

**Home : Sermons : January 14, 2007****Prayer as Incense
Exod. 30:1-10; 34-38****Introduction**

Modern Christians badly need ancient lessons on prayer. When God first gathered His people to teach them how to worship, He taught them on prayer through symbolic furniture—in this case, the golden altar of incense. In verses 1-5 he describes the altar, in verses 6-10 how it is to be used, and in verses 34-38, the incense that is to be used on it.

Overview: The altar of incense was a small altar of gold covered acacia wood about 1.5 feet square, and three feet tall. Like the other furniture of the tabernacle, it had rings through which poles were placed in order to carry it—it was holy and not to be touched. This altar was for burning a pure incense whose recipe was restricted for use only in the Tabernacle by the priests.

Prayer as incense: The Altar of Incense, like the Table of Shewbread and the Lampstand, is richly symbolic. The Table symbolizes, amongst other things, a covenant meal—the Lord's Supper. Jesus is the Bread from Heaven which God gives to us to nourish us in grace (John 6). Across the room is the golden Lampstand, which symbolizes Jesus as the light of the World (John 8). He is the *Logos* —the Word—and this word sheds light on everything for us. So, so far we have the Sacrament (the Supper), and the Word. And now, right there with Word and sacrament is prayer, for in the Bible incense is symbolic of prayer (Ps. 141:1-2; Lk. 1:9-10; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-5).

So, if the burning of incense in the Bible is symbolic of prayer, let's go back and plug the meaning of this symbol back into what we see in the altar of incense, and see what God is teaching us about prayer.

Prayer as a pleasing and acceptable sacrifice

One of the first lessons we learn comes from the nature of the piece of furniture itself. It is an *altar*. But altars are for making offerings and sacrifices, and so—what sacrifice is offered up here? God is very plain what is *not* to be sacrificed here (v. 9).

All other types of offering: animal, grain, wine, or other incense is ruled out. This is an altar for sacrifices, but as we have already seen, it is the sacrifice of prayer. But if we remember that the only sacrifices that were acceptable to God had to be perfect—no blind or sick or lame—how can we hope to please God with our prayers?

Blood on the horns (v. 10): Prayer is a sacrifice, but not a *meritorious* one. We don't earn anything by it. In fact, our best prayers require atonement (v. 10). Why? Because God has given us a perfect formula for prayer, and yet the best of us mix in dirt or dung in with the pure frankincense and galbamus (v. 34). How are these prayers acceptable? The answer is that the blood of Christ sanctifies imperfect prayer. It transforms a stench into a sweet aroma. Jesus is our advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1).

In golden vessels: Jesus does more than make our prayers merely acceptable. He makes them *delightful*. Though our prayers are at best mixed with the soup scum of selfishness or worldly priorities, still because they are sanctified by the blood of the Lamb, they are precious and

acceptable in the sight of God.

Prayer as spiritual discipline

God calls us to pray as a spiritual discipline. It is a means of grace, and the best way to get a lot of grace is a regular feeding. You cannot get in one meal enough nourishment for a month. You have to eat *regularly*. It is the same spiritually.

Framing the day with grace (v. 7-8): In the temple, there are three activities that frame the day with grace. The first was the burnt offerings (29:39-41). God is saying that His people should always be offering themselves up to God as a spiritual sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship (Rom. 12:1). In the morning and again in the evening, we dedicate all we are to God and agree with him that He cannot be compartmentalized—He rules over the whole day. There are no unspiritual acts.

The second activity that framed the day with grace was the trimming of the wicks of the lampstand (v. 7-8?). As we saw when we studied the lampstand, light is symbolic of truth. The Bible is our source of truth, and thus, the Puritans used to speak of their daily devotions as “trimming their wicks.” And what they meant was that morning and evening, they framed their day with a little reading and meditation of the Word of God (cf. Josh. 1:8).

The third activity that was framed the day with grace was the burning of incense on the golden altar morning and evening (v. 7-8). And of course, that is prayer. Begin to dedicate to the Lord a few minutes for prayer in the evening, a few in the morning, and you will find yourself praying spontaneously throughout the day. That is what it means to *pray without ceasing* (1 Thess 5:17).

Sanctified with prayer: It would be remiss not to point out that all the other ways we draw near to God, the means of grace, are symbolically connected to incense. For instance, the bread was offered with frankincense on each row (Lev. 24:5-9). And the lamps were trimmed while the incense was burning (v. 7-8). The word of God and the sacraments must be bathed in prayer. Listening to the Word, or studying it, should be a very active time of prayer. Even as pastors are preaching, they are firing up prayers in their minds while they speak with their mouths. As a listener, you should be doing the same. Pray to understand. Pray to know. Pray to obey. Pray to love God and neighbour more faithfully. Pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer as a means of refuge in God

There are many things to be said about prayer, and much to learn from this text. But allow me to conclude with one more observation. The golden altar of incense had horns. The horns of the altar are just like the horns on the bronze altar. What is the purpose of the horns of the altar?

Fugitives, whether guilty or innocent, would flee to the altar and grasp its horns in order to sue for mercy (1 Kings 1:50; 2:28). Here we have another picture of prayer. Through prayer, we grasp the horns of the heavenly altar and seek refuge in God. It is a place of asylum and protection. We seek refuge from evils and oppressions of this world. We seek respite from temptation, and victory over our flesh. We seek mercy from the King of the Universe. And because o Christ, we do so *boldly* (Heb. 4:16).

Joost Nixon – January 14, 2007