

JESUS IN THE TABERNACLE

THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE — PART 1

A Study Guide from My Daily Bread Global

Try this before we start: walk through your home or workspace and notice what the atmosphere is like. Not the décor. The mood. Is it tense, noisy, heavy, calm? Tonight's lesson argues that the atmosphere around you isn't just something that happens to you. A priest is supposed to help create it.

WHERE WE LEFT OFF

We've been working from the inside out: the ark and the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, then the unity that holds the walls together. Tonight we step back through the veil into the Most Holy Place, the room where the priests worked. It holds three pieces of furniture: the golden altar of incense, the golden candlesticks, and the table of showbread. We're starting with the altar of incense.

THE BIG IDEA

The Most Holy Place is the place of service, and service there happened inside a cloud of incense. The altar of incense pictures prayer. The lesson is that ministry, work, and daily life aren't meant to run on effort alone. They're meant to run inside an atmosphere of prayer, because without it the smell of the outer court creeps back in.

THREE SMOKES, THREE ROOMS

Walk the tabernacle with your nose and you'd notice something. In the outer court, the smoke is burning flesh, the evidence of sacrifice and what it cost. Step into the Most Holy Place and the smoke changes to sweet incense. Go behind the veil and the glory of God appears as a cloud. Each room has its own smoke, and each one tells you where you are.

The incense did something practical. After the smell of the altar outside, the sweetness of the incense was a relief. It's a picture of what prayer does for us. We live close to dead things: regret, conflict, bad news, old habits. A regular prayer life doesn't pretend those things aren't there. It gives us another atmosphere to live in.

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

Revelation 8:3–4 *Another angel... was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints... and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God.*

WHAT THE PRIEST COULDN'T DO

Picture standing at the altar with lit incense in your hands. You can bring it right up to the veil. You can't go through it. That's where the lesson gets personal. Our prayers go as far as we can carry them, and then someone else takes them the rest of the way.

That someone is Jesus. He tore the veil, and he “ever lives to make intercession” for us. That's why we pray in his name. It isn't a closing formula. It's the way the prayer gets past the curtain. A lot of us carry a quiet suspicion that our prayers hit the ceiling. The altar of incense says otherwise: the last thing you prayed has already been carried in.

Hebrews 7:25 *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.*

1 John 5:14 *This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

A CROSS LAID OUT IN FURNITURE

Here's an image to try on your own paper. Draw a cross and place the furniture on it: the ark at the top, the altar of incense where the beams cross, the table of showbread and the candlesticks on either side, the laver partway down, and the brazen altar at the foot. Laid out this way, the tabernacle's floor plan traces the shape of the cross. Notice where the altar of incense lands: at the chest, the heart.

Treat this as a picture to consider rather than a doctrine to defend, since the Bible doesn't explicitly say it. But it fits what Scripture does say about Jesus on the cross: even then he was interceding for others (Luke 23:34). Prayer sits at the center of his work, not at the edges.

If you want to feel that for yourself, read the suffering servant passages slowly: Isaiah 42:1–9, 49:1–7, 50:4–11, and 52:13–53:12.

CREATING THE ATMOSPHERE

One more thought. Incense in a house doesn't stay in the room where you lit it. It travels. The point is that a small amount of prayer can shift something much larger than itself: a tense home, a heavy workday, a situation that's been stuck for years. And because priests serve in the Most Holy Place, we aren't just visitors who put up with whatever atmosphere we walk into. We're responsible for tending it.

Notice also that the incense wasn't one ingredient. Prayer includes requests, but it also includes praise, worship, and singing. A prayer life made only of asking is a thin version of what the altar pictured.

Luke 18:1 *Men always ought to pray and not lose heart.*

SIT WITH THIS

1. Think about the spaces where you spend most of your time: home, car, workplace. What does the atmosphere in each actually smell like right now? What's one small change you could make?
2. If “the less I pray, the more I complain” is true of you, what does your recent level of complaining say about your prayer life?
3. Do you quietly believe your prayers go no further than the ceiling? What does it change to know Jesus carries them past the veil?
4. Is your prayer life mostly requests? What would it look like to add praise or worship this week?

BEFORE NEXT TIME

Choose one place you have to be every day, whether it's a desk, a kitchen, or a commute. For seven days, start the time you spend there with two minutes of prayer that includes thanks as well as asking. Notice at the end of the week what, if anything, shifted.