

# The Tabernacle of Moses

## Lesson 5 – The Altar of Incense

**Exodus 30:1-10 KJV** And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. [2] A cubit *shall be* the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits *shall be* the height thereof: the horns thereof *shall be* of the same. [3] And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about. [4] And two golden rings shalt thou make to it under the crown of it, by the two corners thereof, upon the two sides of it shalt thou make *it*; and they shall be for places for the staves to bear it withal. [5] And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. [6] And thou shalt put it before the vail that *is* by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that *is* over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. [7] And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. [8] And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations. [9] Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon. [10] And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it *is* most holy unto the LORD.

### I. INTRODUCTION—THE LESSON OF THE CROSS

The next piece of furniture to be addressed is out of sequence as the order appears in Scripture beginning in Exodus 25. The next piece in Scripture would be the Brazen Altar, which begins with Exodus 27. However, we started with the Ark, which was in the Holy of Holies. Then we addressed the Table of Showbread and the Golden Candlesticks both of which were in the Holy Place. Before we leave the Holy Place there is one piece of furniture that was present. It was the Altar of Incense or it could be commonly understood as the second altar or the altar of prayer. On a side-note, one can look in Exodus 37 where there is a summary

given of the articles of furniture and find them in the order that we are working through in this study.

If you are familiar with the Search for Truth Bible study, you will remember that on one of the pages of the chart was a diagram that showed the Tabernacle in its layout, which resembled the Cross. At the top of the cross was the Ark of the Covenant, on the left was the lamp-stand, on the right was the table of showbread, and in the center is the altar of incense. Further down was the brazen laver and at the foot of the cross was the brazen altar. For each piece of furniture there is a corresponding wound that Jesus suffered while He was on the Cross.

- The Ark was where the crown of thorns rested.
- The lamp-stand and table correspond to the nails in the hands.
- The altar of incense is linked to the broken heart.
- The laver with the wounded side and the brazen altar were the wounded feet.

So for every place Christ was wounded, the Tabernacle had already set forth a pattern that foreshadowed it. To make a further analogy, consideration should be noted that when Paul listed the armor of the saint in Ephesians 6, each piece also proved to show there was protection now given to the attacks from the devil.

- The helmet links with the crown of thorns.
- The breastplate with the broken heart.
- The belt of truth with the wounded side.
- The shoes with the wounded feet.
- For the hands, a sword was placed in one hand and the other hand held the shield.

With these few analogies again one notes the great power of the Word. To the man who is willing to meditate on the Word (Josh. 1:8; Psalm 119) great treasure comes to his life.

## **II. THE ALTAR OF INCENSE**

## A. The Dimensions and Design of the Altar—Exodus 30:1-3

**Exodus 30:1-3 KJV** And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: *of shittim wood shalt thou make it.* [2] A cubit *shall be* the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits *shall be* the height thereof: the horns thereof *shall be* of the same. [3] And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about.

Again with very precise instructions, Moses passes on the pattern that he received in the mountain to Aholiab and Bezaleel in the construction of the altar. It was to be a cubit wide, one cubit in depth, and two cubits high. This comes out to a square altar being 18 inches wide and long and 36 inches in height. The Ark, Table, and grate of the Brazen Altar were only 27 inches in height while the Altar comes in at 36 inches.

This encourages us to remember the high ministry that prayer has in the life of a saint of God. But chiefly it serves as a reminder of the High Priestly role of intercession and ministry of Jesus Christ. His priesthood is endless and without comparison. Faith can rise in our hearts when we understand that the ministry of this altar went through the wilderness with the Israelites. The same principle holds true for the saint of God in that the intercessory ministry of Jesus Christ is accompanying and supporting us through every wilderness that we make in our trek to Heaven from this earth.

As the altar was square, no matter what direction it was approached from it was always the same. This promotes the idea of the stability that comes with the altar of prayer. Prayer is not just a temporary thing in the life of a believer and something that he grows out of. It is literally a ministry that can be grown into. The more that we are given to prayer we discover the wide variances that take place when we pray.

- We learn those times of calm meditation in prayer.
- We know the feeling of deep agony of heart in supplication and intercession.

- We understand the child-like dependence in asking God for the basic needs of our physical and spiritual beings.
- We know the high places that praise in prayer can take us to. But none of this will ever be accomplished until we enter into the practice of prayer.

The construction was again wood overlaid with pure gold just as with the other pieces of the sanctuary. The most precious metals were used to form this altar of intercession. This hints at the intercessory ministry of Jesus Christ. He was the perfect intercessor who lives forever to make intercession for the church (Romans 8:26-27; 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1). This ministry of intercession could not be fully brought out until there was the fire of affliction that entered His life at Calvary.

On the corners of the altar were horns that were symbolic of God's power and strength. The horns were to remind the priests of the salvation, protection, security, sanctuary, and help that God's power provided for all of Israel. It should serve to remind the saint that God can help in our most desperate of needs (2 Cor. 12:9; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:6; Psalm 23; 28:7; 40:17; Isaiah 41:10; 46:4).

In 1 Kings (1:50; 2:28) Adonijah fled to the horns of the altar for refuge and received it. Joab attempted the same thing but there was a difference in his approach to the altar than that of Adonijah. There is an implicit warning found for those who come charging to the horns of the altar for assistance. If they are presumptuous sinners or hypocritical deceivers it will be of no use to them (Exodus 21:14). To attempt to depend on the blood of Jesus Christ for salvation and still continue to live a life that is dishonoring to God is foolish.

An incredible illustration that proves the power of this altar is evident when Korah and his company disapproved and rejected the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). More than their rejection of Moses and Aaron was their rejection of God's plan of worship. They chose to lead people astray by attempting to show them their own nearness to God. But the sins of the people could only be dealt with through the work of the chosen priest, which was Aaron. Jude (v. 11) tells us of Korah's gainsaying which basically is the equivalent of stating that Jesus Christ cannot save or redeem sin. Aaron (Numbers 16:46-48) takes the censer and stood between the living and the dead and the plague was

lifted from the people. This reflects the power of the position of Jesus Christ as the mediator, which took place upon His sacrificial death. This very analogy puts to rest the whole idea that postmodernism presents and deludes people into thinking there is more than one way to be saved. Aaron's actions reflect the grace of God while Korah's demonstrates the hellish deception of the devil.

Also a crown was present around the top of the altar to contain the incense as it burned. The coals did not need to fall off the altar and die out on the wilderness floor. The same holds true for the every saint of God, our prayer has to be protected by some boundaries of protection that can enclose the coals.

### **B. The Location of the Altar—Exodus 30:6**

**Exodus 30:6 KJV** And thou shalt put it before the vail that *is* by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that *is* over the testimony, where I will meet with thee.

The altar rested directly in front of the veil this only separating it from a direct alignment with the Ark. It is not clear how close the altar was to the veil but it was very close to the presence of God. That the offering of prayer was the closest thing to God's presence again reiterates the priority of prayer. Intercessory praying is the most powerful kind of prayer because it is the kind that requires the most from its participants.

- Intercessory prayer is close to the veil.
- Intercessory prayer is close to the throne of God.
- Intercessory prayer is close to the glory of God.
- Intercessory prayer is close to the place where God's eternal mercy and grace reside.
- Intercessory prayer is close to the door of answered prayer.
- Intercessory prayer is close to the most sacred fellowship and communion with God.

The force of prayer is its ability to get us closer to God.

### **C. The Power of the Incense and Smoke—Exodus 30:7-8**

**Exodus 30:7-8 KJV** And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. [8] And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.

Every morning and every evening the altar was refueled with incense. In the mornings as the priest would dress the lamps, he would offer incense. In the evenings, when he would light the lamps he would offer incense. Concerning the ministry of prayer it is important that it takes place in the morning and in the evening.

**1 Chronicles 16:11 KJV** Seek the LORD and his strength, seek his face continually.

**Matthew 7:7 KJV** Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

**Luke 18:1 KJV** And he spake a parable unto them *to this end*, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

**Ephesians 6:18 KJV** Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

**1 Thessalonians 5:17 KJV** Pray without ceasing.

The coals that were on the altar of incense came from the altar of sacrifice. If there is no fire from sacrifice then there will not be a source of fire for the altar of prayer. This is why God does not respond to all who pray. The brazen altar was a place of holy atonement and the sacrifice offered there was acceptable to the righteous and just nature of a holy God. These hot coals on the altar served the purpose of burning the incense.

Notice the contrast but necessary relationship between the two altars.

- First the brass and then the gold.
- First the sacrifice and then the sweetness.

- First the affliction and then the communion.
- First the sacrifice and then the prayer.
- First Abraham's sacrifice and then the smoking furnace of incense (Genesis 15:9-18).
- First Solomon's sacrifice and then the glory of the Lord (1 Kings 8:5-11).
- First the tarrying and then the power (Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4).

This is God's pattern throughout the entire Bible and we discover that the same is true for all saints who hunger after the things of the Spirit.

The incense would rise upward toward God and would be pleasing to Him. The prayer that ascends to God is that which is accompanied by fire as the incense would only rise when it was hot. Dead, passionless praying does little for the Kingdom of God. There must be that evident breakthrough every time we find a place of prayer. The more aggressive the coals burned the greater the fragrant odors would be. There will never be a fragrance without a fire.

**Revelation 8:2-5 KJV** And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. [3] And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. [4] And the smoke of the incense, *which came* with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. [5] And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast *it* into the earth: and there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings, and an earthquake.

The picture in Revelation 8 is the exact replica of what the priest did in the Tabernacle. He took the censer, filled it with the smoke of the incense and carried it into the presence of God. Peter presents that identical picture in 1 Peter 2:9 when he incorporates us into the place of a royal priesthood. As that is the case, then some probing questions are in order. Why don't we pray any more than what we do? When we do pray who can take those prayers away from God? There is an answer; the devil nor his demons nor this world or those who inhabit it. Our prayers are safe in the hands of God. We are very blessed to be able to pray!

When the prayer of intercession gets into the presence of God, as it moves beyond the veil, God takes it and suddenly His glory overwhelms the smoke of incense. To those who give themselves to intercessory prayer they can change the atmosphere of someone's life or that atmosphere of a church or even an organization.

So the golden altar gives the following implications about prayer:

- **It is universal**—symbolized by the form of the foursquare altar.
- **It is powerful**—symbolized by the horns.
- **It is human**—symbolized by the wood.
- **It has glory**—symbolized by the gold.
- **It has royalty**—symbolized by the crown.
- **It is acceptable**—symbolized by the blood sprinkled on it.
- **It is precious**—symbolized by the incense.

There were three types of smoke that was present in the Tabernacle:

- **The Smoke of Sacrifice**—This was present on the brazen altar.
- **The Smoke of Incense**—This came from the golden altar and was that of prayer.
- **The Smoke of Divine Presence**—This was present in the Holy of Holies at the Ark. It was that of divine presence or the Shekinah of God.

Only once a year could the priest go into the presence of the Ark and experience that smoke of divine presence. The vast majority of his time was spent with the smoke of sacrifice and the smoke of prayer. Both of these ministries of sacrifice and service will be the predominant aspects of our walk with God. Service and sacrifice always precede glory.

As we look at the quality or the aroma of each place, it is clear that in the outer court the priest had to deal with the stench of the burning flesh of animals. But when he progressed on into the Holy Place there was the sweet aroma of incense, which would clear the way for him to get into the presence of God. Clearly one always moves from a place of sacrifice to a place of fellowship. They both work to balance each other as they work in tandem. This has to be lived out



in our personal lives and it also has to take place in the corporate life of the Church.

However, you cannot live in an atmosphere of dead things and for those who get hung up in the outer court, their lives end up being ruled by legalistic thoughts and concepts. By the same token, you cannot live in a constant atmosphere of the sweet incense either. For those who attempt to live in this area, there is no underpinning of commitment to godliness and righteousness.

#### **D. The Power of Uncorrupted Prayer—Exodus 30:9-10**

**Exodus 30:9-10 KJV** Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon. **[10]** And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it *is* most holy unto the LORD.

This altar was to be very carefully protected. It was not to be corrupted by an inferior fire or incense nor was it to be misused with another kind of sacrifice. Anything that was placed on the altar and was outside of the parameters of God's design was sinful. God longs for a people to stand by a holy altar and offer incense to Him that is pleasing. He desires a church that will live holy lives and pray, constantly seeking His face.

Two particular instances stand out where this law was violated. The most familiar is probably that of Leviticus 10 when Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire on the altar and God took their lives. Nadab and Abihu were not outsiders. They were the sons of Israel's priest and the nephews of Israel's leader. They had been to the mountain with Moses and Aaron. They had looked on the powerful demonstration of glory that accompanied this presentation of God's power. They were in on the early stages of the construction of the Tabernacle. Much of the great things of God, they had witnessed and their own familiarity with holy things is what sank them.

How does a man come to that place? These answers are only supposition but when your relationship with God is nothing more than emotional fervor. It

can decline when the things of God become more academic than experiential. Our relationship with God can be eroded when we are busier with activity than with godly devotion. Our spiritual man chokes when we pursue positions more than purpose and our efforts are spent more to glorify self than God. All of these roads cause men to make small allowances in their character and with a sense of entitlement, the downward path is taken.

The other example is in 2 Chronicles 26 when Uzziah decided to usurp the role of the priests and he was smitten by leprosy in the Temple. How many people have suffered a spiritual death because they misused what God intended as holy? How many have suffered spiritual leprosy because they usurped the role that God intended for them in the Kingdom?

Uzziah's destruction was ushered in by his pride. He was a conqueror, a builder, a farmer, a commander, and a political leader. He got too big for God. When he picked up the censer to violate the precincts of the Temple, God smote him with a disease of corruption and he was buried in shame.

Both of these instances demand our attention if we are to attend the altars of prayer that God has ordained for us to follow.

### **III. CONCLUSION—WHAT IF THE INCENSE IS CORRUPTED?**

Consider an arresting question for the conclusion of this lesson. What if the incense is corrupted? The answer is found in 2 Chronicles 29 (vv. 5-16). It also has a remedy as to what we are to do when this takes place. We are to cleanse ourselves from the habits and sins that are corrupting our altars.

**James 1:21-22 KJV** Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. [22] But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

**Colossians 3:5-10 KJV** Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: [6] For which things' sake the wrath of God

cometh on the children of disobedience: [7] In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. [8] But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. [9] Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; [10] And have put on the new *man*, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:

**1 Peter 2:1-2 KJV** Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, [2] As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:

We must turn every portion of our heart toward God and His Kingdom. The growth sometimes is rapid. Almost overnight there are victories we enjoy and there are accomplishments that come. But there are also times that it seems as if every step is a battle and every path we try to take is littered with obstacles and hindrances. These are the times that it is important to keep your altars holy and your worship pure.

Jesus calls from the worship  
Of the vain world's golden store,  
From each idol that would keep us,  
Saying, "Christian, love Me more."

In our joys and in our sorrows,  
Days of toll and hours of ease,  
Still He calls, in cares and pleasures,  
"Christian, love Me more than these."

Cecil Francis Alexander