

## Exodus 30:1–10, 34-38 and 37:25–29

### Introduction

Back in Exodus chapter 25 we came to Part IV of Exodus: “Yahweh is the God who desires to *dwell* among His people – to live with them as “family.”

- Exodus 25:8 — Let [the people of Israel] make me a sanctuary [a sacred space], that I may dwell in their midst.

In the midst of all the instructions concerning the plan of the tabernacle, we’ve come to a section on the priests and their role in the worship and fellowship that is to take place at God’s tent. So, at the end of chapter twenty-seven, we learned about the oil for the lamp in the Holy Place and the special responsibility *of the priests* to tend the lamp, and keep the lamp burning from evening until morning. Then, in chapter twenty-eight we learned about the special *priestly garments*. Last week, in chapter twenty-nine, we learned about the special ceremony of consecration for Aaron and his sons where they were set apart and made holy *for priestly service*. And now, this week, we move back into the Holy Place, where we learn about a third piece of furniture (in addition to the table and the lamp) and how the *High Priest’s responsibility* at this piece of furniture coincides exactly with the priests’ responsibilities in tending the lamp – thus bringing us right back to where we started. We read in chapter thirty, verse one:

**I. Exodus 30:1** — You shall make an altar on which to burn incense.

So this is our second altar at the tabernacle. Three chapters ago, we learned about the bronze altar for burnt offerings and sacrifices that was placed outside of the tabernacle proper, in the outer court. Now, we’re about to learn about a much smaller, golden altar for burning incense that’s placed inside the tabernacle itself, in the Holy Place. Later on in this chapter, God gives specific instructions for the incense that’s to be burned on the altar:

- Exodus 30:34–38 — The LORD said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you. And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the LORD. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”

These are the instructions for the incense, but what about the altar on which the incense is to be burned?

**II. Exodus 30:1–5** — You shall make [the altar] of acacia wood. A cubit [18 in.] shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth [18 in.]. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height [3 ft.]. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they

shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

By now, a lot of this might sound familiar from other descriptions of furniture such as the ark of the covenant, and the table, and also the altar of burnt offering. It's pretty easy to paint a simple picture in our minds of what this "altar of incense" would have looked like. [See **Illustration on page 9**]

So, now, the bigger question is, "What was this altar of incense *for*? What was its meaning? What's the point of burning incense on an altar?" Our first clue comes from the simple fact that this is an *altar*. We could think of an altar as the ultimate point of **contact** between God and man. So, in Exodus chapter twenty, we read:

- Exodus 20:24 — An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

The altar of incense is a different *kind* of altar, but we can still assume that the basic idea is the same. An altar is a place where man **offers** something up to God, and also where God is specially present to **accept** and to **receive** what's been offered. So, on the bronze altar in the outer court, we offer up "food" to God by burning it on the altar. On the golden altar in the Holy Place, we offer up to God *not food*, but *incense*. So what's the point of this incense offered up to God? What's the point of this special place of contact between God and man? We go on to read in verse six:

**III. Exodus 30:6** — And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the place for atonement that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you.

Notice how careful and explicit God's instructions are: "You shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the place for atonement that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. Obviously, the point of all this repetition isn't just to make sure they put it in the right spot. The point is to emphasize the **connection** of this altar with the ark of the testimony and the place for atonement that's just on the other side of the veil. [See **Illustration on page 9**] We've already seen that the table and the lamp are both connected with God's presence simply because they're in the holy place. (cf. Exod. 26:35) But **only** of the altar of incense do we read that it's to be placed "**in front** of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, **in front** of the place for atonement that is above the testimony, where [God] will meet with [His people]." This very, very close connection between the altar of incense in the Holy Place and the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place is emphasized in the Bible in at least two other places. When Solomon was building the temple, we read:

- 1 Kings 6:22 — He overlaid the whole house with gold, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar [of incense] that **belonged to** the inner sanctuary [the Most Holy Place] he overlaid with gold.

The physical location of the altar of incense is still in the Holy Place, but see how it's said to "belong to" the *Most Holy Place*. And then, look what we read in the book of Hebrews:

- Hebrews 9:1-5 — Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold... Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.

Certainly, the writer of Hebrews wasn't confused about the actual, physical location of the altar of incense! He simply understood that the altar of incense truly "*belonged*" to the Most Holy Place in a way that no other piece of furniture did – except for the ark of the covenant itself. The writer of Hebrews simply understood the true significance of these words in Exodus chapter thirty: "You shall put [the altar of incense] in front of the veil *that is above the ark of the testimony*, in front of the place for atonement *that is above the testimony*, *where I will meet with you.*"

Well, so far, it's all very interesting, but maybe we still feel a little "left in the dark." What's the point of this altar of incense – of this special place of contact between God and man? *Why* is this altar of incense so closely connected with the place where Yahweh Himself is enthroned above the cherubim, just on the other side of the curtain? We go on to read in verses 7-8:

**IV. Exodus 30:7-8 (cf. Exod. 27:21)** — And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations.

Of course, one obvious point of incense is that it should smell good, and that's what we have here: "Aaron shall burn *fragrant* incense on [the altar]." The reason for this fragrant incense isn't that it should smell good for the priests, but that it should smell good to *God* – that it should be pleasing and acceptable to Him. We can picture this very vividly as the smoke and the aroma of the burning incense passes through the veil, even into the very throne room of the Lord.

And how often, and for how long does God want to smell this sweet-smelling aroma? Every morning and every evening (at twilight) Aaron shall burn the fragrant incense, "a **regular** incense offering before the Lord **throughout your generations.**" (cf. 1 Chron. 23:30-31) This "morning and evening" schedule reminds us of the regular burnt offering every morning and every evening that we just read about last week in Exodus twenty-nine. (Exod 29:38-42; cf. 1 Chron 16:39-40; 23:30-31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:2-3; Ezra 3:2-3; 2 Chron. 13:10-11) The point of every morning and evening is that it should be daily, regular, and constant; and the point of "throughout your generations" is that it should be for all time and forever – for as long as the tabernacle stands.

And still we're left asking these questions: What's the point of this altar of incense – of this special place of contact between God and man? Why is this altar of incense so very closely connected with the place where Yahweh Himself is enthroned above the cherubim, just on the

other side of the curtain? And why does God delight to smell this fragrant incense constantly and forever? We go on to read verse nine:

**V. Exodus 30:9** — You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.

Let it be clear that this altar is *not the same* as the other altar in the outer court. This altar is for the offering up *only* of authorized fragrant incense, and *not* for the offering up of any burnt offering, or grain offering, or drink offering. In other words, this altar is *different*, and to be used for an entirely *different* purpose.

We can see the difference outwardly, but what *really is* the difference? What's the *meaning* of fragrant incense versus the pleasing aroma of sacrifices and burnt offerings? I wonder if a clue might be found in the fact that the "burnt offerings," "grain offerings," and "drink offerings" on the bronze altar can all be described as "**gifts**" offered up to God. Jesus says in Matthew chapter five:

- Matthew 5:23–24 (cf. Exod. 28:38; Lev. 1:10; 7:14; 17:4; 23:37-38; Num. 6:14; 18:11; Ps. 76:11; Ezek. 20:40; Mal. 1:9; Mat. 8:4; 23:18-19) — If you are offering your **gift** at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your **gift** there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your **gift**.

But *never* is the incense that's burned on the altar in the Holy Place ever described or pictured in any way as a "gift." Why? What is this fragrant incense that's offered up to God, and yet still *not* a gift? Now we come to the last verse, verse ten:

**VI. Exodus 30:10** — Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.

Literally, "It is holy of holies to the Lord." So, once again, we see the connection between the altar of incense and the Most Holy place – the holy of holies.\* It's because of how close this connection is that the altar of incense is to be cleansed from the pollution and defilement of a sinful people once a year on the day of atonement – the *same day* that blood is brought behind the veil into the Most Holy place to make atonement for the people. (cf. Lev. 16:20)

But there were also other times when blood needed to be applied to the altar because of the pollution of sin. Being farthest removed from the profane and common areas and closest to the presence of God, blood didn't need to be applied when just a single leader or one of the common people sinned. (cf. Lev. 4) Only when the High Priest himself sinned, or the whole congregation of Israel, did the need arise to bring blood even into the Holy Place to cleanse the defilement that had reached even to the altar of incense – which was nearest and closest and most intimately

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\* As far as I can tell, the only other piece of furniture that is identified as "most holy" is the *other altar* (the bronze altar) which is nearest to the entrance of the tabernacle and the most holy piece of furniture that can be seen or approached by a lay Israelite. (cf. Exod. 29:37; 40:10; Lev. 10:12)

connected with the very presence of the God who was enthroned above the Cherubim. (Lev. 4:3, 7, 13-18)

So, for the last time, what does it all *mean*? What's the point of this altar – of this special place of contact between God and man? Why is this altar so very closely connected with the place where Yahweh Himself is enthroned above the cherubim, just on the other side of the curtain? What is this fragrant incense that's offered up to God, and yet still *not* a gift? And why should God delight to smell this fragrant incense constantly and forever?

## **Conclusion**

It's not just the people of Israel who burned incense. The pagan nations also burned incense to their gods. The point for the pagans seems to have been to manipulate the gods – to appease them, and calm them down, and put them in a good mood with sweet-smelling aromas. (Ezek. 16:17-18; 23:41) Clearly, this is not the point of the incense at the tabernacle. (cf. Ps. 141:1-2) All *unauthorized* incense, no matter how fragrant, no matter how sweet-smelling it might be, is strictly prohibited by God. And so we read in Leviticus chapter ten:

- Leviticus 10:1–3 — Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’”

Clearly, the point of Yahweh's incense was not to manipulate God by putting Him in a good mood. If that had been the case, then *any* fragrant and sweet-smelling incense would have done just fine. And yet there was still a sense in which the offering of incense could protect the people by turning back God's righteous anger and wrath. Later, in Numbers, we read this account of what happened after the people had rebelled against God:

- Numbers 16:44–48 (cf. Lev. 16:12-13) — The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces. And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun.” So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.

We see that it was the incense that turned aside God's wrath. But it's never the incense in and of itself. It's only the incense in so far as it symbolizes and represents something else. And that “something else” is very simply the prayers of God's people – their crying out to Him, and their calling upon His name.

If incense in the pagan world was an attempt to appease the gods by manipulation, incense at Yahweh's tent was simply a sign of how God was already graciously willing to hear and to answer the *prayers* of His people – to be near and close to His people to forgive and to help whenever they called upon His name. And so we read in Luke chapter one:

- Luke 1:8–17 — While [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God... he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.** And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for **your prayer has been heard**, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John... He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

It's easy to assume that the “prayer” of Zechariah was his prayer for a child (never mentioned in Luke), but I wonder if it was more than this. Perhaps it was also his prayer for the salvation and deliverance of Israel. Perhaps this prayer of Zechariah was also the prayer of the whole multitude of the people as they were praying outside at the hour of incense. Perhaps this prayer of Zechariah was the prayer of all the faithful in Israel who had been praying throughout all the generations. (cf. Acts 10:1-4) How beautiful and wonderful it would have been, then, for God to send His angel to announce the answer to all these prayers at the “hour of incense” – even making his announcement while standing at the right hand of the altar of incense itself. The incense pictured the prayers of God's people rising to Him throughout all the generations, *but even more importantly*, it pictured God's delight in the prayers of His people as a fragrant and pleasing aroma. Think about that! The fragrant sweet-smelling incense was a picture of God's gracious willingness to hear and to answer prayer – to be near and close to His people to forgive and to help whenever they called upon His name. And so in the book of Revelation we read:

- Revelation 6:9–11 — When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw **under the altar [of incense]** the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. **They cried out with a loud voice**, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

In the book of Revelation, it's the prayers of God's people, pictured as rising up from the altar of incense, which are being answered in God's judgement on the world. And, so, we read again in Revelation chapter eight:

- Revelation 8:1–5 (cf. 9:13-14; 14:17-20) — Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood **at the altar** with a golden censer, and **he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God** from the hand of the angel. **Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth**, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Finally, in chapter sixteen we hear the saints again crying out in praise to God for His faithfulness to hear their prayers, and to avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth.

- Revelation 16:4–7 — The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” **And I heard the altar saying**, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!”

What’s the point of this altar – of this special place of contact between God and man? What is this fragrant incense that’s offered up to God, and yet *not* a gift? It’s a picture of the prayers of all God’s people for mercy, and for help, and divine enabling, and deliverance. It’s a picture of one of the most awesome means that God has given to us to draw near to Him. But even more importantly, it’s a picture of God’s gracious delight in the prayers of His people. The psalmist prays:

- Psalms 141:1–2 — O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! **Let my prayer be counted as incense before you...**

Have *we* truly comprehended this? Have we truly understood that God delights in our prayers offered up to Him in Christ’s name – that they are to Him as a fragrant, sweet-smelling incense? And if we truly did believe this, by faith, what difference do you think it would make?

Why is this altar of incense so very, *very closely* connected with the place where God Himself sits enthroned above the cherubim, just on the other side of the curtain? It’s the visible picture of how God has promised to be nearest and closest to His people to forgive them and to help them whenever they cry out to Him in prayer, calling upon His name.

- Deuteronomy 4:7 — What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?
- Psalms 145:18–19 — The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.

So, then, why do we spend so little of our time and so little of our energy crying out to Him and *calling* upon His name? It’s as simple as that! And what failure, and what defeat, and what lack of growth and maturing in true wisdom and righteousness have we experienced as a result?

In the end, how can we not marvel at God’s **goodness** in commanding that incense should be offered up to Him **both morning and evening** – “a **regular** incense offering before the Lord **throughout [the] generations.**” God invites us—more than that, God *calls* us—to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), and to “be constant in prayer.” (Rom. 12:12) We’re instructed in Ephesians six to pray “at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Eph. 6:18) And in Colossians chapter four we’re exhorted: “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Col. 4:2) Do we hear these commands and exhortations and feel

burdened, or do we hear them and feel as if our hearts would burst with awe, and gratitude, and thanksgiving? The point of these commands isn't every waking hour spent in prayer. The point is simply regular, consistent crying out to God and calling upon His name for deliverance from sin, for forgiveness, and for His always needed help and aid.

Have we truly understood that God delights in our prayers – that they are to Him as a fragrant, sweet-smelling incense? Have we truly understood that God has **promised** to be nearest and closest to us to forgive us and to help us whenever we cry out to Him in prayer, calling upon His name?

- **Romans 10:11–13** — The Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in [the Messiah, Jesus] will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, **bestowing his riches on all who call on him**. For “**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**”

This salvation that's granted to all who call on the name of the Lord is *all* the riches of God in bringing us *all the way* into His heavenly kingdom! Will you joyfully live out your life daily calling upon His name in prayer? Maybe, now, we can skip ahead to Exodus 37 and read with humble joy in our hearts:

- **Exodus 37:25–29** — He made the altar of incense of acacia wood. Its length was a cubit, and its breadth was a cubit. It was square, and two cubits was its height. Its horns were of one piece with it. He overlaid it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And he made a molding of gold around it, and made two rings of gold on it under its molding, on two opposite sides of it, as holders for the poles with which to carry it. And he made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with gold. He made the holy anointing oil also, and the pure fragrant incense, blended as by the perfumer.

