

THE KINGDOM, THE BIBLE, & US

Understanding the Bible's story, Jesus' importance, & Our place in God's Kingdom plan



Lesson 53- God Dwells Among His People: Bronze Altar; Courtyard; &
Altar of Incense
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Introduction

In this lesson we continue exploring the furniture of the Tabernacle. We will talk about two more, the bronze altar and the altar of incense. We will also discuss God's call for a courtyard around the Tabernacle to be built.

We see a clear tie in to Jesus Christ once again when we examine the furniture.

Bronze Altar

Exodus 27:1-8

The next piece of furniture is an altar made of acacia wood overlayed with bronze. Its dimensions are five cubits long by five cubits wide. It is to be a square. The height is to be three cubits. This square altar is therefore 7.5 feet length and width by 4.5 feet high.

God also wants poles of acacia wood overlayed with bronze to be used to carry the bronze altar when it is moved. The altar will have horn decorations on each of the four corners. God wanted utensils and ash trays made overlayed with bronze also.

This altar will be placed outside of the tent itself. It will be used for burning the *burnt offerings* that God commands later in the book of Leviticus. This is the altar where the Jews come to and bring their sacrifices to the priests who will offer them up on the altar in a manner pleasing to God.

We read in Exodus 40:6, "You shall set the altar of burnt offering in front of the doorway of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting."

Why do you think God positioned the bronze altar in front of the doorway to the tabernacle tent?

The position of this altar was intentional. It seems God wanted to communicate the clear message to the people that they cannot enter the tent where His presence dwells unless atonement for their sins has been made. The bronze altar was the place where the sin sacrifices were offered up. It was both a place of worship and a place where God's atoning forgiveness was issued out.

The visible message would have been evident to an approaching Jew to the Tabernacle. They must offer sacrifices for their sins at this altar, and this must happen first before there can be any fellowship and communion with God. The position of this altar also makes it clear to the ministering priests that they must have their sins atoned for as well before they may enter the tent of God's presence.

Jesus Christ Removes our Need for the Bronze Altar

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear in several places that Jesus Christ's death on the cross was a payment made for sins on behalf of sinners. He died as a type of atoning sacrifice. This is why John called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus removes our need for offering sacrifices on the bronze altar.

God was communicating to the Jews their constant need for an animal sacrifice to be a type of substitute and stand in for the person, and die in their place. Sin requires death. Rather than the person dying, the animal died on their behalf. Jesus became our sacrifice on the cross.

The Bronze Altar is no longer needed. Jesus has fulfilled its purpose.

being justified as a gift by His grace through the **redemption which is in Christ** Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation in His blood** through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; (Romans 3:24-25a)

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, **but through His own blood**, He entered the holy place once for all, having **obtained eternal redemption**. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will **the blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, **cleanse your conscience** from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Court of the Tabernacle

Exodus 27:9-18

God commands that a *court* for the Tabernacle be built. This is not a court of law where a judge resides. This is idea of a *court* means an enclosure that will make a perimeter around the Tabernacle. Think of this like a fence, or type of wall creating a barrier around the Tabernacle.

This court perimeter is to be made with pillars of wood and sockets making a type of wall. Then it is to be overlayed with curtains of fine twisted linen. The dimensions are as follows: the North & South side walls are 100 cubits (150 feet); the West & East side walls are 50 cubits (75 feet).

God gives the overall dimensions again in Exodus 27:18 as 100 cubits (150 feet) on the long sides, 50 cubits (75 feet) on the shorter sides, and 5 cubits (7.5 feet) in height. As you can tell, this is not a small perimeter fence of curtains. The total footprint of the courtyard is estimated to be 11,250 square feet.¹ There will be a gate for the court fencing that functions like a large doorway. It will be 20 cubits (30 feet) and made of blue, purple, and scarlet twisted linen.

The courtyard was meant to house many people who had come to worship outside of God's house. They could not go inside of it, only the priest could, but they could come in to the courtyard and worship in the presence of God. It would need to have plenty of room for people to line up and come bring their animal sacrifices and other offerings.

Altar of Incense

Exodus 30:1-10

God commanded for another altar, but this one was not for animal burnt offerings like the outdoor bronze one. This altar is called the altar of incense. It is to be cut from acacia wood and overlayed in pure gold. Its dimensions are 1 cubit (1.5 feet) by 1 cubit (1.5 feet) and 2 cubits (3 feet) tall. It is a square. It must also have horns on the corners and rings on the bottom legs for two poles to be used to carry it.

It is to be positioned in front of the curtain veil that separates the most holy place from the holy place. It is in the holy place room along with the lamp stand and the table of the bread.

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 598.

Aaron, the High Priest, shall burn fragrant incense on this altar every morning when he trims the candles in the lamp stand. When he trims the lamp stand at twilight (dusk), he will burn incense again on this altar.

Incense is a material that would be burned causing a smoky aroma to permeate the environment. This would have been a sweet-smelling smoke, not smoke like from a fire that can choke if breathed in.

God made it clear in Exodus 30:9 that no *strange* incense could be offered on this altar. It could not be used for any other type of offering, such as a burnt or drink offering. Only the God-authorized incense could be burned on it. Strange incense means any unauthorized or illicit type of incense.

What do you think the altar of incense symbolized? Why might it have been placed in front of the veil?

This section of Exodus we are studying does not directly tell us what the purpose for the incense altar was for. However, we can come to a good conclusion by looking at the rest of Scripture. It seems best to think of this altar of incense as symbolizing the prayers of God's people offered up before Him.

May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering. (Psalm 141:2)

According to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. (Luke 1:9-10)

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. (Revelation 5:8)

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 of the angel's hand. (Revelation 8:3-4)

The visible picture God was creating seems to be that He wanted His people to know their prayers were a sweet aroma to Him. Aaron as High Priest represented the entire

people of Israel. His presence before this altar every day offering up incense morning and evening means God was listening to the prayers of His people every day, all day. Also, this means God receives the prayers of His people as an act of worship to Him. It is a pleasing sweet fragrance to God when He is prayed to by His people. We know that through faith in Jesus Christ, we are not only forgiven, but He also becomes our Greater High Priest. He is at the right hand of the Father representing us just like the High Priest did for Israel. Also, through the inner working of the Holy Spirit, our prayers are taken directly to God the Father.

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
(Romans 8:26-27)

The Altar of Incense reminds us God wants to hear the prayers of His people. He cares about us and our communication to Him is like a sweet aroma.