

“Golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints”

We want each person to have an incense stick. We will light them in a moment. And if you feel you need to avoid the smoke of the incense just for that moment feel free to move. But we won't light them just yet. We will ultimately place them on our Altar of Incense. (point to the area out in the middle of the field)

Did you know that the Bible equates incense with the prayers of the saints?

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 read in Revelation 5:8, “And when he [the lamb] had taken [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”**

So, **your prayers are to be as an incense offering** to God. The Old Testament incense offering symbolized the prayers of God's people. As we understand what an Old Testament incense offering involved, we will be helped with our prayers!

An incense offering burning in the tabernacle was to be continually given which created a pleasing aroma in the Tabernacle. Why was continual burning of incense required by the Lord? The essential element was not smoke, but the aroma of the incense. (smell your incense stick)

We read in Exodus 30 the detailed directions that the Lord gave for creating the incense. God told Moses in verses 34 and 35, “take fragrant spices ..., 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”. God wanted the right fragrance, the sweet-smelling savor of a well-mixed incense to delight the sense of smell!

Take your unlit incense stick and smell it again (of course if you think you may have an adverse reaction please refrain) **It smells sweet, right?** (Pause)

In Exodus, Moses is instructed to build the tabernacle complex with the tent of meeting or the Most Holy Place. In the Most Holy Place there were four pieces of furniture. The **Table of Showbread, the Golden Lampstand, The Altar of Incense and the Ark of the Covenant.**

The **Table of Showbread** illustrated that the people were in the presence of God; **the Golden Lampstand** was representative of the light of God being on the people. The **Altar of Incense** and finally the **Ark of the Covenant (over which the**

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presence of the Lord hovered). Of these pieces of furniture, God commanded Moses to place the **altar of incense closest to the Ark of the Covenant**. “The altar of incense stood in the Holy Place just before the curtain behind which God was enthroned on the ark in the midst.” Why? Because the incense’s pleasant aroma was peace giving to God.

According to Ex 30:7-8 the incense offering was performed twice a day, every morning and evening. (this could be thought of as a rhythm for our prayer.) *As you can imagine*, in the closed surroundings of the tabernacle, with a continual incense burning and being renewed twice a day, the pleasant smell of this offering would always be hanging in the air.

The incense offering’s sweet-smelling savor pointed to what real relationship, and communion with God can be like. In fact, during a time of Israel’s rebellion Moses told Aaron to bring the sweet-smelling incense out into the midst of the people. Moses wanted the Lord to smell something different from the stench of their rebellion and sin. The sweet smell of incense reminded God of the prayers that he had received in the past, prayers that were possible because of the ministry of reconciliation.

Your prayers (our prayers) bring to His mind the reality of your/our relationship of love to him. Like the perpetual incense offering, prayers of confession, **and** thanksgiving for our salvation, delight his heart. Your prayers are a sweet smell of fellowship because of his redeeming work. **Let’s pause** to quietly thank the Lord for our salvation. Just remain quiet for a moment.

Also know that intercessions delight God’s heart. Reigning with Jesus, the lamb, involves intercession. Jesus, our High Priest, is the great intercessor. And He calls us to join him in that priestly work. Before John hears the song in Revelation where they sang “worthy;” John sees golden bowls of incense, which he says are “the prayers of the saints” (5:8). As a Kingdom of priests we serve the Lord by bringing the world to the throne room through our prayers. We bring the world’s brokenness, the world’s evil, into the presence of the Lord for his sovereign healing.

Now let’s move toward lighting our incense and bring a sweet aroma to him as we turn our attention back to the front.

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That is, we reign with him by entering into the suffering and rebellion of the world, and standing with those who suffer and those who will die, pleading for the just mercy of God. (168)

In the last month a story of prayer and unity unfolded that is worth hearing.

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).