O forgive,’ they cry,
‘Nor let that ransomed sinner die.’

“The Father hears Him pray, His dear Anointed One.
He cannot turn away the pleadings of His Son.
The Spirit answers to the blood.
The Spirit answers to the blood
And tells me I am born of God.”

The altar tells us other wonderful things about our Intercessor, Jesus Christ.

1. Our Intercessor ascended on high (v. 6). Instructions for the altar come after the instructions for the ark and for the brazen altar, so our Lord’s intercession began after He left heaven’s glory to suffer for our sins on the cross. He rose again and ascended to the right hand of the throne of God. The golden altar is the closest piece of furniture to the mercy seat, representing God’s throne (Eph. 4:8, “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.”).
2. Our Intercessor rules on His throne (v. 3b). The golden altar of incense is crowned with golden molding, like the ark and the table of shewbread, symbolizing His royalty (Ps. 110:1-2, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.”).

3. Our Intercessor conquers our sin completely (v. 2b). The golden altar of incense bears four horns, like the brazen altar, carrying the victory of that sacrifice over our sins once and for all into the heavenly presence of our holy God (Heb. 10:11-14, "And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God, from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified.").
4. Our Intercessor atoned for our sins (v. 10). The instructions of the altar of incense presuppose the sacrifice of the brazen altar. Even the coals used to burn the incense came from the altar of sacrifice (Lev. 16:12). Only the One who died for us can pray for us this way.

When we pray, we pray to the One who prays unfailingly for us. When we fail to pray, we fail to pray to the One who still prays unfailingly for us. The most important thing we can know about prayer is not whether we have been faithful in it, but rather that the One to whom we pray has been faithful to pray for us (Rom. 8:33-35a, "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"). Jesus prays for us. Nothing can separate us from His love.

II. Chapter 2: Prayer and Universal Access (30:6).

Application: The uniqueness of the late position of these instructions in our text includes the fact that they come after instruction about the courtyard fence. You may remember that there is a progression in the order of these instructions

from the interior of the holy of holies to the outside . The altar of incense is the one piece of furniture that seems to violate that order, for our verse says that it is positioned right by the veil and before the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat, but its instructions are given last, as though it belongs outside the fence of the courtyard.

But prayer is the connection between anywhere outside of heaven to heaven. Prayer is universal access to the throne room of God. For this reason, a Gentile centurion soldier like Cornelius, who was never allowed into the courtyard of the temple let alone the holy place of God's temple, still offered prayers that ascended before God like the smoke of the incense of the golden altar (Acts 10:4, "And he [an angel] said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.").

If Cornelius's prayers found access to God's throne room, we can be sure ours will too (Heb. 4:15-16, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."). Anytime from anywhere, we have access to the holy of holies through prayer.

III. Chapter 3: Prayer and Great Delight (30:7a, 34-35).

Application: We must make this a short chapter, but the sweet fragrance and aromatic beauty of prayer is something in which God takes great delight. The Scripture pictures our God as one who inclines His ear to hear our prayers – He is listening for them (Ps. 116:2, "Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live."). Will we conclude the same thing, knowing that the Lord has inclined His ear to us?

God not only hears our prayers, He delights in our prayers (Prov. 15:8, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: but the prayer of the upright is his delight."). I give my dog a treat every now and then simply because I know it delights her. When we pray, we delight the God of heaven and earth. How can we fail to pray as we should?

The number *four* in equal parts is important to the beauty of the altar in the eyes of the Lord. Its breadth and length were both one cubit, making it a square. This foursquare design answers to the four equal parts of the ingredients of the incense mixture. I believe the Lord looks for four ingredients in equal measure when it comes to our prayers. They are mentioned by Paul in our New Testament (1 Tim. 2:1, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men.").

Supplications are specific requests for specific needs we have; prayers are words of communion with the Lord – praying over Scripture, for instance, or with the text of a good hymn; intercessions are prayers for the needs of others, including their spiritual needs like salvation and growth in grace; and thanksgiving is self-explanatory. We should strive to have these four elements in equal proportion in our prayers. The Lord delights in them all equally.

IV. Chapter 4: Prayer and Daily Preparation (30:7b-8).

Application: This chapter in God's book on prayer highlights two instructions about the use of the altar of incense. First, it was to be done every morning and evening. That is what Paul is referring to, I believe, when he encourages believers like us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). Day by day, we should not have gaps in our commitment to prayer. Each morning and evening, He inclines His ear.

And secondly, the lighting of the incense was to be done during the trimming and refueling of the lamps of the candlestick. It is more than coincidence that the incense ascended at the same time that the light of the candlestick was refueled. Prayer fuels the light of gospel ministry.

When we studied the candlestick, we noticed that in Revelation 2-3 every local church is one of God's candlesticks today. Our local church is to be a light in a dark world. We need the fuel of the Holy Spirit to keep our light lit, and that power of the Holy Spirit comes to us when our prayers and those of our Lord for us ascend. When we pray, we do so "in the Holy Ghost" (Jude 20-21, "But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.").

V. Chapter 5: Prayer and Holy Reverence (30:9, 10b, 36-38).

Application: 2 Chron. 26:16-23 tells the story of Uzziah's pride expressed in the mistreatment of the altar of incense ("But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense," v. 16). Uzziah became a leper and lost his privilege to worship at the house of the Lord.

It is when we become strong and our hearts are lifted up with pride to our destruction that we are tempted to think we no longer need to follow God's instructions on prayer. Pride either makes our prayers become Pharisaical, "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are," or we simply see little need for prayer at all. When that happens, we have lost our reverence for the Holy One and what He calls holy. We have instead treated prayer as an unclean thing.

Conclusion: And so what we learn about prayer from the symbolism of the altar of incense must be far more than a good read. It must be truth that cause us to repent over our failure to value prayer and prayer times together. It must be truth that exposes our tendency to become strong enough and prideful enough to do without daily prayer.

And most importantly of all, God's book on prayer symbolized by the altar of incense, must remind us that the One we have failed to pray to as we should never fails to pray for us in His love and forgiveness. Knowing those prayers and that love, may we pray more faithfully to Him.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching