

## Sweet Altar of Prayer (Exodus 30:1-10)

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What's sweet to you? Smell of coffee? Bacon? Favorite meat grilled, smoked? Baking dessert?

- The sweet aroma fills all around. Maybe you love to take in a pastry or plant or perfume?
- The odor of an ocean breeze? New \_\_\_\_ smell? Freshly cut pine, a real Christmas tree?
- Maybe there's a scent or season or something you breathe in and it brings fond memories
- after rain (the flood) Noah offered a sweet-smelling savor to God to recall covenant grace

What smells sweet to God? Turn to Ex 30 for the answer of what scent God wants in His house

- We've seen in the context, meat burned rightly on His altar was a pleasing aroma to Him
- This month we had a BBQ at camp & super senior lunch--Israel's priests did lots of BBQ
- Some of it they ate, other parts they burned outside, but there's another altar that's inside

Enter His tent to fresh baked bread on the right and keep walking to an incense altar in the back

- Right in front of the veil, a sweet incense recipe burned where God met with His people

**Look at Exodus 30:34** *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),** <sup>35</sup> and make **an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy.** <sup>36</sup> You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony [ark of covenant] in the tent of meeting where **I shall meet with you.** It shall be most holy for you.*

**Context of series: Israel's worship in the desert tabernacle after coming out of Egypt**

For us this is black and white on a page but for them it was a color 3D multi-sensory experience

- The sense of **smell** would instantly be hit by the sweet spices of a perfumed incense blend
- The sense of **hearing** by bells always jingling on a priests's robes as he served in the tent
- Entering that holy tent of meeting a priest could **feel** the warm candles he lit on his left
- The priest could **taste** his portion of the bread of the table of God's presence to his right
- He would **see** the gold tabernacle furniture and glorious cherubim art lit up by candlelight
- And as we **hear** about this, may all our senses **feel and taste and see** that the Lord is good
- The book of Hebrews says all this is to show the gospel and Christ as superior or sweeter
- v. 23 talks about 'sweet-smelling cinnamon,' but this all points to something still sweeter

Eph 5:2 *Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering ...to God for a sweet-smelling aroma* <sup>1</sup>

**That language of sweetness and pleasing God by an offering for people is from Ex 30**

So as we look at the altar where sweet incense was offered we'll also look to our sweet Savior.

*Ex 30:1 "You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. <sup>6</sup> And 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.** <sup>7</sup> And Aaron shall burn **fragrant incense** on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, <sup>8</sup> and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, **a regular incense offering before the LORD** throughout your generations. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

- This is the most holy word of the Lord and this was crucial to Israel's Day of Atonement
- Aaron was Israel's first high priest, and only his descendants ministered at this gold altar
- 2 of his sons Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized incense and instantly died, Lev 10

King Uzziah, not in Aaron's line, burned incense unlawfully and he was struck with leprosy.<sup>2</sup> Numbers 16:40: *no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the LORD, lest he become like Korah and his company [the rebellion where they brought censers with incense to burn, thinking they could take Aaron's place, but God killed them all. v. 42 says they] 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...* <sup>46</sup> *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.**"* <sup>47</sup> *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.*** <sup>48</sup> *And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.*

**So that's all part of the imagery of the altar of incense and grace by an intercessor**

Jesus the judge of the living and dead stands between us and God's wrath going out to sinners

- He came in our midst to make atonement for His people and stop judgment we deserve

Incense in the Bible had to do with intervention to save, and it also had to do with intercession

- We'll look at intervening / paying a ransom next time in 30:11 and following

- Today I want to focus on interceding / praying in relation to Israel, and Jesus, and us

Ryken calls it the '[sweet altar of prayer](#).' I can't improve on that but I need to improve in prayer

**Outline:**

- 1. The incense and prayer we need**
- 2. The intercession of Jesus for our needs**
- 3. Some implications we need to apply**

[The incense and prayer](#) connection is implicit in this context and explicit in the broader context.

- Rev 5:8 has '*bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*'-incense symbolizes prayer
- Ex 30:1 is burning incense, smoke ascending to a high ceiling (implied going up to God)
- v. 6 says this altar is in front of the mercy seat where God met them (place to commune)
- This is the closest OT Israel could approach God's presence except on Day of Atonement
- The high priest at the incense altar could inquire of the Lord on the other side of the veil
- No spiritually minded man would go through rituals like this without praying to the Lord
- The incense altar in v. 3 is square (cubit math 1.5 x 1.5 feet wide on top, it's a short stool)

The table and ark were rectangular as was the holy place, only one other thing was square in it

- The breastpiece of the high priest was square, and on it the names of tribes he'd pray for

*28:29 So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD [implies high priestly prayer]*

**The small square altar and square breastpiece both seem to connect to prayer**

30:10 connects this altar to the making atonement on its horns once a year, with specific prayer.

*Lev 16:12 And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil <sup>13</sup> and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die...* <sup>18</sup> *Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood...and put it on the horns of the altar all around...<sup>21</sup> ... lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins....*

- That's what Ex 30:10 is describing and it included a prayer of confession for the people
- On the Day of Atonement the high priest went behind the veil with incense from this altar
- He was pleading the blood of the substitute sacrifice and interceding for a sinful people
- Incense went with intercession and the smoke in the holy of holies veiled God's full glory
- Exodus ch 33 says no one can see God and live, but a cleft or cloud can shield man's eyes
- So man wouldn't die by seeing God direct, sweet incense went up with prayers for grace

A poet imagines the priest thinking ‘this is intense, I take burning coals off the altar for the incense  
 The sweet aroma fills the room, The smoke protects my eyes—one sight of [God] seals my doom...  
 I feel like running scared, hoping I’m not unprepared, Stunned with fear--no one comes in here but once a year  
 ...After counting to three, next time I inhale, I’m in the Holy of Holies beyond the veil!  
 The first thing I realize is I’m thrilled that I’ve entered into God’s presence and yet I’m still alive!’<sup>3</sup>

How sweet and awful ... amazing grace, how sweet

What started with a prayer of confession would turn to praise going up with the sweet incense

- I’ve had to confess my sin of prayerlessness and carelessness and PTL He’s gracious
- But there’s a sweet fellowship symbolized here that I miss and need more of like you do
- Remember God’s presence led Israel in desert by a big pillar of fire and pillar of cloud
- His holy tent had fire (a lamp) and cloud of incense for His intimate presence in prayer<sup>4</sup>
- That was in the law but turn to the gospel of Luke ch 1 for how Jews came to apply this
- Incense and prayer go together in Ps 141:2 ‘*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you...*’
- Another translation has ‘*Accept my prayer as incense offered to you...as an evening offering*’ (NLT)

David’s not a priest offering incense sacrifices but he links them to intercession or supplication

After David the temporary tabernacle and its altar was in the Jerusalem temple

Lk 1:8 *Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, <sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. <sup>11</sup> And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard...*

- So he was praying as he was offering incense, and God answered his prayer for his wife
- Don’t fear that God doesn’t hear and don’t feel prayer doesn’t do much or go anywhere
- God’s people were praying outside, the hour of sweet incense was a sweet hour of prayer
- We need that, too, pray for spouses, children, multitudes, Jerusalem’s redemption (2:38)
- Those are some of the things we’ll pray for tonight, and our nation, nations and churches
- Ex 30:6 said God would meet them there at the altar and God met Zechariah at that place

Do you have a time and place where you meet God in prayer? We need this

Now turn to Rev 8 and to the end times this incense altar imagery goes beyond earth to heaven

- In Rev 6 souls under the altar, the voice of the martyrs prays ‘*O sovereign Lord, how long...*’
- Rev 8:3 is the answer: ‘*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, <sup>4</sup> and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God...*’ [and then He answers]

So Israel’s altar of incense pictured a heavenly reality with our prayers to the end

Turn to Heb 7 and Amy Carmichael explains this from her mission field in India: ‘I saw incense used, as it has been from time immemorial in India, in simple household ways. You throw a few grains on burning charcoal and a column of smoke rises straight up. Anyone coming into the room notices the fragrance long after the smoke has disappeared. It fills the room, floats out through the open doors and windows, and for an hour or so, if the air be still, you are still aware of it about the house. I never watch that white column of smoke, laden with its own peculiar fragrance, without a grateful thought of that of which it is the figure [symbol]. There is nothing in our prayers that would cause them to rise. But they are cleansed and perfumed and lifted. It is all of [Christ] who ever liveth to make intercession for us.’<sup>5</sup>

That takes us to a 2<sup>nd</sup> point that’s sweeter than incense: The intercession of Jesus for our needs

Look at Heb 7:25, Amy was quoting one of the sweetest truths about Jesus: *he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

- What keeps us from utter ruin is sweet Jesus saving to the uttermost and always praying

- A great High Priest ever lives and pleads for me, before the throne of God, all my needs<sup>6</sup>
- Better than OT priests who died, Jesus always lives to always make intercession for us
- Sweeter than any sweet incense, it's all about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know
  - o There is a name I love to hear & love to sing its worth, the sweetest name on earth
  - o When He was born, there were angels heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plain
  - o At His triumphal entry, children's sweet hosannas ring all glory, laud, and honor
- Now His resurrected ascended majestic sweetness sits enthroned in the sweet by and by<sup>7</sup>
- And as we heard last week, He and His Word should be sweeter than anything to our soul
- The OT images of incense and an intercessor are fulfilled as Jesus draws us near to God

After talking about His intercession for us, Hebrews mentions '*the golden altar of incense*' 9:4

- Then it says the holy place while it was still there was '*symbolic for the present age*' v. 9
- The blood on the incense altar signified '*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*'
- That's Heb 9:22, look at 9:24 '*Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*'<sup>25</sup> Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own [Day of Atonement in Ex 30]<sup>26</sup> for then he [Jesus] would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.<sup>27</sup> And...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment...'

**Are you ready to die today and face judgment?**

Everyone here has an appointment you can't reschedule with death, before the sovereign Judge

- The bad news is you're not good by God's law and trying to do or be good all falls short
- All sinners deserve death and eternal judgment, that's the bitter truth of man's bitter end
- But there's good news, sweet news, by the shed blood of Jesus your sins can be forgiven
- Not by religion or Catholic incense, it's by redemption in Christ on the cross for our sin
- Confess your sin and Jesus as your Lord you commit to follow, plead His blood for you
- Trust His life, death and resurrection and intercession for you as your mediator in heaven

**He forgives any sin, attempted murder with a sword or denying the Lord**

Like Peter, Lk 22:31 "*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*"

- Simon Peter sinned greatly, but PTL true believers by grace turn back and help others to
- How awful: Satan wants to you, but how sweet: Jesus prays for the saved so Satan can't!
- He can tempt but he can't take our salvation, after sifting Jesus said there's strengthening
- In my weakness, when I fear my faith my fail, Christ will hold me fast by praying for me

**He prays to the utter end and saves to the uttermost His elect**

Rom 8:33 *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [nothing/no since Jesus is interceding for us!]*

**What security and sweetness: He's praying for those He elected and justified**

Jn 17:9 *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours...keep them in your name, which you have given me...I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves...I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me...that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory...*

- How sweet! He keeps us to be with Christ, to see His glory, love & full joy of the Trinity!

**He's praying we see Him glorified as we're unified, sanctified and evangelize in His joy!**

As we go, the intercession of Christ for our needs means **some implications we need to apply**

- Will you go or support others to go to let the nations be glad & spread gospel joy abroad?
- In Phil 4:18 Paul calls a mission gift he received a ‘*sweet-smelling aroma...pleasing to God*’<sup>8</sup>
- Last month you gave an extra \$4000+ to C4C (some VBS kids), how sweet that it is, PTL
- A lost world needs to know and believe and many will if they see His love in His church
- Where’s that in Exodus? Theme verse, 9:16: His name is to be proclaimed in all the earth
- Missions exists because worship doesn’t in places without true prayer to the true God<sup>9</sup>

God says of the incense altar Isa 56:7 ‘*at my altar...my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*’

- Jesus quoted that to Jews who corrupted God’s holy place away from prayer by all people
  - The incense of prayer wasn’t just for that holy place or even just for Jews even in the OT
- Malachi 1:11 *For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name ... [time of Messiah, Gentiles in every place will pray in Jesus’ name]*

- Not saying we’ll smoke incense in churches, but what incense meant, we’ll offer prayers
- Let’s pray for people like Chris and Seth to make His name great in hard to reach places
- Let’s pray we make it known in our school or workplace, in every place we live or go to

Love to tell the story, and it will seem each time you tell it more wonderfully sweet

Sweeter than incense, 2 Cor 2:14 says ‘God **manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life** (NASB95)

- What kind of aroma are you? Is there a sweet savor of the Savior? A fragrance of Christ?

People know what’s sweet to you. Sweeten your speech with more grace

One of the sweetest old ladies ever told me ‘Philip, I’ve prayed for you every day for 4 years’

- This month Greg Ross gave me a hand-written prayer lyrics for me from Diane, 4/2008
- When you intercede for others, it’s powerful and can bring personal comfort to tell them
- Priests interceded for names on their heart, the NT says we’re priests to pray for others
- Just like the altar was always kept burning, we’re to pray without ceasing AM&PM 24/7
- We don’t need sweet incense for prayer, we can have a sweet hour of prayer anywhere
- Jesus in the garden said ‘watch and pray’ and ‘could you not keep watch for one hour?’
- Tonight we’ll have an hour of prayer, a little less with testimonies, can you not join us?
- Teaching isn’t enough, we need sweet fellowship around tables and prayer (tonight @ 5)

Acts 2:42 says the early church ‘*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...*’<sup>46</sup> *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,*<sup>47</sup> *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*<sup>1</sup> *Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer...* [they had prayer times and we need prayer times for all those things]

APPLICATIONS TO PRAYING FOR EACH OTHER – DIRECTORY, APP, GROUPS THAT PRAY, 2819, \*TONIGHT\*

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<sup>1</sup> NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Chronicles 26:18-20, cf. Isaiah 6:1.

<sup>3</sup> Shai Linne, "The High Priest."

<sup>4</sup> I owe this insight to Iain Duguid, "The Altar of Incense," *TableTalk Magazine* (December 2017), 22: 'The lampstand itself was a kind of miniature pillar of fire, memorializing God's presence with His people in the wilderness. The incense altar formed a corresponding pillar of smoke to accompany the lampstand's pillar of fire. What is more, the smoke from the incense itself, constantly rising from the altar, came to symbolize the prayers of God's people constantly ascending before the Lord.'

<sup>5</sup> Amy Carmichael, *Gold by Moonlight* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1970), pp. 157, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Charitie Lees Bancroft, "Before the Throne of God Above."

<sup>7</sup> These lines are from the hymns He Keeps Me Singing (Luther Bridgers), O How I Love Jesus (Frederick Whitfield), Angels We Have Heard on High & All Glory Laud and Honor (various authors), Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned (Samuel Stennett).

<sup>8</sup> NKJV.

<sup>9</sup> This part is influenced by and indebted to John Piper's intro to *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*.