

The Altar of Incense

For the past several weeks we've been studying the tabernacle in the book of Exodus. Through the daily readings in the Bible Reading Plan, and our Sunday morning preaching, we've been discovering that when God called his children out of slavery in Egypt, and they began to spend time in the wilderness, that God began forming them into his covenant people. He wanted them to get to know him. He wanted them to focus on worshiping him. He gave Moses the instructions to construct a place of worship, the tabernacle. This is the place where the people would worship God, where the presence of God would come and dwell with the people, and it was the means by which sinful people could approach a Holy God.

God gave Moses some very detailed instructions for how to build the tabernacle. All the people of Israel contributed the finest offerings they could: gold, silver, bronze, fine linens and yarns, leather hides, and fine wood. God wanted Moses and the priests to build a tabernacle because He wanted to be near His people. The story of the tabernacle is the story of the people gaining access to God. Every detail of how the tabernacle was to be constructed, and the order in which each item was placed in the tabernacle, meant something.

We learned that there was only one gate into the outer court of the tabernacle; one way in. We learned that praise and thanksgiving are the passwords to enter the gate. Not a literal password that must be given at the door, but rather, the password that begins to allow us entry toward God's presence is an attitude of gratitude; an attitude of praise and thanksgiving for who God is, and all that God has done for us. Worship begins with our motivation of loving and honoring God. And we remembered how Jesus called himself the gate through which we must enter to be saved in John 10:9.

As we made our way through the outer court of the tabernacle we encountered the altar and the basin. All worshipers brought their sacrifices to the tabernacle, and after they transferred their sins to the animal, the animal was sacrificed on the altar. The animal was killed, and its blood was poured out at the foot of the altar. The first step into God's sanctuary is the step of sacrifice.

Next we encountered the bronze basin. It was here that the priests washed their hands and feet before entering into and when coming out of the holy place. The basin was made from the bronze mirrors of the women, and it was filled with water for the continual cleansing of the priests as they ministered in the work of the Lord.

After the priests made their sacrifices and washed in the bronze basin, they were ready to enter into the first section inside of the outer court. This interior section is called the holy place.

The first thing the priest would encounter when entering the holy place is the altar of showbread to the right of the entrance. Every Sabbath day, twelve loaves of freshly baked unleavened bread, one loaf for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, would be placed on the golden altar before the Lord. This bread was also known as the "bread of face" in Hebrew, and this is where the priest spent "face time" with God. This is where the priest first entered into communion with God. Of course this picture of the bread in the Old Testament tabernacle is a powerful symbol of Jesus, the Bread of Life, and the New Testament covenant of Holy Communion.

To the left of the entrance into the Holy Place was the golden lampstand. It had seven golden branches, one in the middle and three on each side. It was covered with almond buds and flowers carved out of gold; they represented first fruits and new life. The priests kept the lamps filled with olive oil both morning and

evening so it never went out. This shining lampstand points Christians to Jesus who is the light of the world, and to the gift of the Holy Spirit which fuels us to be Christ's light in our world.

This brings us to the next item in the tabernacle, and the final item in the Holy Place which will be our focus today—the altar of incense. I'll be reading from Exodus 30:1-9 if you want to follow along in your bible, on an app, or on the screen...

¹“Make an altar of acacia wood for burning incense. ² It is to be square, a cubit long and a cubit wide, and two cubits high—its horns of one piece with it. ³ Overlay the top and all the sides and the horns with pure gold, and make a gold molding around it. ⁴ Make two gold rings for the altar below the molding—two on each of the opposite sides—to hold the poles used to carry it. ⁵ Make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ⁶ Put the altar in front of the curtain that shields the Ark of the Covenant law—before the atonement cover that is over the tablets of the covenant law—where I will meet with you.

⁷ “Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. ⁸ He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the Lord for the generations to come. ⁹ Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it.

So here we see again, in the Holy Place, the items are more valuable, they represent a higher level of worth, as the worshiper gets closer to God, to the Holy of Holies. Out in the outer court, the altar of sacrifice and the basin were made of bronze. Here in the first inner court, the Holy Place, the table of showbread, the lampstand, and now the altar of incense are all made of or overlaid with pure gold.

The altar of incense wasn't very big really. It was square in shape, about a foot and a half on each side. And it wasn't particularly tall, just about three feet in height.

Like the altar of sacrifice it had horns of gold decorating the four corners of the top rim. Once a year, the blood of the atonement sacrifice was applied to these horns.

The side of the altar had loops built into it, two on each side. Poles were slid through these loops, and men would carry the altar by holding the poles when moving the tabernacle from place to place in the wilderness, never touching the sacred altar.

The priests were instructed to make a special kind of incense for the altar. It wasn't to be used for any other purpose; it was sacred. It was only to be burned for God. The priests burned incense on the altar twice a day, both morning and evening.

We find the instructions God gave Moses about making and burning the incense in Exodus 30:34-38...

³⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices—gum resin, on'ycha and gal'banum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts,³⁵ and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. ³⁶ Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the ark of the covenant law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. ³⁷ Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the Lord. ³⁸ Whoever makes incense like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from their people."

Burning incense was not uncommon for the Israelites. But clearly, this special holy incense was only to be burned in the tabernacle. The sweet-smelling incense was burned in shallow

dishes called censers. It was used to show honor and reverence to God.

The altar of incense is where God promised to speak with his people. You may remember, when God was ready to announce the birth of John the Baptist, who would herald the way for the birth of Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, it was here at the altar of incense that the Lord chose to reveal his plan.

By the time of Jesus, the tabernacle had been replaced by the temple in Jerusalem. But it was designed and set up in the same way as the tabernacle had been.

In the very first chapter of Luke, we're introduced to a man named Zechariah. He is a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother, so he is of the priestly tribe. By this time in Israel's history, there were so many descendants of Aaron that the priests were put in divisions, and they only served in the temple when their division was called upon to serve.

Once, Zechariah's division was on duty serving as priests, and he was chosen by lot to be the one to go into the holy place and burn the incense on the altar to the Lord.

While Zechariah was at the altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to him standing to the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear. Gabriel told Zechariah not to be afraid because God was answering his prayer for a son. His wife Elizabeth would become pregnant and bear a son, and they were to name him John.

Zechariah had some doubts which he expressed to the angel, mainly because both he and his wife Elizabeth were getting on in years, and they were still childless. Gabriel reminded Zechariah that he had been sent by God himself to share this good news, so

it would surely happen. Gabriel told Zechariah that he would remain speechless because of his doubting throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy, until the baby was born, and Zechariah gave him the name John.

Meanwhile, all the other priests in Zechariah's division were waiting for him outside the holy place wondering what in the world was taking him so long in there. When he came out, and couldn't speak, they realized that he had seen a vision in there. God had spoken to his people right there, at the altar of incense.

God still speaks to his people today. Have you ever heard God? Do you believe God still talks to people? If so, why? If not, why not?

I haven't had any experiences where God's audible voice actually spoke to me. No burning bushes with voices emitting. No angels standing by the altar. I have had a couple of experiences where God seemed to indirectly speak to me. And lots of times when God seemed to speak to me through nudges and promptings.

When I was wrestling with my call to ministry—to leaving my banking career, moving my family, and becoming an itinerant preacher—was one of the times God spoke to me most directly.

I remember one time I was walking back to my desk after lunch. I was alone walking down a hallway, just kind of talking to God, letting him know I was getting kind of anxious about leaving my job soon to start seminary full time. Suddenly, I felt the presence of someone with me. It was so palpable that I actually turned to look over my shoulder to see who it was—only there wasn't anyone there. I was still all alone in the hallway. Except that I heard a voice inside my head say, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you."

Another time, when I was about one year into seminary, but still wrestling with eventually having to move my family, and uprooting them from home, school, and friends I had another clear communication from God. I was on a run near my home at the time. It went on a curvy road that wound its way through a wooded park. This was my favorite course to run, and I had run it so many times. As I crested a little hill, where the road curved down into the woods ahead of me, it was like I felt a hand on my shoulder and a voice which told me to stop. The voice in my head asked, "What do you see?" And I said I saw a road which curved ahead and disappeared behind the trees. The voice asked, "What do you see around the bend?" And I said, "I can't see what's around the bend, but I know that it's a run that I've run many times, and it is a continuation of this pretty, scenic, wonderful road. And then it was like the voice in my head said to me, "Don't be afraid of the future Mark. You can't see all that's around the bend, but God is with you. God has been faithful, and God will continue to be faithful, so you can rest assured that what is around the bend will be good, and pleasant." That promise has certainly been true!

More recently, I've been practicing a method of listening and speaking with God that Bobby Cabot taught us when she was here. It involves getting still and asking the Lord if he has a word for us, or a word for another person. Then listening to see what God says. I've tried that several times, with interesting results. I certainly sensed God speaking. I believe God still speaks to his people.

One of the reasons most people never hear the voice of God is that they don't come into the holy place with him. Remember, we've been learning that the holy place is about intimacy, illumination, revelation, and intercession. And the altar of incense is where God says he meets people and talks with them.

Most people don't hear God simply because they refuse to come into intimacy. Or once they're there, they spend too much time talking and not enough time listening. We're like baby birds that chirp, chirp, chirp until our mama puts a worm into our mouth. Then we immediately start squawking again once we swallow it!

Hearing is really hard to do without listening!

In listening prayer, it's like God is filling us up. Then, as people who minister for God, we can help fill up others with God.

A worship leader tells the story of a vision he had while getting ready for worship one Sunday. His custom is to walk around the worship space praying over the space before worshipers arrive. One weekend he was walking around praying and it was like someone changed the channel on what his eyes could see, and instead of seeing himself walking around, he saw himself on the worship platform leading worship.

He says, "I was playing my guitar and adoring Jesus with my eyes closed, and I cocked my back my head and lifted my face to the ceiling. When I did, a light broke through the ceiling of the church and shone down on my. God's face came through the hole in the ceiling, and he began to stoop down closer and closer to me, engulfing me in light and glory.

When his face was so close to mine that his nose was almost touching my nose, he exhaled. I inhaled and was filled to near bursting with the breath of God. Then I turned my face toward the congregation and exhaled. I released God's breath all over them. And the congregation inhaled, sucking in the Spirit of God. Then every one of them turned their faces to the sky and exhaled back to God. And the vision ended.

In order to pray and intercede with power, we have to come to the moment when God exhales his Spirit into us, and we inhale as much as we can hold. The word “inspired” means to be breathed into. It also means to be filled with the Spirit. Prayer and intercession must be inspired.

The directive for all prayer and intercession come from God’s heart. The passion to carry it is inspired. The strategy is God-inspired. The words and actions are God-inspired. And the fire is God-ignited.

Did you know that the fires that burned in the tabernacle were directly from God? When the construction of the tabernacle was first completed, Moses summoned Aaron and his sons. They were to begin the ministry in the tabernacle with a burnt offering and a sin offering on the altar of sacrifice. They did just as Moses commanded. When they were finished they blessed the people, and Leviticus 9 tells us that *“The glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. All the people saw it, they shouted for joy, and fell facedown.”*

This fire was to be kept burning continuously. It was never to go out. (Lev 6:13)

But right after this happened we’re told that Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu were ministering in the tabernacle. *They took their censors, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (Lev. 10:1-2)*

What happened there? The new priests, Aaron’s sons, went into the holy place to minister, but they disobeyed right away. Instead of using the fire that God lit on the altar, they just pulled

out their ancient Bic lighters and lit the fire in the way that was most convenient for them. And for the second time that day fire came down from God. Only this time it turned Nadab and Abihu into bacon.

Why? Obviously they disobeyed. But something else was going on here beyond a flagrant disregard for the prescribed process: they tried to minister using their own fire. The only fire acceptable for ministry is the one God lights.

If fire is man-made, it's an abomination. If the fire has to be sustained by human methods, it will eventually fail. God's fire is sustained by intimacy with God's heart.

Our prayers need to be ignited by God's fire, derived from an intimacy with God found in the holy place. When our prayers are ignited by God's holy fire, our prayers begin to shift from "me-centered" prayers, to "Thee-centered" prayers.

Our prayers for ourselves, and our prayers of intercession for others, begin to sound less like a laundry list of things we want, and more like they are coming from the Father's heart itself. Our heart begins to beat in unison with the Father's heart. Our breathing begins to align with God's breathing.

The altar of incense is the place where God would meet with his people in prayer. And the incense was used to offer prayers of intercession for the people.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the priest would go from the holy place into the holy of holies to make atonement for the sins of the people. A censer of incense was taken into the holies of holies to fill the room with sweet smelling smoke to shield the priest from the glory of God and the Ark of the Covenant. The incense protected the priest from God's holiness.

Intercession still protects priests today from God's holiness. Intercession protects the world from the just sentence of holiness against sin.

The difference between the priests in the tabernacle and us today is that Jesus has become our Great High Priest. Jesus's final lesson as a man on earth was the ultimate submission of obedience. Obedience, born of love, is good worship. And Jesus worshipped so well on the day he died that he earned eternal life for all of us. He also earned the position as High Priest of heaven. Hebrews 7:24 tells us that *"Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."*

What was Jesus doing on the cross? He was worshipping. He was praying the Father's heart. He was interceding for us. *"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

Imagine what would happen if our church was filled with people who passionately and selflessly worshipped by interceding and praying God's heart for our families, friends, neighbors, our church, the nation, the world, and even our enemies?

God loves it when we pray. He loves to hear from his children. He loves it when we seek to pray his heart. He loves when our breath begins to align with his breath.

God meets us in our prayers. So let us offer prayers of intercession believing in the mighty influence they have. And may our prayers rise as sweet incense unto the Lord. Amen.