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# Prayer as an Incense Offering (Part 1 of 3)

What is prayer? One can say: praying is speaking to God. Yes, but what therefore does prayer involve? What is expected of us? What does the Lord delight in and what prayer is he pleased with? What are the prayers from our hearts and lips to be like?

According to Scripture, the prayers of God's people are like and are to be like an incense offering. In Psalm 141 David says: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice" (Ps 141:2). We can also think, for example, of the last book of Scripture where this image occurs as well. We read in Revelation 5:8, "And when he [the lamb] had taken it [the scroll with seven seals], the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (cf. Rev 8:3, 4). These two examples show that our prayers are to be as an incense offering to God. The Old Testament incense offering therefore spoke of and symbolized the prayers of God's people.

Now, if we can understand what an Old Testament incense offering involved, we will be helped in knowing what praying is all about and what it should entail. For our prayers are to be as an incense offering! So we see that although the incense offering itself is a thing of the past, yet the instruction that we can receive from the regulations about the incense offering as we find them in Exodus 30 are still very relevant for us today. Indeed, in Article 25 of the Belgic Confession we confess that

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from

the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honesty, according to God's will and to his glory. So let's apply this truth to our topic. Because our prayers are to be like the incense offering, we need to understand this sacrifice as well as possible. Then we will better understand God's will for our prayers today.

## The position of the incense offering

If one entered the tabernacle, the Holy Place, and walked straight down the middle of it to the curtain, behind which was the Most Holy Place, one would walk directly to the altar of incense. This altar stood in the middle, directly in front of the Most Holy Place. A curtain separated it from the ark of the covenant which was in the Most Holy Place. Thus it was close to the place where God met his people (Exod 25:22; cf. 29:42) and is therefore described in Leviticus 16:18 as the altar "before the Lord" indicating in this way its close association with the mercy seat.

Not surprisingly, being this close to God's presence, the altar of incense was a beautiful altar, all covered with gold and known therefore as the golden altar (Num 4:11). This altar was normally the closest the priests got to the Most Holy Place. The altar of incense stood in the Holy Place immediately before the curtain behind which God was enthroned on the ark in the midst of Israel (Ps 80:1; also 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Ps 99:1).

Now because this close relationship of the incense altar with the ark is of utmost importance, therefore Scripture sometimes omits the fact that there was a curtain separating the two. In Exodus 40:5, we simply read, "You shall put the golden altar for incense before the ark of the testimony." There is no reference to a curtain until verse 26. It was more important, given the

context of Exodus 40:5, to mention the close relationship of the incense altar to the ark than to dwell on the fact of a separating curtain. In this light, we can also understand why 1 Kings 6:22 associates the incense altar so closely with the ark, that it says that this altar belongs to the inner sanctuary. This description is not a contradiction to the altar's standing outside the Most Holy Place, but only stresses the close association. Similarly we can appreciate Hebrews 9:3, 4 which states that "behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant." This does not mean that the author of Hebrews did not know the place of this altar. But, considering his theological concern with atonement and forgiveness and the entrance into God's presence, it is not surprising that the ark and the incense altar are brought here into a very close association, as was already done in the Old Testament. Furthermore the term, "having," does not need to mean that the altar stood *in* the Most Holy Place. The preposition "in" is not used. A very close relationship is expressed in the "having" of the altar (cf. Rev 8:3).

### **The aroma of the incense**

It was here at this altar of gold that the priest offered the precious offering of incense (cf. 2 Chron 13:10-11). The very best was burned before God and so given to him. The offering of the costly incense was a recognition of the LORD's place as God.

This offering was performed twice a day, every morning and evening (Exod 30:7, 8). As one can imagine, in the closed surroundings of the tabernacle, the smoke and smell of this offering would always be hanging in the air and never really leave. Indeed, verse 8 literally speaks of "a constant / perpetual incense before the LORD for the generations to come."

However, this was not all. More was necessary. On the Day of Atonement the incense had to be brought *inside* the Most Holy Place. We read in Leviticus 16:11-14, Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. 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 within the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat which is upon the testimony, lest he die; and he shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and before the mercy

seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

Notice the superlatives in verse 12. "A censer full of coals of fire" and "two handfuls of sweet incense" – as much fiery coal and incense as possible. The burning coals came "from the altar before the LORD," that is, the whole burnt altar outside in the court. There was always fire on that altar (Lev 9:9; cf. Num 16:46), so the coals could readily be retrieved.

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In verses 12-13, notice that only after entering the Most Holy Place was the incense to be burned. The purpose was to cover the mercy-seat with the smoke lest the high priest die. No one can see God and live (cf. Judg 6:22-24; 13:22; Isa 6:5). So the incense was brought directly into the very presence of God. Usually the smoke of the incense came to the Most Holy Place by going through the veil, but on the annual Day of Atonement it was brought right into the presence of God by the high priest.

Why was this continual smoke, smell, and burning demanded by the LORD? To answer this question properly, one must realize that the crucial element was not the smoke but the smell of the incense. This is clear, for example, from the exact directions that the Lord gave for the preparation of the mixture of incense. The parts have to be mixed exactly so! God instructed Moses to "take fragrant spices – gum resin, onycha, and galbanum – and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred" (Exod 30:34, 35). God wanted the right fragrance, the sweet smelling savour of a well composed incense!

Because the altar of incense was immediately in front of the curtain of the Most Holy Place, the fragrance would work its way through the curtain to the throne of the LORD! God demanded that sacrifice of incense, that burning, so that, he the LORD could take in the sweet savour. What is behind this? Surely, God is not man that he simply needs and desires a perfumed house. What is the point?

*To be continued* 