

A Sweet Smell For the Lord

Exodus 30:1-38

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn to Exodus chapter 30. Let's begin with reading Exodus chapter 30: 1-10.

Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. Its length shall be a cubit, and its width a cubit, it shall be square, and its height shall be two cubits; its horns shall be of one piece with it. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around it. And you shall make two gold rings for it under its molding; you shall make them on its two side walls-on opposite sides-and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. And you shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. "And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. And when Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a libation on it. And Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout you generations. It is most holy to the Lord.

Amen. Thus far this reading of God's holy and inspired word. Let us look to Him in prayer.

Our Lord and our God as we again come to study this ancient place of worship ordained by Your own Spirit, commanded by Your own word, we ask that You would teach us of things that to pertain to our worship and service and that You would cause us to understand the finished work of Christ even better, in light of the teaching of this book and this passage. This we ask in Jesus name, Amen.

Many scholars puzzle over the chapter that we're looking at tonight. They puzzle

over it partly, because of its placement. Why suddenly is the altar of incense so close to the holy of holies, being dealt with in chapter 30? It had been mentioned in earlier chapters, it had been eluded to in earlier chapters. But, the command for its building is dealt with separately, and what about these other things that are dealt with in chapter 30 along with the altar of incense? It seems to many scholars that this is a passage of leftovers. That it is Moses' version of "Oh, and by the way, there was some other stuff too," because when you get to Exodus 32 the topic changes momentarily. Exodus 31, that will be the last part of this particular section of the book of Exodus, deals with those who were assigned to do the building of the temple and various instructions for them. And so it occurs to many scholars that this is just an "Oh, by the way" chapter, that Moses throws together all the things that he hadn't had a chance to say before, and they are fairly disconnected, and so there thrown together in a jumble.

But I want to suggest to you that there is a definite logic to this placement, and that logic is this: The altar of incense could not be used until the altar of sacrifice had done its work. The altar of sacrifice symbolized the need for atonement. The altar of incense especially symbolized the prayer and worship of Israel going up to God, and God's acceptance of that worship in manifesting Himself in the cloud of incense inside the tent of meeting. It would have been like a little miniature pillar of cloud, as God manifested Himself in the wilderness. But you can't get to that altar of incense as a priest, until the sacrifice has been offered, until you have been cleansed at the laver, and then you go inside of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, to engage in that worship which symbolically manifests the prayers and the worship of the people of God going up to God. So there is a reason why Moses would have waited to explain the altar of incense and the bronze laver and the function of the priest in utilizing those instruments and coming into the tent to offer the incense here in chapter 30.

Realize now the altar of sacrifice is different from the altar of incense. The altar of sacrifice is in the courtyard. The altar of sacrifice is larger. The altar of sacrifice is the place where, literally, the animals are placed upon it and sacrificed and blood is strewn on it and all around it. The altar of incense has no animal sacrifice on it. It has no bread sacrifices or meal sacrifices. It has no drink offering sacrifices. Only one kind of sacrifice goes up from it: the sacrifice of incense.

And so Moses has beautifully distinguished those two altars, to keep those things distinct in your own mind, and there is a tremendously important spiritual message in that distinction. And I hope to elaborate on that as we look at each part of this chapter together tonight.

Let me say quickly that this chapter has five sections. Verses 1 through 10 give you the instructions regarding the altar of incense. Verses 11 -16 give you directions about a census being taken of the sons of Israel and ransom money being required from all of them for the worship of the tabernacle. Thirdly, in verses 17-21, we find instructions regarding the bronze laver that we have just

referred too. Fourth, in verses 22-33, we find instructions regarding the anointing oil which was used to consecrate the priests, the furniture, and the tent of meeting itself in the course of the worship. And finally, in verses 34-38, we find instructions regarding even the ingredients that were to be used for the incense and perfume that were going to be utilized in this ritual. And in each of these sections we learn respectively about prayer and atonement and ransom and redemption and cleansing for service and Christ purification for His people and more. So in the time that we have together tonight let's look at this great passage.

I. The altar of incense spoke of the presence of God, His pleasure in and acceptance of the satisfaction of His people, and of the prayers of the Mediator and the people to Him.

Let's begin in verses 1-10 and look at the incense altar. In verses 1-6, specifications are given for the construction and placement of the incense altar, and then instructions are given in verses 7-10 for how it is to be used. The altar of incense spoke of the presence of God as we hinted at just a few moments ago. That cloud of incense was probably a reminder of the visible manifestation of the invisible God, the nearness, the presence of the invisible God with His people. Just as He had been with them in the wilderness and manifested Himself in the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire by day and night, so also this cloud of incense was a visible reminder of His nearness, His presence with His people. And so the altar of incense speaks of the presence of God.

But it also speaks of His pleasure in and acceptance of the satisfaction of His people. Before the priest ever got to the altar of incense to begin lifting up that worship, especially that prayer, they have already slaughtered the animals, they have already been cleansed themselves, and then they come into the house.

And the fact that God would manifest Himself and draw near to His people at that altar of incense is an indication that He has taken pleasure in and accepted the sacrifices that His people have offered. And of course the altar of incense also speaks of the prayers of the mediator. In the case of the Old Testament though, those are the priests and the prayers of the people. The prayers of the priests are representative of the prayers of the people. And so at the altar of incense that incense that is being wafted into the air by the priest is a symbol of a visible marker of the prayers of God's people going up. But that also points forward to the intercession of Jesus Christ.

Let's look at these verses closely for a few moments. First, in verses 1-5, these are instructions for another altar. And this altar is distinct from the bronze altar of sacrifice. You remember the general rule is, the closer to the mercy seat, the more expensive the material. Whether it is the coverings, the curtains, or whether it is the metal used on the altar. The altar of sacrifice is far away from the mercy

seat. It's at the entrance of the courtyard. It's made of bronze, some sort of a copper tin combination which would have been used by the Israelites. But the altar of incense, because it's right in front of the curtain on the way into the holy of holies, is covered with gold. And so once again, the closer one is to the mercy seat, the more precious the metal. And on this altar, within the tent before the holy of holies, was to be offered not animals but incense.

Now the use of incense in worship was wide spread in the near eastern world and there are churches that still do it today. Eastern Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic churches, high Anglo Catholic churches will use incense in the course of their worship. But at least part of the symbolism is, of course, the presence of God in the cloud drawing near to His people. We'll talk about the rest of the symbolism in just a few moments.

Notice as well, as you look at verses 1-5, that the dimensions of this altar are much smaller than the altar of sacrifice. It didn't need to be as big as the altar of sacrifice. The altar of sacrifice had to hold some mighty hefty sacrifices, but this altar of incense only was used for this one thing, and instructions for making it are given in verses 1-5. And then the placement of it is commanded in verse 6.

Notice again, the order of approach into the mercy seat is bronze altar of sacrifice first, that's where the blood sacrifice was made. Then the priest had to be bathed at the bronze laver. Now that makes perfect sense. You remember we talked about the bloodiness of those sacrifices. We mentioned, for instance, Josephus' description of one particular Day of Atonement during the reign of Nero, in which something like two hundred thousand animals were slaughtered at that one altar. Now you can't imagine the amount of blood. So having a laver for cleansing makes perfect sense before the priest goes into the tabernacle. Having been cleansed ceremonially, he then goes into the tabernacle and offers up incense at the altar of incense.

Notice as well, in verse 9, that only a certain type of commanded incense was to be offered on this altar. That will play into another story in the first five books of Moses, for you remember, the very sons of Aaron who had heard these commands contravened them in their worship and received in their bodies the due penalty for sin. Only commanded incense was to be offered. No strange incense.

What does that mean? Well if you look at the end of the chapter from verses 22 on, the rest of that section of the chapter describes for you the secret formula. This is the 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' formula for the proper way to make the incense. You had to make it this way. It had to have these ingredients. It's the secret formula. It's the formula of the only kind of incense and perfume that is acceptable in the worship of God. And any other thing is called strange incense or strange fire.

Notice again that on this altar nothing is to be offered but commanded incense; no burnt offerings, no meal offerings, no drink offering. Now, what are we to make of this? What is the New Testament significance of this particular passage?

What do we get out of this passage as New Testament Christians, other than obvious knowledge of how things were done in the Old Testament? Well at least this, the New Testament sees this altar of incense as a figure for prayer. In Luke 1: 8-11, do you remember that when Zechariah is performing his duties at the time of the offering of incense, everyone is gathered and we're told in Luke 1:10 that the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. So there was already a connection in the minds of the people of God between prayer and that offering of incense. In fact, that connection is made explicitly in the book of Psalms.

And may our prayers go up as incense. That very image is picked up by John in Revelation chapter 8: 3 & 4. You remember John is speaking to people who are marginalized, they are people who are persecuted, they are people who are looked at as insignificant in the world. And he paints them this picture of these bowls of incense being lifted up into the very throne room of God by angels. And what does he say? In Revelation 8:3 and following, John says "another angel came and stood at the altar holding a golden censer and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints went up before God out of the angel's hand."

Now you see what John is saying to these Christians that feel insignificant and marginalized. He's saying, let me tell you that your prayers are being brought in the very presence of God, and they're being counted as acceptable in His sight. Do you remember the bowls of incense with the prayers of the saints that come before the presence of God before what happens? Before the blast of the trumpets, before the breaking open of the seals. What's John's point? John's point is, that though you may feel insignificant and marginalized, though you may be persecuted, it is your prayers which God is responding to in accordance with His eternal will and decree to control the future history of the world.

And so this picture of angels ministering before this gigantic altar of heaven is picked up by John right out of the passage that we're reading here. And so when we look at Exodus chapter 30:1-10 and see the altar of incense, we see it pointing to the intercession of the saints, and the prayers of the saints being offered up to God. But of course, ultimately it points to the intercession of Christ and therein we see the distinction between the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense. The altar of sacrifice manifests Christ's work of atonement on the cross, in which He offered His own body on the tree as a sacrifice for our sins. But the altar of incense manifests His ongoing intercession for His people, just as the New Testament says He is at the right hand of God every living to intercede. And so the sacrifice prepares the way for Him to serve as our effectual interceding

mediator and high priest. And so Reformed theologians have for many, many hundreds of years emphasized that the altar of sacrifice points to the atoning work of Christ at Calvary. Whereas, the altar of incense points to the interceding work of Christ as our great high priest, as it were, at the right hand of the Father conveying to Him the prayers and desires of His people's hearts.

II. Atonement money, ransom money, had to be collected for all Israel.

Look with me then, secondly, at verses 11-16. First of all we see the altar of incense. Then we had this interesting description about the census and poll tax. The Lord also spoke to Moses, saying, "When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the Lord, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the Lord. The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the Lord to make atonement for yourselves. And you shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel, and meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for yourselves."

Here, we have a description of the census being taken of all the Israelites. And then ransom money, atonement money, is collected for all of them lest God judge them with the plague. What is the significance of this census and poll tax? Very tempting isn't it, to turn this into a stewardship sermon. Everybody is supposed to be participating in the support of the temple. And of course there is a practical purpose to this. That money, that half shekel, was a small amount collectively for all of Israel, but it was a great help in aiding the ongoing work of the service of the temple of God. So there is a practical purpose to it.

But it's the symbolism that I want you to see. It was already a principle in Israel that the first-born belonged to God and a special sacrifice was offered on behalf of the first-born sons of Israel. God had said, "the first-born are Mine." But if you offer the sacrifice in their place you can continue to keep them. But in the Old Testament, all of Israel was also considered God's first born and so in this passage we have an explanation of the principal of redemption. The symbolic nature of this ritual is made clear by the uniform amount that was demanded and by the fact that it was demanded of everyone.

Everyone alike in Israel is a sinner. Everyone alike in Israel, rich or poor, prominent or obscure, priest or no, is a sinner in need of redemption, in need of ransom. No one has a privilege status before God, before His tabernacle; everyone needs atonement, everyone needs ransom, everyone needs

redemption. All are like sinners in need of mercy and forgiveness, and though this money practically contributed to the up keep of the service of the temple, symbolically it reminded the people again of their need for atonement.

Have you noticed how many times from Exodus 25-30 God is reminding us that we need atonement? Do you think He's making a point? Do you think there is something there that He wants us to pick up? Over and over He weaves in symbolic elements to the structure of the sanctuary and to the worship of the sanctuary to press home this one truth: there is no fellowship with Me without atonement. And it's the same thing with the ransom money.

III. The priests had to be made clean by the washing of water before they entered the tent.

Thirdly, look at verses 17-21. Here we have the bronze laver described. The priests we've already said had to be made clean by the washing of water before they entered the tent. Let's hear what God says in His Word here. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying. "You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing; and you shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it. And Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it; when they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to minister, by offering up in smoke a fire sacrifice to the Lord. So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they may not die; and it shall be a perpetual statute for them, for Aaron and his descendants throughout their generations."

Now we've already said, certainly there was a practical value in the midst of the carnage of this sacrifice. But clearly symbolism is at work because the priests only wash their hands and their feet. They are symbolically, they are ceremonially, cleansed at this bronze laver, and they had to be ceremonially cleaned before they entered into the tent. The priests had to be ceremonially consecrated before coming into God's presence. And the passage here in verses 20-21, says "lest you die." Death for the unclean priest is the penalty.

Now there is probably a linkage between this concept and Christian baptism. We are ceremonially washed in water baptism and consecrated to the service of God. That water baptism itself is not the cleansing baptism. It is Spirit baptism. Just as this ceremonial baptism of priests on the way into the tent would not have fully cleansed every uncleanness in their bodies. But it would have symbolically shown their recognition that they need to be cleansed before they come into the presence of God.

Now Jesus did not need such a cleansing as the Old Testament priests. And the author of Hebrews emphasizes this, especially in Hebrews 7-10, that Jesus didn't have to offer sacrifices for Himself as the priests did. Jesus didn't have to be

cleansed. The priests did. Jesus in His moral perfection and authority was perfect. He was already an acceptable sacrifice to God.

But, there is a very interesting thing about this passage. Let me ask you to turn with me to the end of the Old Testament to Malachi. This struck me tonight as we were rehearsing the Christmas portion of Handel's *Messiah*. And it occurred to me that there's an interesting fulfillment of this point in Malachi. You will remember in Handel's *Messiah* there is a chorus based on Malachi 3:3, "And He shall purify the sons of Levi that, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." And you know the context of Malachi is clear. If you look at Malachi 3: 1-4, the priests had been disobedient, the priests had not followed God's law. The priests are not holy.

And Malachi is longing for a day when God will purify the priesthood, when He will make them to be like they ought to be, shepherds to the people of God, serving the people of God faithfully, doing the sacrifices of God. And so he speaks of a day when the messenger of the covenant will come and He will purify the priests, the sons of Levi, so that they can offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

But when Jesus comes He purifies the sons of Levi in a way that perhaps none of the Old Testament saints could have guessed. And that is this: He brings and end to the offerings of the sons of Levi in offering the perfect sacrifice - Himself. And He extends efficacy to the hundreds and hundreds of years of offerings that they have offered through the real offering and sacrifice which He renders up to God. He makes all those offerings pure and acceptable before God, as well as offering up a sacrifice that will never, ever have to be repeated again. And so the Lord Jesus fulfills even the picture and symbolism of the bronze laver, because, He is the clean priest who needs no cleansing Himself, who takes us within the veil.

IV. Spices and anointing oil to die for.

The fourth and fifth sections of this chapter deal with the aromatic anointing oil and the ingredients for it, and the ingredients of the incense. And I want to say that this incense and perfume is literally to die for. You saw the instructions there. Look at verses 22 and following. "Moreover, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take also for yourself the finest of spices: of flowing myrrh five hundred shekels, and of fragrant cinnamon half as much, two hundred and fifty, and of fragrant cane two hundred and fifty, and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin. And you shall make of these a holy anointing oil, a perfume mixture, the work of a perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. And with it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lamp stand and its utensils, and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the

laver and its stand. You shall also consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be holy. And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister as priests to Me. And you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on anyone's body, nor shall you make any like it, in the same proportions; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever shall mix any like it, or whoever puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from this people.'"

Now, once again the practical and symbolic interests again intersect here. Imagine the smells of the tabernacle, of thousands and thousands of slaughtered carcasses, and blood running ankle deep. The smell would have been putrid. It's called, I understand a sweet aroma before the Lord. Surely there's a bit of irony in that. And so any priest would have wanted lots of incense. "Please Lord, lots of incense, lots of perfume, let's get it everywhere around you, the stronger the better, Lord, anything to smell but those sacrifices that have been offered." And the symbolism is dominant. The anointment of the priest, the anointment of the tent, the anointment of the furniture, constitutes the utensils and the priest and the tent itself as acceptable before the Lord.

Notice again, God emphasizing that things have to be set apart and cleansed and consecrated before they're acceptable to Him. Once again we are struck by just how much ritual action had to be done, simply to render the priests and the furniture and the utensils and the sanctuary acceptable to God. God is sending a very clear message. And the same thing again in verses 34-38. Here we read, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. And with it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting, where I shall meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. And the incense that you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the Lord. Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people'"

Once again we see a strong distinction between the sacred and profane use of this thing. I was reading one commentator who said that earlier this century an expert on Scripture decided that he would take these ingredients and try and make some of this himself to see what it would smell like. And the commentator, who is commenting on this action said, "Of course such an action would have been unthought of by any good Jew and the person who did it would have been immediately killed." And of course that's true. That's exactly what's being said here. You can't make this for yourself, because God has set it apart as sacred.

Notice also that some of the ingredients listed here in the recipe of the incense are ingredients elsewhere used for sealing covenants. We don't have time to explore that now, but there is a wealth of truth there. Do you remember in the Old

Testament the reference to the covenant of salt? That's a way of talking about a covenant that is very sure, because something very precious and valuable has been used to seal the covenant. Those ingredients are mentioned right here in verses 34-38. But again, the incense represents lifting up our worship to God. And in the New Testament we're told that we are to be ourselves, a sweet aroma and acceptable sacrifice to God, in both Romans 12 and II Corinthians 2. May God bless His Word. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Lord we have barely scratched the surface of the significance of Your word and our heads are spinning with the glory of the symbolism. Help us then, we pray, to glory in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great sacrifice who has united us to God. We give you praise in His name. Amen.

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