

## EXODUS 30:1-10 (THE ALTAR OF INCENSE)

Every time we look at a new implement or piece of furniture in the tabernacle, at first we might think, “What is this even here for?” Until we look for and find Christ in them, they don’t seem to make any sense. But as soon as we open our eyes and minds to what we are being shown about Him, it all becomes so clear.

Today’s verses may not all make sense to you yet, but even before reading them, we can make a few logical deductions about what they must picture. For example, we have incense. Pretty much everyone knows what incense is and what it is for. When you light it, it smells good, it smokes, and the smoke rises up and out of sight.

If we understand the significance of the burnt offerings from previous sermons, we should at least get a hint of an idea what this incense must then be picturing. If so, then everything else should naturally begin to fall into place as well.

This is especially so if we read through the Bible and evaluate the 130 or so times that incense is mentioned. Eventually, we can form a general idea of what God is showing us. However, as incense has only been mentioned once before in the Bible, and that concerning what we are about to evaluate, it may take a bit of explaining. As an advanced clue, our text verse for today comes from Job 9 –

**Text Verse:** “He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him,  
that we might confront each other in court.

<sup>33</sup> If only there were someone to mediate between us,  
someone to bring us together,

<sup>34</sup> someone to remove God’s rod from me,  
so that his terror would frighten me no more.

<sup>35</sup> Then I would speak up without fear of him,  
but as it now stands with me, I cannot.” Job 9:32-35 (NIV)

Job noted that God isn't a man. Because of that, there was no way for Him to talk directly to Him and get an answer from Him. And so he hoped for a mediator to help him out, someone who could bridge the gap between finite him and infinite God. This is what he desired.

Incense goes up from its place and eventually diffuses into the heavens. It pictures that transition which Job longed for. If his prayers could just go up and be received by a mediator who was qualified to take them in and pass them on, then all would be AOK. Likewise, if we were sure that our prayers were so handled, then we would surely know that everything is AOK.

Well, guess what. If you know Christ, then everything is AOK. It's all to be found in His superior word. And so let's turn to that precious word once again and... May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

### **I. The Altar of Incense (verses 1-6)**

#### **1 "You shall make an altar to burn incense on;**

The altar now to be described gets its name from these words, *mizbeakh miktar qetoret* – "altar to burn incense." The word *qetoret*, or incense, is from the same root as the word *qitor*, meaning "clouds" or "smoke." Thus it means, "smoke, odor of (burning) sacrifice, incense." However, the altar will also have a different name ascribed to it which we will see in a bit.

There are quite a few things about this altar which are perplexing to scholars, but if we simply take each verse, one at a time, and consider what we already know from the description of the other tabernacle furniture, we'll will have very few problems with the details.

<sup>1 (con't)</sup> **you shall make it of acacia wood.**

Like much of the other furniture, the base material of this altar is to be acacia wood. Without going into all of the detail of the past, a short description of acacia and its properties will suffice as a good reminder. It is a very slow growing tree that would be readily available in the area where they are. Its heart wood is dark reddish-brown and is beautiful when sanded and polished. It is resistant to decay for several reasons and thus it is considered an incorruptible wood.

<sup>2</sup> **A cubit *shall be* its length and a cubit its width**

An *ammah*, or “cubit,” comes from the word *em*, or “mother.” Thus it is the mother measurement. It is the distance from the tip of the middle finger to the bend in the arm at the elbow. Thus this will be about 18 inches and....

<sup>2 (con't)</sup> **—it shall be square—**

So far, we have seen that the Brazen Altar and the Breastplate of Judgment were both square. The altar carried the idea of judgment. The breastplate signified judgement and intercession. This third square piece will logically follow as intercession then. The Breastplate of Judgment is what ties the judgment of the Brazen Altar and the intercession of the Altar of Incense together. The fact that this is square, like the other two implements, signifies that the scope of the intercession reaches to the four corners of the earth without distinction or interruption; it is without limits.

<sup>2 (con't)</sup> **and two cubits *shall be* its height.**

In total, the altar will be about a half yard square and a yard in height. It is one half cubit taller than both the Ark and the Table of Showbread. That it is two cubits in height is not without significance. Bullinger defines the number saying, “It is the first number by which we can *divide* another, and therefore in all its uses we may trace this fundamental idea of *division* or *difference*.”

<sup>2</sup> (con’t) **Its horns shall be of one piece with it.**

The *qarnotav*, or “horns,” were not to be made separately and then fixed to the altar. Instead, they were to grow out of the altar, just as a horn grows out of the head of an animal. Something particular needs to be noted now. Here is a portion of the description for the Brazen Altar –

“You shall make its horns on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it.” Exodus 27:2

If you noticed, the number of horns is given for the brazen altar, but the number of them is not given here. There must be a reason for this.

<sup>3</sup> **And you shall overlay its top, its sides all around, and its horns with pure gold;**

Again, like the other wooden implements, this one is to be overlaid. The word is *tsaphah*, and it is identical to the verb *tsaphah*, which means “to look out or about, spy, keep watch.” Unlike the Brazen Altar, this one is to be overlaid with *zahav tahor*, or “gold pure.” It is the same overlay as that of the Ark and the Table of Showbread. Thus it will carry the same significance here as it did for those.

One new word introduced into the Bible here is *gag*, or “top.” It is probably by reduplication from the word *ga’ah*, which means “exalted. And so by analogy it is the top of an altar, house, etc.

<sup>3</sup> (con't) **and you shall make for it a molding of gold all around.**

The *zer* or "molding" was introduced with the Ark of the Covenant. One was also prescribed for the Table of Showbread. Now, a third implement is to be given such a molding. Like the Ark of the Covenant and the Table of Showbread, this molding is lacking the adjective "pure." Although the overlay is specifically said to be pure in all three, the same adjective lacks in all three concerning the molding.

Because of the complete covering in gold, and this golden molding at the top, this altar will also be known as the "Golden Altar" in Scripture. It is first called this in Exodus 39:38.

<sup>4</sup> **Two gold rings you shall make for it, under the molding on both its sides.**

Like the several other pieces, this is to have rings attached to it. And like the other gold pieces, the rings for this one are also lacking the adjective "pure." They will carry a similar signification as the other times they were mentioned.

The word for "ring" is *tabbaath*. It means "ring," but it comes from another word, *taba*. That is a verb which means "to sink." This then gives the idea of a signet ring which is sunk into clay or wax in order to make a seal. From this comes the idea of any ring. Unlike the Ark and the Table, the rings for this Altar are to be under the molding. It will be carried with only the top of the Altar elevated above the priests.

<sup>4</sup> (con't) **You shall place *them* on its two sides, and they will be holders for the poles with which to bear it.**

Unlike the other furniture with rings and poles, this one has only two rings. They are made of gold and under the molding of the table. They will be used for holding the poles that bear and transport the altar.

**<sup>5</sup>You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold.**

Again, exactly as has been seen in the previous instances, these *badim*, or “poles,” are to be of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. And again, just as before, the adjective “pure” is lacking from the description.

**<sup>6</sup>And you shall put it before the veil that *is* before the ark of the Testimony, before the mercy seat that *is* over the Testimony, where I will meet with you.**

This Golden Altar of Incense was to be put directly in front of the veil, in the middle of the holy place between the Table of Showbread on one side, and the Menorah on the other side. As it is said to be “before the ark of the Testimony,” it indicates that the ark and it are intricately connected.

However, it also says, “before the mercy seat.” Therefore it is also intricately connected to that. It is tied to both individually. Finally, it says that it is “where I will meet with you.” This is speaking of the presence of the Lord above the Mercy Seat, between the cherubim on it.

These three items – the Ark, the Mercy Seat, and the Altar of Incense are so intimately connected, that the author of Hebrews says that this altar is actually on the other side of the veil. Here is what he says –

“For a tabernacle was prepared: the first *part*, in which *was* the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; <sup>3</sup> and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All,

<sup>4</sup> which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which *were* the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; <sup>5</sup> and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat." Hebrews 9:2-5

This description by the author of Hebrews is not in error. Rather John Lange explains what is intended –

"For this reason we would rather find a theological idea than an archaeological error in that passage of the Epistle to the Hebrews (9:4) which puts it in the Holy of holies. For this is the altar which by its incense symbolizes the prayer of the high-priest (Rev. 5:8; Heb. 5:7)." John Lange

In this verse, there is a play on words occurring which is provided to give insights into the work of Christ. The veil, or *paroketh*, comes from the word *perek* which means "cruelty" or "rigor." That then comes from an unused root meaning to "break apart" or "fracture." In this, we can see where cruelty or rigor then comes into play.

The mercy seat or *kapporeth*, indicates "a satisfaction." This comes from the word *kaphar*, which in this situation means "to appease" or "to satisfy." The two words, *paroketh* and *kapporeth*, are spelled with the same letters, but they are simply realigned from *pe, resh, kaph, tav*, to *kaph, pe, resh, tav*. The letter *kaph* is simply moved forward. The letter *pe* means "mouth" and signifies "to blow or scatter." *Kaph* is represented by an open hand and signifies "to open, allow, or tame."

On one side there is cruelty and rigor; on the other side, there is mercy, or satisfaction. The only thing that would pass through this veil each day would be the *smell of the incense* as it wafted into the air.

*An altar of incense made of wood and gold*

*Its dimension are exacting and precise*

*It has a special purpose, so I am told  
To know what that purpose is would be rather nice*

*There it sits in the Holy Place, before the veil it is set  
But despite it being there, it does not seem obstructed at all*

*Even though I am not behind the veil yet  
It seems that because of this altar, behind it I can call*

*Yes, there is an Altar which makes this possible  
He is there receiving every wondrous puff of perfumed smoke  
I believe that because of Him, to God my prayers are audible  
It is as if He has heard me from the first moment I spoke*

## **II. Priestly Responsibilities (verses 7-10)**

**<sup>7</sup>“Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning;**

The Hebrew reads, *qetoret sammim*, or “smoke of spices.” The altar of incense is introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The composition of that incense will be given to close out the chapter. There it says –

“And the Lord said to Moses: ‘Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with *these* sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. <sup>35</sup> You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, *and* holy. <sup>36</sup> And you shall beat *some* of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the



tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you.” Exodus 30:34-36

This incense of spices shall be burnt *ba’boqer ba’boqer* or “by morning by morning.” This was the priest’s duties just as he was accomplishing another duty...

<sup>7</sup> (con’t) **when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it.**

When the lamps of the Menorah were trimmed at morning time, the incense was to be burned on it at the same time. This says “Aaron,” but it is the priesthood of Aaron which is implied. Whatever priest was given the responsibility could do this. We know this from Luke 1:9-10 where Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was given this privilege.

As far as the burning of the incense, it is unknown how it was done. Some scholars see this altar as having a grating where the ashes would fall through. Nothing is said of this. Some scholars see the incense as being brought in and burnt on a golden censer. This seems more likely, but it is still only speculation. As it is not stated explicitly, it is not the focus of the details. That incense is burned on the altar is.

<sup>8</sup> **And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it,**

As in the morning, Aaron was also to burn incense on this altar at twilight, or literally *ben ha’arbayim*, “between the evenings.” These then are at the same times that the morning and evening sacrifices were to be made on the brazen altar.

The two are being linked together in a unique way, just as this altar is linked to the Ark and the Mercy Seat in a unique way, and just as this altar and the

Menorah are being linked together as well. Everything is tying together in the details of this special Altar of Incense.

As a bonus for you which is found in the words *eth hanerot ben ha'arbayim*, or "lights the lamps at twilight," the word "LOVE," or *hava* is found in a reverse acrostic of these words. The first letter of each word – *aleph hey beth hey* spells a reverse acostic *hava*, or LOVE.

<sup>8</sup> (con't) **a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.**

The incense was to burn perpetually morning and evening for as long as the Aaronic priesthood was in effect. Every generation that came was to continue this practice, unabated, morning by morning, and each day between the evenings. The incense was to be before, or in the face of, Yehovah at all times. This mandate as I said, is tied in with the timing of the care for the Menorah each day as was seen in Exodus 27:20, 21 –

"And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually. <sup>21</sup> In the tabernacle of meeting, outside the veil which *is* before the Testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening until morning before the Lord."

<sup>9</sup> **You shall not offer strange incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; nor shall you pour a drink offering on it.**

The specificity here is given because the word for altar, or *mizbeakh*, is the same as for that of the Brazen Altar. It is an altar, it is square, it has horns, etc. just like the Brazen Altar. Even the rising of the smoke from the different offerings uses

the same words for the Brazen Altar and this one. Because of this, prohibitions were required to avoid confusion.

No strange incense was to be burned on it. This means that only the prescribed incense given later in this chapter was to ever be burnt. No burnt offering of any kind, no grain offering of any kind, nor any drink offering of any kind was to be offered on this altar.

Finally, the fact that the offerings for both of these altars was to be made at the same time is showing a special connection between them. As the smoke rises from one, so it would rise from the other. This Altar of Incense is so uniquely tied to so many other items in the tabernacle that its importance cannot be downplayed in any way.

**<sup>10</sup> And Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns once a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonement;**

The ritual for this mandate is found detailed in Leviticus 16:18, which describes the Day of Atonement rituals –

“And he shall go out to the altar that *is* before the Lord, and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around.”

<sup>10 (con't)</sup> **once a year he shall make atonement upon it throughout your generations.**

The last clause said, “upon its horns.” This clause says, “upon it.” The horns are cleansed by the smearing of blood, but after that, it says this in the following verse of Leviticus 16 –

“Then he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, cleanse it, and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the children of Israel.”  
Leviticus 16:19

The entire altar would be considered purified from uncleanness by this annual atonement provided by the high priest.

<sup>\*10 (fin)</sup> **It is most holy to the Lord.”**

Another connection to the Brazen Altar is revealed in these final words of the instructions. This altar was considered “most holy to the Lord,” just as that which touched the Brazen Altar was to be so considered –

“Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and sanctify it. And the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar must be holy.” Exodus 29:37

A great deal of what occurs around this Altar of Incense is inextricably linked to other implements of the tabernacle. Let’s take a short poetic break, and then come back to see what it all means...

*The Altar is most holy to the Lord  
Nothing impure should ever be brought to it  
Such is the warning in God's precious word  
And such is the warning I now to you submit*

*When we come to this Altar, let us be likewise holy  
Let our prayers be unstained; let them be pure  
This is what God asks of us, and so let them be  
And in this manner, we will be heard for sure*

*When we are in our time of prayer and praise  
And at all other times of this life that we live  
Even throughout our lives, for all of our days  
Let us to this precept all our attention give*

### **III. Wonderful Pictures of Christ and His Work**

The placement of this passage in the Bible appears to cause some people problems. Charles Ellicott, and other noted scholars, find it rather puzzling that the description of this altar comes now instead of when the Table of Showbread and the Menorah, which were maintained in the same room, were described. Here are his words –

“Why the directions concerning the altar of incense were delayed until this place, instead of being given when the rest of the furniture of the holy place was

described (Exodus 25), it is impossible to say. But there is certainly no reason to suspect a dislocation of the text.” Charles Ellicott

He was wise to say that there is no reason to suspect a dislocation of the text. In other words, it wasn't an accident being placed here. He just doesn't see the logic of why it is, in fact, placed here. Well, there are several good reasons why it is.

The first is that the earliest items recorded tell us of Christ coming to His people in order to bestow mercy and *grace on them*. However, this item now shows us what God has done in order for us to go *to Him*. This will be seen first and foremost in what the incense pictures.

Secondly, the details of the selection, ordination, and consecration of the priests was detailed in chapters 28 & 29. It would make no sense to speak of the things which the priests would daily minister to until the priests were prepared to minister. The care for the lampstand anticipated the ordination of Aaron; the daily offerings and the ministration of the Altar of Incense, confirms that same ordination.

Thirdly, there is a lesson concerning ourselves in relation to the Altar of Incense. The Altar speaks of Christ, but in a second sense it has an application in the people of Christ. It relates to our relationship with God *through* Him and our duties to God *because* of Him.

The first and most obvious thing to do is to understand what the incense pictures. If that can be determined, then pretty much everything else will fall into its proper place. The altar is for incense, something which is burnt and rises toward heaven. The word *qetoret*, or incense, is from the same root as the word *qitor*, meaning “clouds” or “smoke.” Thus it means, “smoke, odor of (burning) sacrifice, incense.”

The Bible explicitly states what incense pictures. First, we saw that Zechariah was selected to offer incense at one point in his ministry. When that occurred, we read this in Luke 1 –

“So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,<sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.” Luke 1:8-10

The people were praying at the hour of incense. That gives us a clue which is explicitly revealed in both the Old and New Testament. In Psalm 141 it says –

“Let my prayer be set before You *as* incense,  
The lifting up of my hands *as* the evening sacrifice.” Psalm 141:2

The incense and the burnt offering are tied together in this one verse, showing their unique connection. But the incense is *described as if prayer*. This is then repeated in Revelation 5 –

“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 5:8

The burning incense pictures prayer. But prayer is intimately connected to praise, and so it has that secondary meaning adjoined to it. The next thing described is the base material for the altar, acacia. Just as before, it pictures Christ’s humanity. The wood is incorruptible, just as He is.

The square shape of the Brazen Altar, the Breastplate of Judgment, and the Altar of Incense are all tied together with the Breastplate being the interconnection between the three. There is judgment, judgment and intercession, and intercession. Thus the Altar of Incense signifies Christ's intercessory work on our behalf. Our prayers are offered to Him, and through Him they are deemed acceptable to God the Father. This is explained in Hebrews 7 –

“Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

Hebrews 7:25

“That this altar is square shows that His intercession reaches to the four corners of the earth without distinction or interruption; it is without limits.” Next, it is described as being a single cubit square. A cubit is the mother measurement. One cubit would be the basis of everything else. Bullinger describes the meaning of One –

“There can be no doubt as to the significance of this primary number. In all languages it is the symbol of *unity*. As a cardinal number it denotes *unity*; as an ordinal it denotes *primacy*.” EW Bullinger

Therefore, the prayers of intercession of Christ are unified and they hold primacy. In other words, prayers to God can *only* be offered through this One Source. No other prayers are acceptable to God without going through His chosen Mediator. So much for the RCC's prayers to Mary.

The height being two cubits means that it is one half cubit taller than both the Ark and the Table of Showbread. It is exalted above those. The Ark is Christ embodying the law, meaning the Testimony which stands for the entire law. The Table of Showbread reveals Christ our Bread who gave His life for us. Only in the



fulfilling of the law and in the giving of His life can we stand justified and acceptable before God.

Bullinger shows that two “..is the first number by which we can *divide* another, and therefore in all its uses we may trace this fundamental idea of *division* or *difference*.” There is a fundamental difference between acceptable prayers and unacceptable prayers. Only those prayers which rise above the law through the completed work of Christ can be considered acceptable to God. Those which do not, are not.

The one cubit square symbolizes that it reaches to the four corners of the earth. The two cubits in height symbolize that these prayers have overcome the world and reach to the heavens because of Christ’s intercession. This is actually made explicit in Hebrews 7:26, 27 –

“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, *who is* holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; <sup>27</sup> who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.”

The *qarnotav*, or “horns,” were made to grow out of the altar, just as a horn grows out of the head of an animal. They are a symbol of power and strength and demonstrate the intercessory power of Christ to God for us. As they are one with the altar, then everything about this altar is typified by His power.

That the number of horns is not stated is a significant omission. As four is the number of creation, the Brazen Altar having four horns signified the judgment on sin throughout creation. However, because Christ’s intercessory work is in

heaven, no number of horns is given. Thus there is a transcendence from the earthly to the heavenly in this omission.

The overlay of the wood with pure gold signifies Christ's perfect purity and absolute divinity. It also symbolizes His kingly status. He is the priest-king. Therefore, it signifies Christ's divine ability to keep watch over those He intercedes for and mediates for. Just as a king watches over His subjects, so Christ our King watches out and for us.

The gold molding, signifies the same as for the Ark and the Table, it represents His kingly status. He is, as it has been said already, our Priest-King. After this, we were shown that unlike the other furniture, this altar only has two rings. These then picture these two things which Jesus spoke of in the Gospel of John –

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” John 5:39

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.” John 15:26

The word of God, given through the Holy Spirit, is represented by these two rings. They are the number of “witness.” They “speak of the Spirit's testifying of Christ.” They testify as the seal and authority of who Christ is. The first mention of this by Jesus was when He spoke of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The second mention of it was when He spoke of what would be given to the apostles for the New Testament. Both are of divine origin, meaning from the Holy Spirit, but both have since been handled by man and therefore the adjective “pure” is not used.

They have our taint in them, even if they are the inspired word of God. Though the word of God is pure, man's hands and his fallible interpretations have been used in the process of sharing it. The lacking adjective is no mistake. Instead, it is another picture for us to understand.

It is to these two rings into which the poles are placed. These then are the two testaments themselves, the New and Old. They speak of the God/Man, represented by the wood and gold. They are what makes Christ mobile to the world as their word carries Him, each contrasting - the law and grace, but each supporting the whole and confirming the message of Him.

As the table can only be carried by two poles, not just one, it teaches us that should either or both testaments of the Bible be removed, we would not have a proper presentation of who Christ is. Without one or the other, we would have a faulty view of Him, and without either, we would have no knowledge of Him at all.

As these poles and rings are just under the molding of the altar and not at its feet, it shows us that Christ's intercessory work for us is near and close to us. He is our ever present help in time of need. That the Altar is directly before the veil and before the Ark and the Mercy Seat, it shows that even though we are still on this side of the veil, living in this fallen world, our prayers are acceptable to God because of the embodiment of the law and the satisfaction of that law for us because of the torn body of Christ, which is the veil.

This unique arrangement of the Altar, Veil, Ark, and Mercy seat shows us that even though we cannot see heaven and the throne of grace with our eyes yet, our prayers are still received because of Christ's work. This is why there is that play on words concerning the Veil and the Mercy Seat – the *paroketh* and the *kapporeth*.

On our side, we walk in a world of cruelty and rigor. On the other side, where our hope lies, there is mercy, and satisfaction. As the smell of the incense would waft through this veil each day, so our prayers pass through to the throne of God. It is the incense of the altar passing through to God where mercy is made available to the sinner, and where grace is bestowed upon the believer.

The change in the letters of *paroketh* and *kapporeth* shows that our sins are scattered on one side, being blown away. This is signified by the letter *pe*. On the other side, there is an open hand, allowing our prayers to be received, signified by the letter *kaph*. If you have ever wondered if your prayers are really heard by God, these ancient pictures show that because of Christ, they are. It is there at the seat of mercy that we now meet with the Lord.

The burning of the incense at the time of the tending of the lamps shows a direct connection between the two. As the lamps picture the illumination and ministry of God by the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, it is a direct consequence of Christ's intercession for us. As we pray, He intercedes, and therefore the Spirit responds.

The perpetual burning of the incense shows that Christ ever-lives to intercede for us. We may be asleep at night, but Christ never sleeps, He never slumbers, and He is always available when our prayers rise to Him. This is why the Menorah and the Altar are so inextricably linked together. John Gills sums up the two functions represented by the two implements in regards to Christ's work. He says that –

“...when the priest looked after the one, he did the service of the other; and hence we learn, that our intercessor and lamplighter is one and the same; he that was seen amidst the golden candlesticks dressing the lamps of them, appears at the golden altar with a golden censer, to offer up the prayers of his saints.” John Gill

But there is more. The timing of the two burnings is not only connected to the Menorah, but it is the same time of day as the morning and evening offerings on the Brazen Altar. The Brazen Altar sacrifices speak of the consecration of the life and actions of the body and soul to the Lord. They make a satisfaction for that which was displeasing to God.

The Altar of Incense offering speaks of the spiritual side of man being consecrated to the Lord. This tells of divine acceptance of what is pleasing to Him, namely our prayers because of the work of Christ.

Where the Brazen Altar sacrifices express atonement and reconciliation, the Altar of Incense offerings declare intimate fellowship with God because of that atonement and reconciliation. The two offerings both complement and complete our daily spiritual interaction with God in both act and exclamation.

And finally, the timing of the two offerings are aligned with the timing of Christ's final day in His earthly ministry. He was brought before the leaders of Israel and the Gentiles in the morning, and crucified between the evenings at the same time as these offerings. Thus they are a constant reminder to God of the work of Christ on our behalf.

It is no coincidence that the acrostic *hava*, or LOVE is found in the words "lights the lamps at twilight." This is the time of day that Christ died on the cross. The love of God, seen in the death of His Son, is what made our prayers acceptable to Him once again. This is the LOVE of God which is found in the High Priestly ministry of Christ's cross.

Jesus, the Light of the world, illuminated both heaven and earth with the splendor of His work. Because of Him, we now have intimate fellowship with God through the offering of our prayers and praises.

These two altars are so closely connected to show us a single truth, and that truth is Christ. Each has its own purpose and design. One is a Brazen Altar; it is the place of sacrifice. The other is the Altar of Incense; it is the place of worship. Both together form the picture of One true Altar – Christ. The Author of Hebrews, speaking of Christ, says –

“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. <sup>15</sup> 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.” Hebrews 13:10-15

The admonition to not offer strange incense upon this altar shows that the only prayers which are acceptable to God are those prayers which meet His exacting standards. No other prayers are acceptable except those authorized by and through His word. It is a note of exclusivity for the believer in Christ.

It is also a note that the follower of Christ is to *never mingle his prayers* with the prayers of unbelievers. That would be to mix the holy with the profane. It is an abomination to God. The admonition to offer no other offerings of any kind on this altar indicates that only through the work of Christ, which is realized in the other implements of the tabernacle, are prayers acceptable to God.

We can add no works of any kind into our complete devotion to Christ. Rather we are to trust in His sacrifices and offerings alone when we submit our prayers to God.

The final verse of the directions is that of atonement upon the altar. If our prayers offered to God go through Jesus, who is the Altar of Incense, and the yet atonement must be made upon the altar, it shows us a truth that is inescapable. Arthur Pink sums the thought up –

“Our prayers are so faulty, our praises so feeble, our worship so far below the level of what it ought to be, that even our "holy things" needed to be cleansed by the blood of atonement. How humbling this is!” AW Pink

In other words, even our prayers are defiled because we are defiled. The atonement upon the altar shows the need for Christ’s continued intercessory work for us. Though we are deemed acceptable to God because of Christ, it is only because of Christ. Without His past work, our prayers would be *unheard*. Without His on-going work, our prayers would continue to be *unheard*.

The annual atonement of the altar shows that the virtue of Christ’s intercession is fully complete by His earthly suffering, once for all time. We need nothing else, no sacrifice of any kind, to be acceptable to God. Instead, we need only our true Intercessor, Christ Jesus.

Such is the marvel and the majesty of Jesus Christ. Not only did He save us, but He keeps saving us. Not only did He purify us, but He continues to do so.

A direct example of this intercessory work is seen not long after the construction of the tabernacle. In Numbers 16, a rebellion takes place. At that time, the Lord’s anger was aroused against Israel. But because of this altar, signifying Christ’s intercession, the plague against them was arrested before it could kill the entire congregation –

“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup> ‘Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.’

And they fell on their faces.

<sup>46</sup> So Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense *on it*, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun.’ <sup>47</sup> Then Aaron took *it* as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people.” Numbers 16:44-47

If you’re like me, and you wonder why God doesn’t just strike you dead and cast you into the pit for the things you do, now you can see why. Christ is there. He is that Altar and He is ever interceding for you, even when you blow it in a major way.

As a life application concerning what this altar signifies, we can discern from it three major precepts which we can apply to our life. The first is that it shows us just what prayer is. Incense is something that needs to be lit in order to smell. Unless the fire is kindled it just lays there, useless.

But once it is lit, it begins to smoke and to smell sweet. It then arises towards heaven. Likewise, unless we have a fire in our heart concerning our prayers, they are useless. They are vain repetitions without any fragrance. But if we are fervent in our prayers, they will rise in a smoke of wondrous joy to the Lord who is delighted to hear them and respond to them.

Secondly, the placement of the altar should be a clue as to where prayers belong in our lives. We first have to come to Christ through His sacrifice. Only then are our prayers acceptable to God. Sin must always be dealt with before our prayers



can be responded to. As the altar of incense is in the Holy Place, it is before both the Menorah and the Table of Showbread.

The Menorah shows that we are to be a light to the world. That the Menorah illuminates the side where the Table of Showbread is, it indicates that we are to illuminate the work of Christ, our Bread of Life.

The Altar of Incense stands between the two. It teaches us that our light will be ineffective and our proclamation will become stale and moldy without an effective prayer life. Both are hallowed by the presence of the Altar of Incense in our lives.

As it stands before the veil, it shows that our prayers must reach into the most holy place by going through the veil. As Christ is the veil, our prayers must be offered to God through Him. When they are, they reach the Throne of Grace and the Seat of Mercy. Though we are in a land of cruelty, our prayers raise even to the seat of heaven because of Christ.

And thirdly, we are taught how to cultivate our prayers through this altar. The altar was tended to morning and evening and it burned perpetually in the Holy Place. We should prepare ourselves morning and night in the contemplation, prayers to, and praises of the Lord. With this preparation, our prayers will be constantly streaming to the Lord throughout the day and night. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, "Pray without ceasing."

We can only do this if we are prepared to do so. We are on a journey, heading west and back to that wonderful land of delight promised to us by God who cannot lie. As we continue our trek, we should be ever praising, ever praying, and ever petitioning this wonderful God who has given us all things through Christ the Lord. If you have never made a commitment to Him, today is the day. Let's get

that resolved so that your prayers will be heard by the One who sits on Heaven's throne, waiting to present your prayers to His Father...

**Closing Verse:** "Hear my cry, O God;

Attend to my prayer.

<sup>2</sup> From the end of the earth I will cry to You,

When my heart is overwhelmed;

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Psalm 61:1, 2

**Next Week:** Exodus 30:11-16 *This is for the people's atonement...* (The Ransom Payment) (84th Exodus Sermon)

The Lord has you exactly where He wants you. He has a good plan and purpose for you. Even if a deep ocean lies ahead of You, He can part the waters and lead you through it on dry ground. So follow Him and trust Him and He will do marvelous things for you and through you.

### **The Altar of Incense**

You shall make an altar

To burn incense on, so shall you do

You shall make it of acacia wood

As I am now instructing you

A cubit shall be its length and a cubit its width

It shall be square, as instructed by Me

And two cubits shall be its height

Its horns of one piece with it shall be

And you shall overlay its top

Its sides all around, no detail shall you forsake

And its horns with pure gold

And you shall for it a molding of gold all around make

Two gold rings you shall make for it  
Under the molding on both its sides, this detail you shall not omit  
You shall place them on its two sides  
And they will be holders for the poles with which to bear it

You shall make the poles of acacia wood  
And overlay them with gold, as is understood

And you shall put it before the veil  
That is before the ark of the Testimony, so shall you do  
Before the mercy seat that is over the Testimony  
Where I will meet with you

Aaron shall burn on it  
Sweet incense every morning, this shall be  
When he tends the lamps  
He shall burn incense on it, sweet incense to Me

And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight  
He shall burn incense on it, at that time too  
A perpetual incense before the LORD  
Throughout your generations, this he shall do

You shall not offer strange incense on it  
Or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; you shall pay heed  
Nor shall you pour a drink offering on it  
No priest shall consider such a deed

And Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns  
Once a year with the blood, so shall he do  
Of the sin offering of atonement  
This is what shall be conveyed to him by you

Once a year he shall make atonement upon it  
Throughout your generations

It is most holy to the LORD  
For this altar, these are my expectations

O God, how marvelous are You in all ways  
For giving the true Altar of Incense to us  
And so forever, yes even through eternal days  
We can petition You, through our Lord Jesus

All of these pictures from Israel's past  
Have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ our Lord  
And through Him and His work we can fellowship at last  
Yes, through Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word

Praises, yes praises we shall eternally sing to You, O God  
And forever in Your marvelous light, golden streets we shall trod

Hallelujah and Amen...