

BFF324 The Altar of Incense

Scott Moore: Welcome to the "Building Faith Families" podcast with Steve Demme. I'm your host, Scott Moore. Thanks for joining us today. Good morning, Steve. How are you today?

Steve: Today our focus is on the altar of incense. We're going to read it first. Then make some applications. It's pretty straightforward. I didn't find anything particularly interesting in the original languages. It's an altar. It's incense, with smoke and a sweet fragrance. Which is what you'd expect from an altar of incense.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for this important and necessary piece of furniture that You put into the tent of meeting. Help us to understand it more thoroughly, and be able to apply it deeply.

I pray that You help us as we consider it and read the scriptures, to have insight and understanding, perhaps even more than I do at this point. Even as we contemplate it, with Your help and Your presence, I pray that it will come to life for us in a new way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Steve: Exodus 30:1-5 "You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. 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.

Several weeks ago, if this would have been the first piece of furniture that we had studied, we would have taken some time to talk about acacia wood, but we've already done that. We assume a cubit is about a foot and a half.

This altar was about foot-and-a-half square on the top and about three feet high. It had horns, which were crafted of one piece with it. The horns remind us of the horns that were on the altar in the outside in the courtyard, where we were offering sacrifices.

However now we're in the tent of meeting and the horns, like the other horns are of one piece with it. It's overlaid with pure gold, it's sacred, it's special. It has a molding of gold around it similar to the table where the showbread was.

There are golden rings for transporting it because this was part of the tabernacle, which was often moved. There is some question about where this particular piece of

furniture was. Was it inside the Holy Place, or was it inside the Most Holy Place? There is some discussion about that, I'll put that way.

There are theologians and scholars on both sides. I'm not going to get into that because I don't think it's very clear either way. The altar of incense was very near the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, and was made of fabric. I think that the smoke, the fragrance, the smell that came from the burning incense would have wafted into both chambers because of Exodus 30:6, "You shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony where I will meet with you."

However, there are other verses later that make you think that it was in the Most Holy Place. I like to think that the fact that it filled both of those rooms, those chambers with a pleasing fragrance.

Exodus 30:7-8 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. This was twice a day. I'm going to get into this a little bit more later. This was the same time that he was taking care of the lamps that he was going to take care of burning the incense.

I'll tell you why I think another reason it's probably in the Holy Place, but real close to the veil, it's because we know that Aaron was only able to go into the Most Holy Place once a year.

In this particular part of the tent of meeting, he could go into every day because he needed to every morning and every evening, he was going to take care of the lamps and burn the incense. To me that makes you think it's probably in the Holy Place.

According to 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 Jehovah."

Now you read that and you think, "Wow, maybe he did it when he went in once a year." That's why it's not really clear. Perhaps it was still in the Holy Place, and once a year when he was going into the Most Holy Place that he would also anoint this altar. Let's just hold that thought.

They had to be careful because this was not a light duty. It says in 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."

When I heard those words as I was reading through this, "unauthorized incense" all I could think of was Nadab and Abihu. These were Aaron's sons.

Leviticus 10:1–2, "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. The fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died."

Then later says something about these priests are not supposed to drink wine. Leviticus 10:9 "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations."

If we connect the dots, perhaps Nadab and Abihu were drinking and maybe it affected their senses, and they thought, "Hey, let's go be like dad. Let's offer sacrifice. Hey, we're priests, we can do this." They took it lightly. They offered the exact thing that God said not to offer and they died. Wow, there's a lot to that, but I just want you to get the background.

Where did this spice come from? This was part of the offerings that we read about many weeks ago. Exodus 25:3–6 "This is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense."

In 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."

You're not supposed to mess with this stuff. This is a unique, precious, fragrant blend of spices that God gave them the recipe and said, "Don't just use this for the common stuff to have it in your homes, this is a unique smell to the tabernacle."

We've talked about how frankincense and other smells they trigger memories. I don't know. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why, because God wanted this whole tent to be filled with this fragrant aroma, this sweet smell, this incredible recipe that He put together. This is a divine composition, and He doesn't want it to be common. This is not something everybody would be burning in their own tents, this is something that is unique to God.

Twice a day, when Aaron went in to make sure that the lamps were burning, he was also to take care of the incense. When you read that, you can't help but think of the chapter before. I think it's one of the most incredible promises in Exodus.

It's starting in the 38th verse through the 43rd verse. "This is what you shall offer on the altar, two lambs, a year old, day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. With the first lamb, a tenth measure of fine flour mingled with a fourth of a hin of beaten oil and a fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering. The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, and shall offer with it a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to Jehovah. It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before Jehovah, where I will meet with you to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel."

We've covered the basics of the altar. This is not only a sweet smell that's filling the tent, but this is smoke which goes up to God. Twice a day, they're offering the lamb. These pure, one-year-old beautiful lambs, obviously representing Christ. They're offerings. They're a pleasing aroma. They're a food offering going up to the Lord. These are things that we're offering on earth, we the people of Israel, and they're going up. Then God says, "When you do that, I'm going to come down, and I am going to meet with you. I'm going to come down, and I am going to talk to you."

Right there He says, "I will meet with you, I will speak to you there. I will meet with the people of Israel." This reminds me of James 4:8, "Draw near to God, He will draw near to you." Or Ephesians 2:13 "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

This is a connection with heaven. This is special stuff, and that's why, like Nadab and Abihu, we can't mess with it, we can't offer it in an unauthorized fashion. These priests, had the task of maintaining this connection with heaven.

The altar of incense was also in the New Testament? Luke 1:8-12 "While he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, 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."

You remember what we just read, twice a day there was this window you might say, where they were to offer up the lamb. They were to go in and take care of the oil, and they were to burn incense. This expression is new, it says, "The hour of incense."

"There appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." There you go, prayers go up and the angel of the Lord comes down, and he visits him. He meets him like He said He would in the book of Exodus.

I thought that was fascinating, because there we have what we read about still being maintained except not in the tabernacle but now in the temple, and Zechariah was administering it.

Also in Revelation 5:6–9 "Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty–four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"

Scott, you and I are not only believers adopted into the family of God, sitting in the back row, we have been made into a kingdom, and we're priests. We're like the priests of old. While they're offering up incense, we're offering up prayers.

If we share that priestly mentality, 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 takes on a new meaning, when Paul exhorts the believers to: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

We used to hear new believers often say when we were younger, "I want to know what God's will for my life is." Now I can say, "Oh, that's easy. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances."

This is very similar to Psalm 100, which is a call for us as priestly believers is to be priests unto God. Even though we might not walk around with our hands raised, we can have our hearts raised. "Pray without ceasing," even while we are walking around. we can still be presenting ourself before God. We are having an attitude of being thankful, rejoicing, and standing in faith as priests by the Lord of the whole earth. I think it is a beautiful picture because I can do that. I can walk around believing, rejoicing, and giving thanks because that's a priestly function just like offering the incense.

Revelation 8:1–6 "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 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. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.”

This is an incredible picture of cooperation. This is us, offering the prayers of the saints. As an example consider that we have been praying for a long time for God to eliminate the murder of innocent babies. Abortion has to cease. I like to think in my mind that there is a bowl up there. There's a bowl of incense. It's assigned to take care of the murder or the infanticide in our culture.

The more I pray, the more that bowl is filling up. There comes a time when the time is perfect. In the proper time, an angel comes along, and he adds incense to it. Perhaps it's the prayers of Jesus, our high priest, who's sitting at the right hand of the Father now praying.

Perhaps his prayers provided the incense, I don't know. All I know is this incense is added to the prayers of all the saints. Then this angel takes this censer and boom, things happen on earth.

Perhaps this is where a lot of these plagues, these judgments which are soon to appear on the earth because we certainly know God has every right to judge us as a nation because of this incredible infanticide, and a whole bunch of other ones. I'm just using that as an example.

We're cooperating with God, with our prayers. We're standing before God, and we're lifting up our hands. We're presenting ourselves and we're saying, "Father in Jesus' name, deliver us from evil, deliver us from this plague.

Stop the spirit of infanticide, that we have so hardened ourselves that we're able to murder babies not only in the womb, but outside of the womb now in different states." There will come a time when those prayers are going to be answered. Those bowls of incense are going to be poured out. It's quite a picture.

Do you remember after Korah's rebellion? Numbers 16:41–50 On the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of the LORD.” And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. And Moses

and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and 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. Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped."

"The plague had already begun. Aaron put incense and made atonement for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped." I like to think of that as intercessory prayer. Sometimes you and I are praying, and we're standing between the lives of people dying and the people being saved.

Lets think about the matter of abortion, there are people every day -- thanks to the work of birthing centers and pro life advocates who are on the streets -- who are giving free sonograms to parents, who are about to have an abortion, and they're seeing that's a real child, and they're stopping. While they're doing their work, we can do our work.

We can pray. We can fill up those bowls of incense. We can deliver people from death. We can deliver babies from death. There is so much in this that I feel like I'm just getting warmed up. This is what we are called to do as priests is to pray without ceasing, like offering incense, and fill the tent of meeting.

We can keep standing by God, even when we don't know how to pray. We can say, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Deliver us from evil, give us our daily bread." We can continue to pray prayers that we know, but we're going to fill up those bowls of incense until these things are full. Amen.

Scott: I tell you, that's a whole different picture than the one I had in my head before studying this a little bit, and listening to you, because the only experience I've had with incense has been at a couple of high church services that I've been to where the priest -- either an Episcopal or a Catholic service that I'd been to -- where they're walking down the aisle swinging the little thing full of incense and the smoke is coming out.

It permeates the whole place. I never understood what they were doing that for. Then the only other experience is that hippy attitude in college where people are burning incense in their dorm rooms for whatever purpose to stink up the dorm room,

basically. This is a little different picture when you consider the bulk of prayer, the wrath of God, and that kind of stuff.

Steve: There may have been a physical need for it because I don't know how people picture this in their mind. There had to be a smell coming from offering the animals right outside the tent of meeting that couldn't have been pleasing. Perhaps this was to shift gears.

However now we're in the tent and it's cleansed perhaps by the prayers, or the sacred fragrance. When you put together the tabernacle with Revelation, you really get a different picture. These are prayers. These are the prayers of the priests and the prayers of the saints.

Steve: When Moses was given the pattern for the Mount, he got that from what he saw in heaven. John, in the book of Revelation, he's simply recounting to us what he sees in heaven. There's a lot of similarity between the tabernacle and Revelation. We've seen that over and over again.

When we fully grasp what was written in Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus, then it brings to life the book of Revelation in a whole new way.

Scott: Definitely.

Steve: Let's pray. Father, thank You for these truths which I feel like I'm still just scratching the surface of. Thank You for this picture of sacred, fragrant, holy, consecrated incense on this holy altar that goes up before you. It's a pleasing aroma. It was the priest's responsibility to maintain that. I pray that You'll help us to get a glimpse in a new way that we, as priests, according to scripture that we can present faith that we can stand by You, that we can offer up something that is a pleasing aroma to You, and also has a great impact on the world.

I pray that You'll help us to be faithful, help us to be in faith as we fill up those bowls of incense until the day when they are judiciously applied, and justly applied to those on this earth. We pray today, Father, thy will be done on earth, just as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scott: Amen. That's our show for this week, folks. Thanks for joining us for the Building Faith Families podcast with Steve Demme. If you have a question for the show, email Steve at spdemme@gmail.com. If you have a question for me, you can reach me at scott@unsocializedmedia.com. Thanks for joining us. Have a great week.