

Prayer Has Incense

Lord, the only way to come to You is on bended knee with a humble heart. So we do come before You once again in this manner, totally depending upon You, upon Your Spirit to speak, to open our eyes and ears. Lord, I pray that You would speak today. What a privilege we have to be in Your presence, and we just bless Your name. Amen.

Psalm 141:2: “May my prayer be counted as incense before You.”

Prayer can be worship as well as petition, as we know from the Lord’s prayer. Worship is like the bookends of the Lord’s prayer. When I read this I say, “Lord, may our worship, may our prayer be as incense before You.”

Today, I would like to look a little bit at what the Scripture says about our prayer and our worship being as incense. This is just as a way of encouragement; this is nothing new, but I have found it a great encouragement just to consider these passages.

Before I begin, one of my presents at Christmas was a little book called “The Valley of Vision,” which contains some prayers by the Puritans. This collection of prayers shows that, during this time, although a lot of the Puritans had doctrinal differences, the Spirit was the same; the love for the Lord was the same. And as I have read some of these prayers, I have been astounded. I would like to read one which is called “The Throne.”

“Oh, God of my delight, Thy throne of grace is the pleasure ground of my soul. Here I obtain mercy in time of need, here see the smile of Thy reconciled face, here joy pleads the name of Jesus, here I sharpen the sword of the Spirit, anoint the shield of faith, put on the helmet of salvation, gather manna from Thy Word, am strengthened for each conflict, nerved for the upward race, empowered to conquer every foe; Help me to come to Christ as fountain head of descending blessings, as a wide open flood-gate of mercy. I marvel at my insensate folly, that with such enriching favors within my reach I am slow to extend the hand to take them. Have mercy upon my deadness for Thy Name’s sake. Quicken me, stir me, fill me with holy zeal. Strengthen me that I may cling to Thee and not let go. May Thy Spirit within me draw all blessings from Thy hand.”

Can you just imagine a picture of a Puritan in a little cabin with a hat on, praying these kinds of prayers to the Lord. What a blessing that is!

I must admit when I first started considering this thing about incense, I have to confess that I do not like incense. When I first got married, I would walk into the house, and being the wonderful husband that I was, I think I am a little better now, my reaction was: “Whoa! What is that smell!?” And it would be one of those Yankee Candles sitting on the stove and that smell—what is that smell!? It was so strong it would go through the whole house. Now I say, “What a wonderful smell!” That was my only touch with incense. But this is real incense, isn’t it?

In Revelation 4 we find this great scene of John being shown the throne room, and there is wonderful worship in front of the throne. There were twenty-four elders, myriads of angels, the

four beasts, the seven angels—these wonderful beings all giving this wonderful worship and praise.

Revelation 5:6-8: “And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

What struck me in the midst of all this grand worship in the heavens before the throne itself were the prayers of the saints. Just think of that! In the midst of all that grand worship, the prayers and worship of the saints are there.

Between chapters 5 and 8 of Revelation the seals are being opened. With the 7th seal there is silence in heaven for about half an hour, and the trumpets are getting ready to be opened.

Revelation 8:1: “When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out the angel’s hand.”

So the Psalmist says, “Lord, may my prayer be as incense before You.” We can see that in the heavens this means that there is a golden altar before the throne, and the incense that is upon it is lit, and it rises up as smoke before the Lord. And notice that in the first passage that we read there is great worship and praise. In this passage it is great judgment, and right there in the middle of both are the prayers of the saints rising up as incense before the Lord. I find that again an astounding thing.

But to really understand the New Testament you have to understand the Old because it is based upon the Old Testament.

Exodus chapter 30 begins with the altar of incense, then it talks about the atonement money and the anointing oil, but in 34-38 we have the incense which is the prayers of the saints, so hopefully we will understand more of what this incense is.

Verse 30:34-38: “Then the Lord said to Moses, “Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the Lord. Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people.”

Incense is Made by a Perfumer

Now this incense is a very unique fragrance. It is made by the perfumer. And I am not going to go over each spice and what it could mean. I know some of the ancient men say that these spices mean certain things, but I do not know what they mean. I do know the spices put together for the incense were very special and this incense was made only for this purpose. The spices were ground up in a particularly fine way, and they were mixed together in equal proportions. In other words, it was a precise thing, a precise smell. It was a fragrant incense made by the perfumer.

In verses 23-24 we find that the anointing oil had all different kinds of spices. There was flowing myrrh, fragrant cinnamon, fragrant cane, cassia, and olive oil. So even the anointing oil which represents the Holy Spirit's anointing of everything was totally different. I never realized that the spices were different between these two nor that it was such a precise measurement made in a certain way. The children of Israel did not make their own spices and bring them into the temple as they did with the lambs that were brought from the flocks. They did not touch the incense; it was made by a perfumer.

As I was meditating upon this, I said, "Lord, what could the perfumer mean? Is there something here about the perfumer? Who is the perfumer? Who makes the spices? Who grinds up the spices and makes the incense? In the next chapter I came across this verse.

Exodus 31:3: "I have filled him with the Spirit of God." That's it! The Perfumer is the Spirit of God. It is the Holy Spirit for us. He is the Perfumer. That is neat, Lord. Your Holy Spirit is the One who makes the incense. He is the One who makes the incense fragrant. He is the One who precisely mixes up the spices and makes that incense. You know the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in incense making in our lives. He is the One who makes the incense, not us. I would encourage you to read this book by Dana called, "The Fellowship of His Spirit." I just want to read a small portion of it.

"In these Scriptures, which tell us some of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves involved with the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to commune with us. He communes and fellowships and shares with us the things regarding Jesus, and the things that belong to Jesus because the Father gave them to Him. Jesus and the Father own the same things so He shares the things of the Father with us, and the Father shares the things of the Son with us. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us this blessed fellowship. We are the recipients of this most blessed benediction. He goes on to describe that it is the Spirit of God who works so much in our lives to reveal the Lord Jesus. He is the One that leads us through our life withholding the things we should not be doing, encouraging us to do the things we should be doing. The Spirit of God is intimately involved in our lives."

When you read the Psalms, you can see how the Psalmists have so much prayer and praise and worship that came out of their lives as they walked with God. So incense is made by the Holy Spirit in our lives as He works and moves and shows us the Lord. It is a very simple thing, but incense that rises up before the Lord is only made by the Holy Spirit. It is not us who make that incense.

This is the question that I have for each of us: Do we trust the Holy Spirit for this work? Do we think that we have to produce this incense? No, it is the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus to us. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals the greatness and the goodness of the Lord. It is the Holy Spirit who walks with us through our troubles and difficulties. Even as we talked about hope this morning, it is the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus as our hope. He has a great work, and that work is producing incense in our lives. But fundamentally incense is made by the Holy Spirit. That is so encouraging. I do not have to be in charge of making the incense. I do not have to mix it up in the right way or be sure the fragrance smells a certain way. I am not in charge of that. It is the Holy Spirit. What a blessing! When we come to worship and to pray, it is the Holy Spirit who is in charge of that. We trust the Holy Spirit.

Incense is Pure and Holy

There is something else we find in verse 35-37. When the perfumer makes the incense, it is salted, it is pure, and it is holy when He makes it. When we make it, it dissipates; it is dirty and it is not holy. But when the Holy Spirit makes it, it is salted, pure and holy. This word pure has the thought of clean, refined like pure gold; it is pure incense. What really struck me is that it is holy.

Verse 30:36b says, "It (the incense) shall be most holy to you."

Verse 30:37b says, "It shall be holy to you for the Lord."

The incense is holy. And this word 'holy' has the meaning of sacred. It is a little different thought about what incense is or what holy is; it is sacred. It is to be considered sacred to you, and it is considered sacred to the Lord. This is a different light that I have never seen before. When we come together to worship and pray, that incense is sacred. It is like we have within us this sacred, holy thing which is the incense, the work of the Holy Spirit. And when you share or you pray, I am to consider that as sacred. This is just me speaking, my own personal feeling on it. But it is of great value; it is sacred. And not only should it be sacred to each other, it is sacred to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is sacred to Him. What a wonderful thought that is! But it is only because the Holy Spirit makes it in a certain way and it is sacred. We need to touch lightly this incense. The hand of man can ruin that incense quite quickly.

Verse 38 says, "Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people."

It is so sacred you better not mess with it. It is only made by the perfumer. Don't make it for yourself, don't try to manufacture it; it is only done by the perfumer. Then we find that incense is not just to be there; something has to happen to that incense.

The Altar of Incense

Verse 30:1: "Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense." The altar is a place for burning incense.

Verse 10: "Aaron shall make atonement on its horns (the altar) once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord."

Brothers and sisters, the altar is a place for incense to be burned. It is not a place for the incense to just rest and sit there. The incense must be burned on the altar. You know, you have an altar in your heart, that place where you pray and worship before your God, but my thought this morning is that we have an altar here. It is the place where we come and incense is burned.

Now what is the reason for the burning of incense? In the Old Testament the priest would take the coals from the altar of sacrifice and bring the coals in and put them on the altar of incense. Then he would sprinkle some of the incense that had been finely beaten and lay it on the coals, and an aroma would rise up from the incense. Incense has to be kindled for the smell to rise up before God. That altar, that place where that incense is burned has to be atoned for. The blood of the atonement once a year was applied to different things in the tabernacle, but so far as the altar goes, once a year the blood of the atonement was sprinkled on the altar of incense. This signifies that the place of the burning of incense is holy to the Lord. It is made holy by the atoning blood of our Lord Jesus.

So the place we have when we burn incense is when we come together in worship and prayer on the altar, and it is only by the blood of Jesus that we can offer prayers and worship. That altar is most holy to the Lord. Once again we see how sacred, how holy is worship and prayer. He makes the incense and when we come to pray, the incense is burned. Now how is incense burned? To me this is so simple. Incense is burned when we pray. When we open our mouths and pray. Psalm 141 says, "May my prayer be as incense before You." When we pray, the incense, as it were, is brought to the altar, and when it is burned, it releases a fragrance that goes up before the Lord. What a wonderful thing! And we find something else very wonderful about this altar.

The Placement of the Altar

Verse 6: "You shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you."

He mentions twice "in front of." The first time the altar is mentioned, it is in front of the veil that is near the ark. The second time he says, "... in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you."

At the beginning of verse 6 you have the old covenant, and in the second part of verse 6 you have the new covenant. The old covenant is in front of the veil; the second phrase does not even mention the veil. When I first read this I said, He is repeating but he is not repeating because he said, "in front of." The first time the emphasis is on the veil, the second time there is no veil. It is a glorious placement of the altar. The altar is placed in front of the mercy seat. And we know from the Old Testament that he is enthroned above the cherubim. Three times it says in the Old Testament "above the cherubim the Lord is enthroned." So the altar is placed right there before the Lord. In Hebrews 9 there is a big doctrinal controversy which this really answers.

Hebrews 9:2-4a says, "For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place."

Doctrinal people say, “No, this is wrong. This should not be in here because verse 3 says that behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant.”

There is no mention of a veil. Wait a minute, the altar of incense in the tabernacle is separated by a veil, but here the Holy Spirit puts them together without the veil. And in the doctrinal controversy they are trying to explain it all this way, and when I read Exodus what a wonderful proclamation. All of the tabernacle is prophetic; it is speaking of the Lord, and the Holy Spirit, it seemed like to me, He took delight in saying the second time without the veil the altar of incense is right before the mercy seat. And some of the rabbis that I read said that this shows a very special unique wonderful place that the altar of incense has in the tabernacle, and you can see it in Revelation. But even in the tabernacle it was not far off in the courtyard somewhere because the smell would have gone all over. They say even in Jerusalem when they burn the incense, you could smell it a quarter of a mile away from the temple. So this smell was very strong. The Lord is saying worship in prayer is as close as you can get to Me. It is right up next to the ark of testimony. He says “right in front of” twice. What a glorious place the altar has!

When we come and worship and we pray, not only is it sacred, it is so very near, as near as can be to the throne of God. If this is true, we should always have a great sense of His presence, a great sense of nearness to God. Every time that we worship there should be an overwhelming sense. And I believe the Spirit of God wants to give this to us that the place where we worship is holy and sacred and right before the throne of God, not far away.

In Hebrews it talks about drawing near. Brothers and sisters, when we worship by the power of the Holy Spirit we pray by His strength, it is on that golden altar which is right before the throne. What a glorious placement. It is also a very glorious presence of the Lord because He says, “Where I will meet with you.

In Exodus 25:21-22: “You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you, from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.”

In the tabernacle the Lord God says, “From between the cherubim I am going to speak to you.” And right in front you have the place where the people of God are speaking to the Lord as incense that rises up before Him. This shows great communion and fellowship in worship and prayer. You are speaking to the Lord, and He is speaking to you; it is that close intimate relationship.

Brothers and sisters, don't you know that when we are in the worship time, often it is the times we hear from the Lord clearer than any other times? When the brothers and sisters are raising up that sacred incense before the Lord, the Lord is speaking to you and to us. What a wonderful communion it is. It is our blessing and our honor to have this communion with the Lord.

You can see now when we say, “May our prayer rise as incense before the Lord,” we mean right there before Him. We mean that incense, that smoke that rises when we pray is right there

before the Lord. And it is difficult for us to understand the importance that the Lord places on our prayer and our worship. I know that the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for us, and in that we are part of it. But the prayers of the saints are so involved with this worship that goes on in heaven. And the prayers of the saints are somehow, which I do not understand, connected to the great judgments that are upon the earth. Have you ever thought of that?

Come, Lord Jesus

As I was considering that I said, "Lord, none of us are praying for judgment, we are not praying that the world have plagues and earthquakes and trouble and turmoil. But what is one of the greatest prayers which is the last prayer of the church? "Come, Lord Jesus." That is the last, as it were, incense that rises up from the great heart of the church. And what does it say in Revelation? "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." You see both together there. The One who makes the incense, the Holy Spirit, is crying out, "Come, Lord Jesus." And we who are in total agreement are saying, "Come, Lord Jesus." And this 'Come, Lord Jesus' has been going on for a couple of thousand years. It has been the prayer of the saints since the Lord Jesus left the first time. "Come back, Lord Jesus." "Come, Lord Jesus." And it seems to me through all the judgments in Revelation the church is not praying for judgment, the church is praying, "Come, Lord Jesus." And the Lord says, "Okay, I will break another seal." "Come, Lord Jesus," and another seal is opened. "Come, Lord Jesus," and the trumpet sounds. "Come, Lord Jesus" and have all these battles done with. And the church is saying, "Come, Lord Jesus." And it seems to me that perhaps this is the prayer that rises up continually before our God, continually before the Lion of Judah, the One who comes and takes the seals and begins to break them. The church has been praying, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Revelation 8:5: "And the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightening and an earthquake."

It is like the very coals from the altar when the angel came and took it and scattered it, and all these things began to happen. This is just me. I did not read that anywhere so just ignore that. But it seems to me how that prayer rises up within us: "Come, Lord Jesus."

Revelation 8:3: "Another angel came and stood at the altar." Where have we seen an angel standing beside an altar of incense? In Luke 1. Isn't it amazing that the first time He came the angel comes and talks to the priest who is ministering the evening incense.

The angel came and stood beside the golden altar of incense while Zacharias was ministering, putting that incense on top of the coals so that the incense rises up. What was happening outside at the same time? People were praying. Perhaps Anna, Simeon, many others were praying, "Come, Lord. Messiah, come." And right there it seems so wonderful to me that the answer came by the golden altar of incense. I find that an amazing blessing. All through chapter 1 you find the Holy Spirit coming on different ones to offer prayer and worship. How much the Holy Spirit was involved in that!

Brothers and sisters, may our prayer, our worship be as incense before the Lord, rising up before the Lord.

Let's pray:

Lord, I do pray that in the coming days we would sense Your presence with us as we worship, as we pray throughout the day. Lord, as we come together as Your people in the house of prayer, may we sense Your great presence with us. May we sense Your delight in placing us so near the throne of God. May we sense the delight You have as we pray, as that incense rises up before You. Lord, we bless You for this wonderful work. Thank You, Lord that our prayer, humble people of no value other than what You have done, could be considered as incense that rises before the very throne of God. Bless the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.