

JESUS IN THE TABERNACLE

THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE — PART 2

A Study Guide from My Daily Bread Global

Quick check before we start: when was the last time you prayed for someone you're frustrated with, instead of just talking about them? Tonight has a few uncomfortable moments, and that question is a good one to carry into them.

WHERE WE LEFT OFF

Last time we stepped into the Most Holy Place and found the golden altar of incense, a picture of prayer rising in a room where priests worked. We saw that Jesus carries our prayers past the veil where we can't go. Tonight we look at how that prayer was kept, what happens when it stops, and what kind of fire it was never allowed to burn on.

THE BIG IDEA

Prayer in the tabernacle wasn't occasional, and it wasn't spectator work. It was continuous, it was served by priests who were never idle, and it was lit from one source only: the fire of the sacrifice. When those three things are in place, the room is alive. When any of them goes missing, the building might still stand, but the incense is out.

HELD UNTIL IT'S CARRIED

The top of the altar of incense had a gold border, a crown. The incense rested inside it until a priest came to carry it, in a censer, toward the presence of God. The picture is easy to feel: what we place in prayer isn't left to blow away. It's held and then carried.

Jude 24 *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.*

Revelation 8 shows the same movement from the other side: an angel with a golden censer, offering incense “with the prayers of all the saints,” and the smoke rising before God. Here's the question worth asking yourself: once something is actually in his hands, who is going to take it out? A lot of our anxiety comes from handing a prayer over and then quietly reaching back for it.

One note on access: any priest could bring incense to the altar, but only the high priest carried the censer into the Holy of Holies. For us that's why we pray in Jesus' name. We bring the prayer as far as we can, and he takes it the rest of the way.

PRIESTS DON'T SIT

There were no chairs in the Most Holy Place. Everyone in that room had something to do: tend the lamps, handle the bread, burn the incense. Peter says that's the job description we've inherited.

1 Peter 2:9 *You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*

It's easy to drift into treating worship gatherings as something to evaluate rather than something to take part in. A priest doesn't come empty-handed and doesn't need a title to be useful. Whatever you can do toward the work, do it as an offering.

WHEN THE INCENSE GOES OUT

Second Chronicles 29 describes a time when Judah's leaders had let the whole system collapse: the doors were shut, the lamps put out, and the incense no longer burned. King Hezekiah's response was to call the Levites to consecrate themselves and carry the filth out of the holy place.

2 Chronicles 29:7 *They also shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the Holy Place to the God of Israel.*

Notice who he's talking to. Not outsiders. The Levites, the people with the roles. And notice what counts as “filth” in the teaching: not only the dramatic stuff but nasty attitudes, gossip, and the way we respond when people don't give us what we wanted. It's an honest list. Most of us have something on it.

The closing question applies to the places we least expect. Ministry with no prayer. Parenting with no prayer. A marriage where we've gotten so busy complaining about our spouse that we've stopped praying for them. The incense rarely goes out by decision. It goes out because nobody is tending it.

MORNING, NOON, AND EVENING

The incense was kept burning at set times, morning and evening, so that the room always smelled of it. David describes the same rhythm in Psalm 55:17, and look at what he prays about: "Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and He hears my voice." A continuous prayer life doesn't require polished prayers. It permits honest ones, as long as they keep going up.

FIRE FROM ONE SOURCE

The fire for the altar of incense had to come from the brazen altar, where the sacrifice was made. Any other fire was called "strange fire," and Nadab and Abihu died offering it (Leviticus 10:1–2). The lesson for us is that anything we put at the center of our faith has to trace back to Christ crucified. If something else becomes the thing we're offering, even something good, we've changed the fire.

Some ways to test ourselves: elevating a doctrine above the gospel, treating a standard of dress or practice as the thing that saves, treating one denomination or building as the church, using control or fear to keep people, or building a ministry on gimmicks and personality. Ask whether any of those is quietly true of a place where you serve or belong.

SIT WITH THIS

1. Is there a prayer you handed to God and then took back? What would it look like to leave it there this week?
2. Where are you a spectator in your faith community right now? What's one thing you could do as a priest, without needing a title?
3. Which of these is closest to filth in your own life right now: attitude, gossip, or how you respond when you don't get what you wanted?
4. Is there a relationship where you've stopped praying for the person and started only talking about them? What would change if you prayed for them first?
5. Test your foundation: what do you find yourself emphasizing most when you explain your faith to someone? Does it trace back to Jesus crucified?

BEFORE NEXT TIME

Pick one person you've been critical of lately. For seven days, pray for them at the same time each morning, and say their name out loud. Don't skip the day you don't feel like it. Notice what happens to your attitude toward them.