

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 30:1-10, 34-38

To understand more about the Altar of Incense.

Read the Text:

You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. 2 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. 3 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. 4 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. 5 You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. 6 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. 7 And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, 8 and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. 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. 10 Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.” (Exodus 30:1-10, ESV)

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), 35 and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. 36 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. 37 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. 38 Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.” (Exodus 30:34-38)

Study the Text:

The Altar of Incense

Verses 1 through 10 of Exodus chapter 30 outline the essential construction details of the Altar of Incense, to be placed in the Holy Place, just in front of the entrance to the Holiest Place. Below is a breakdown of some of the key details.

CONSTRUCTION

The Altar of Incense, like many other furnishings within the Tabernacle, was to be constructed of acacia wood (Ex. 30:1). The size of the altar was “a cubit” in both length and breadth and “two cubits” in height (Ex. 30:2). Additionally, like the bronze altar described in Exodus 27:1-8, the Altar of Incense had horns that were to be consecrated once a year, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood from the sin offering (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16). Like other furnishings in the Tabernacle, the Altar also had golden loops with poles slid through them “with which to carry it” (Ex. 30:5). Moreover, the Altar was then entirely overlaid with gold, which, as John Durham notes, was for this reason that it was “sometimes called ‘the Altar of Gold’ (see also Ex. 39:38; 40:5, 26; Num. 4:11; 2 Chr. 4:19).”¹ Additionally, it



¹ John I Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3 of Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 399.

was to be decorated with “gold molding around it” (Ex. 30:3), similar to that of the Ark (Ex. 25:11) and the Table (Ex. 25:24).

PLACEMENT MATTERS

The placement of the altar was significant. Verse 6 says: “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.” The altar was likely centered on the curtain wall that separated the Holy Place from the Holiest Place, directly in front of the veil entrance. This location was not only where the LORD would meet His servants, but given that incense smoke rises, the placement was likely strategic in that the smoke of the incense would pour into the Holiest Place, where the LORD dwelt. In the placement, there is further correspondence between the Altar of Incense and the Bronze Altar. The Bronze Altar stood in the courts just outside of the Holy Place, and thus the smoke from the fragrant offerings could have been smelled from inside the Holy Place. Similarly, the incense smoke could likely have smelled in the Holiest Place. They were also constructed similarly (with minor deviations in size and materials) and seemed to be on the exact timing schedule.

TIMING MATTERS

The timing of the incense offering coincided with that of the morning and evening sacrifices described in 29:38–42. The offerings were spaced out as far apart as possible within a day, at 12-hour intervals. When the priests made offerings on the Bronze Altar, they perhaps even used the coals from this Altar as an ignition point for the Altar of Incense, which was lit simultaneously.

A SPECIAL INCENSE (VS.34-38)

We have included verses 34 through 38 because this passage describes the special incense required on the Altar of Incense. God would not have just any fragrant incense burned on the special Altar. Given the prevalence of incense use in India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, the kind of incense mattered. Everything in the Tabernacle must be set apart. The Lord specifically directed Moses to “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” (Ex. 30:34-35). Apart from frankincense, the other required ingredients needed to make this special incense “cannot be confidently identified.”² Even if they could be identified, the ratios of each part are not listed.

This is an example of an important point to consider. Modern Christians often approach the Bible as if it were a textbook, and this is to force a weight onto the text that it was never intended to bear. Exodus is a narrative description of what God did on behalf of the Israelites. A record, of sorts. It is not necessarily a textbook with the exact measurements. We need not fret over the ratios or the same ingredients. To focus on those details is to miss the point. The point is that even the incense burned on the Altar of Incense within the Tabernacle must be different than any other incense available in the world and therefore set apart for holy purposes. Like the surrounding nations, the Israelites likely burned incense for various reasons. There was an altogether different reason for this practice. The question is, what was it?

FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

One crucial detail is curiously missing: the *purpose* of this incense. While this text doesn’t give us an apparent reason beyond it being simply “a regular incense offering before the LORD” (Ex. 30:8), other texts help us form an idea of what the incense was supposed to accomplish. During Korah’s rebellion, the LORD determined to destroy the entire congregation, and immediately a plague struck the people of Israel (Num. 16:41-45). Moses

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 645.

responded by telling Aaron to take his censer and “lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them” (Num. 16:46). While obviously symbolic (given there is no actual sacrifice), the incense acts in some atoning manner. In Psalm 141, the incense is likened to the prayers of God’s people. Similarly, Revelation 5:8 records the prayers of the saints as being like “incense.” While there is no real definitive answer, it seems as if the incense is at a bare minimum symbolic of the prayers of God’s people going up to Him. The smell of the incense is a kind of sensory validation: “If the incense can be smelled, the prayers can be heard.” Regardless, it is important to God and commanded in Scripture, and was taken very seriously by Aaron and the priesthood.

What About Now?

One takeaway from this passage is the beautiful reminder that blood atonement must be made before God hears our prayers. The altar had to be consecrated by the high priest by applying the atoning blood of the Day of Atonement, once a year, and then and only then was it operable before the LORD. The Altar of Incense reminds us that we, too, require a blood atonement, offered by a high priest, before our prayers will be heard. The difference is that Jesus is our high priest and His offering stands forever (Heb. 10:19-20).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 30:1. What did God command them to build? What material was it made of? What was the purpose of it?

2. Read Exodus 30:2. How big was the Altar? What else is described in this verse?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 30:3-5. With what was the Altar to be overlaid? What kind of molding did it have around it? What were the golden rings and wooden poles for?

2. Read Exodus 30:6. Where was the Altar to be placed? What was significant about this placement?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 30:7-8. Who was to burn incense on it? How often was this to occur, and with what was it synchronized?

2. Read Exodus 30:9-10. What was not allowed to be burned on it? How was atonement made for this Altar? When did this atonement occur?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 30:34-36. What are the ingredients required to make the special incense? How was it to be made? Where was it to be burned?
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2. Read Exodus 30:37-38. According to what shall the incense be made? What is the punishment for those who use these same ingredients to make a perfume?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 77 Discussion: The Order Matters

One striking connection between this passage and today is the importance of the order of blood atonement followed by incense (which corresponds to prayer). In the same way, we require blood, offered by a high priest for atonement, before our prayers will reach the LORD as a fragrant offering, and this blood is offered by the final high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19-20). That means that the prayers of Christians are special and set apart from the rest of the world. It isn't that God *can't* hear the prayers of non-believers. Further, the Bible says that "whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). However, this passage helps distinguish how God relates to Christians and non-Christians regarding prayer. The prayers God hears of non-Christians are those of surrender and faith, whereas the prayers of Christians are intercessory, meant for supplication, and personal, which cannot be said of the non-Christian. Our prayers, above everyone else, are truly special. Talk as a group about how this changes your view of prayer.

1. Icebreaker: How often do you pray?
2. What do you pray for more than anything else?
3. When you pray to God, do you talk to Him as a child talks to a Father? Or is it more formal?
4. How often do you pray for people you know who are lost?
5. Do you enjoy private prayer or corporate prayer more? Why?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Light incense and have your child notice the smoke that rises from it and the smell that it creates. Tell them to imagine that the aroma and smoke are like our prayers, moving upward to God. Then pray together so that they can make the connection.

Takeaways:

1. The Altar of Incense was made to burn incense in the Holy Place.
2. Not just any incense was permitted to be burned on the altar; only specially made incense was allowed.
3. The incense likely represents the prayers of God's people.