

The Altar of Incense

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[0 : 0 0] But if we could, for a short while this evening, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, the book of Exodus and chapter 30.

The book of Exodus, chapter 30, and we'll just read again at the beginning. 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 round its sides, and its horns. And you shall make a moulding of gold round it. And so on.

So as you know, this evening we're resuming our study of the tabernacle and its importance for us as the Lord's people. And as you know, everything we're looking at in relation to the tabernacle, it's always pointing us forward to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the word who became flesh and dwelt among us. He tabernacled among us, all so that we might behold his glory. And so as we consider the tabernacle in the Old Testament, it should be pointing us to the glory of Jesus, our tabernacle.

[1 : 3 0] And as we said before, we're looking at our study of the tabernacle and considering all its furniture as sinners who are approaching a holy God. We're sinners approaching our God, seeking favour, forgiveness and fellowship.

And as we saw in the video there, that when we would come to the tabernacle, we would see this perimeter. And we'd go around the perimeter. The perimeter would lead us, this white cloth perimeter, it would lead us all the way round to the outer gate.

It would lead us all the way round to this gate because we can't approach God any other way except through the outer gate. There's only one way to God, as the Bible emphasises to us again and again.

And that way is through Jesus, our tabernacle. He is the way, the truth and the life. And so we must enter through the outer gate and we must come with our substitutionary sacrifice.

And on entering the tabernacle courtyard, as we saw in the video, we would be confronted by two items of furniture. We'd be confronted by the altar of sacrifice and then the bronze laver.

[2 : 3 8] And as we've said before, these two items of furniture, they remind us about two key doctrines in the Christian faith. The altar of sacrifice, it reminds us about our justification.

That we're made righteous, we're accepted in the sight of God through the shed blood and death of Jesus Christ. And the bronze laver, it reminds us about our sanctification.

That we need to keep coming to the word of God day by day for continual cleansing. Because sanctification is this ongoing work of God's free grace.

And it's a work in which we also have a role and a responsibility. But as we've moved through the tabernacle courtyard, we came to the tent coverings over the tabernacle.

And as we saw, there were four coverings. Four coverings which point us to the person and work of Jesus, our tabernacle. Four coverings, but one Christ.

[3 : 38] But as we said before, on entering into the tabernacle, under these coverings, we're made to realise that we're in Christ. We're covered by Jesus, our tabernacle.

We're in Christ. And for those who are in Christ, as we can see in the holy place of the holy king, there are three items of furniture. There's the golden lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense.

And these items of furniture, they speak very clearly to us of what sinners receive when they are in Christ, when they're covered by Christ. When we consider the golden lampstand or the menorah, which was this golden tree, symbolising the tree of life.

It was a tree that promised life and light to all who are in Christ. When we consider the table of showbread, we learn that those who are in Christ, they have the assurance of Christ's presence and his provision day by day.

But now this evening we can come to the third item of furniture in the holy place of the holy king. And it's the altar of incense. And I want us to see that the altar of incense is an altar of purpose, prayer, and promise.

[4 : 58] The altar of incense is an altar of purpose, prayer, and promise. So first of all, it's an altar of purpose.

The altar of incense is an altar of purpose. We'll read again at verse 1. The Lord commands Moses, he says, 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 round its sides and its horns. And you shall make a moulding of gold round it. Now the altar of incense, it isn't the first altar that we've encountered in our study of the tabernacle.

Because when we were back in the tabernacle courtyard, we came face to face with the altar of sacrifice. It was the first, the altar of sacrifice was the first thing you would see when you entered through the outer gate into the tabernacle courtyard.

[6 : 04] You would be confronted by this large bronze altar that was continually burning. And there are certainly similarities that can be drawn between the altar of sacrifice that was in the tabernacle courtyard.

And the altar of incense that's here in the holy place of the holy king. There are many similarities and we'll note them in a moment. But there's one obvious difference. Because the altar of sacrifice in the tabernacle courtyard, it was overlaid with bronze.

Whereas the altar of incense, it was overlaid with gold. Emphasising that we are now in the presence of the holy king. We're in the holy place of the holy king.

But the similarities between these two altars, the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense, is that as we were reading there, they were both square and they both had horns.

They're both square and they both had horns. Now if you remember the altar of sacrifice, it was large, it was a square altar, it was bronze.

[7 : 12] And as the Lord described, it was to be five cubits long by five cubits wide by three cubits high. So it was seven and a half feet wide, seven and a half feet long and four and a half feet high.

It was huge. But then you come to this small, square, golden altar of incense. And we're told there was only one cubit long by one cubit wide and only two cubits high.

It's not very high at all. About one and a half feet by one and a half feet by three feet high. But more than being square like the altar of sacrifice, the altar of incense, it also had, as you can see, it has four horns on it, on the four corners.

And as we said when we considered the altar of sacrifice, the horn was a symbol of power. The horn was a symbol of authority. This horn was a promise of salvation.

Which undoubtedly, these horns, they are in the holy place of the holy king. They're pointing us to the power and the authority of Jesus Christ and his promise to us of salvation.

[8 : 22] But what's interesting about the altar of incense, what's really interesting about it, is that even though it looked like an altar, and was shaped like an altar, and even though it's called an altar, it wasn't really an altar.

And I say that because the word altar in Hebrew, it literally means place of slaughter. Place of slaughter.

But as you know, inside the holy place of the holy king, no sacrifices were to be offered on the altar of incense. Plenty sacrifices were offered outside in the tabernacle courtyard on the bronze altar of sacrifice.

But no sacrifices were to be offered on the golden altar of incense. And that's even what the Lord commanded down in verse 9. He said, Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it.

So no sacrifices were to be offered on the altar of incense. Instead, the altar of incense was to be used, as we're told down in verse 1, you are to use it for burning incense.

[9 : 37] That's its purpose. It was to burn incense. And then in verse 7, we're told that Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar. So it was a particular incense.

And so the altar of incense, it was only to be used for slowly burning incense in the holy place of the holy king. But that then raises the question, why did they call it an altar?

And there's a particular reason why. Why did they call it an altar if the altar of incense wasn't a place of slaughter? Why is it called an altar?

As we said, the word altar means place of slaughter. And the reason it's called an altar is all because the altar of incense that was situated in the holy place of the holy king, and the altar of sacrifice that was directly in line with it, sitting outside in the tabernacle courtyard, they closely related to one another.

There's no reason why they were all in line with one another. They were closely related to one another. They were closely related not only because of their shape and also their structure with the horns, but also because it seems that the altar of incense, it was there to veil the smell from the altar of sacrifice.

[10 : 58] The altar of incense was there to veil the smell from the altar of sacrifice. Because as you can imagine, walking into the tabernacle courtyard, or even living around the tabernacle, it was a slaughterhouse.

It was a slaughterhouse rather than a sanctuary. And being in the tabernacle courtyard, you would have this constant smell of blood and death and burning flesh.

And it wouldn't have been the nicest place to be at all. It was a place of slaughter and sacrifice. But when you would come inside the tabernacle, under the coverings of Christ, you can say, we're in the holy place of the holy king.

And in order to veil the stench of blood and death outside, there would be this incense that was burned on the altar of incense. And in many ways, the burning of the incense on the altar of incense, it was part of the sacrifice that was burning on the altar of sacrifice.

The two are very closely related. The burning of the incense inside the tabernacle was part of the sacrifice that was burning outside in the tabernacle courtyard.

[12 : 15] That's why the altar of incense was referred to as an altar. It related to the altar of sacrifice. It was closely connected to and related to the altar of sacrifice.

And the reason was that because it was through the shedding of blood outside that forgiveness would be achieved. It was by the substitutionary animal of a sacrifice that atonement would be made.

But it was only through the altar of incense in the holy place of the holy king that this offering was finally rising before God as a sweet-smelling savor.

The two of them are connected. If I'm not making sense to you, I'll quote the late John L. Mackay. He wrote in his commentary on the book of Exodus, He says, And what it's emphasising to us is that both the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense, they both point us to Jesus, our tabernacle.

Because the altar of sacrifice outside was the place of suffering. But the altar of incense was the place of supplication. The altar of sacrifice outside presents us with Christ our Saviour.

[14 : 07] But the altar of incense inside presents to us Christ, our mediator. It was the altar of sacrifice where we see Christ dying for sinners.

But it's at the altar of incense that we see Christ interceding for his saints. It's a wonderful connection. It makes you appreciate more and more what the tabernacle is really about.

But that's why I want us to see that this altar, it's not only an altar of purpose, but it's also an altar of prayer. It's an altar of prayer. Look at verses 7 and 8.

We're told there that 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.

So when the Lord commanded Moses how to build the altar of incense and what to offer on the altar of incense, the Lord also gave instructions as to when the altar of incense was to be attended to.

[15 : 18] And as we read, the altar of incense was to be attended to by the priests both morning and evening. In fact, the altar of incense was to be attended to at the same time as the lampstand was attended to inside the holy place of the holy king.

Because as we said before, the golden lampstand, which was situated just beside the altar of incense in the holy place of the holy king, the golden lampstand was to be topped up with oil both morning and evening.

And so when the golden lampstand was topped up with oil, the altar of incense was to be attended to. They were both to be attended to together at the same time every day.

As some commentators said, it was a joint ministry. It was a joint ministry. And you know, as those who are in Christ, the lampstand should draw our attention to our profession.

The altar of incense should draw our attention to our prayers. Our profession and our prayers. And needless to say, our profession and our prayers are a joint ministry.

[16 : 33] Just like it was for the priests, morning and evening. They had to attend the lampstand and the altar of incense. Their profession and their prayers. And our joint ministry is our profession and our prayers.

And one commentator, he put it very well when he said, We shine best for men when our hearts burn most for God. We shine best before men when our hearts burn most before God.

Our profession and our prayers are a joint ministry. But what's interesting about this joint ministry of attending to the golden lampstand and the altar of incense was the time at which they were attended to.

Because we're told that it was morning and evening. They were attended to at 9am and 3pm. In fact, those times, those two times, the 9am and 3pm, they were the hours of prayer.

Both morning and evening, 9am and 3pm, at the hour of prayer, what was amazing was at the same time, a lamb was also offered outside in the tabernacle courtyard on the altar of sacrifice.

[17 : 50] So all this was going on at the same time every day. While there was this spotless lamb being offered on the altar of sacrifice to the Lord outside in the tabernacle courtyard, the golden lampstand and the altar of incense were attended to inside, in the holy place of the holy king.

And this all happened at the same time every day, both morning and evening. Therefore, at the same time, every day, both morning and evening, there was sacrifice and supplication.

There was promise and there was prayer. There was the message of sin being forgiven and the mediation with the Saviour. There was the word and there was worship.

And it was at the same time every day, both morning and evening. And you know, it should be the clearest instruction to us as Christians to read our Bible and pray both morning and evening.

Do you want an instruction to make sure that we do it? The Lord has given it in His word. This command here, it should be the most obvious scriptural warrant for us to ensure that we come to church on the Lord's day, both morning and evening.

[19 : 07] This should be the most important directive for us to gather together for prayer as the Lord has commanded us. Because, and you know, this is what I love.

I love what the Lord said to Moses in verse 6. He said, put the altar of incense in front of the curtain that shields the Ark of the Covenant. Why?

Because that's where I'll meet with you. That's where I will meet with you. The Lord promises people that at the same time every day, both morning and evening, I will meet with you.

I will meet with you. You know, what a promise. What a promise that the God of heaven, the creator of the universe, the one who made us, sustains us, saved us, cleansed us, washed us, and made us his.

He says to his people at the same time, every day, both morning and evening, I will meet with you. I will meet with you.

[20 : 09] And you know, if that's the Lord's promise to his people, why would we ever want to neglect reading our Bible or praying? If that's the Lord's promise to us, I will meet with you, why would we ever want to make excuses and avoid coming to church?

If our Savior promises to meet with us at the hour of prayer on a Wednesday evening, why would we want to be anywhere else but here?

I will meet with you. You can't get a better promise than that. I will meet with you. It's a wonderful promise. But you know, what I find fascinating is this connection between the two altars.

The altar of sacrifice outside and the altar of incense inside. Because you know, if you were a sinner standing at the outer gate, you're standing at the outer gate of the tabernacle.

You're coming in with your sacrifice. And you're confronted by this large bronze altar. But as the Lord has commanded here, indirect line of this large bronze altar, motioning towards the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies, indirect line with you is not only this altar of sacrifice, but also the altar of incense.

[21 : 31] And as we read in verse 6, the Lord said, put the altar of incense in front of the curtain that shields the Ark of the Covenant because that's where I will meet with you.

And so for a sinner to approach their holy God, both altars had to be attended to at the same time every day, both morning and evening.

Because both altars emphasised to sinners that they have continual access to God. They have access to God through sacrifice and supplication.

They have access to God through promise and prayer, through the message of sins being forgiven and the mediator who is our saviour. We have access to God through the word and through worship.

My friend, these two altars, the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense, they were attended to at the same time every day, both morning and evening in order to remind us of the joint ministry of Jesus and our continual access to God through his death and his resurrection.

[22 : 37] because, you know, it's through the altar of sacrifice, it's through Jesus' death that we have received the ministry of reconciliation and it's through the altar of incense inside the tabernacle, it's through Jesus' resurrection that we have received the ministry of intercession.

intercession. And, you know, that's what the writer to the Hebrews affirmed to us when he said that Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.

They are able to draw near to God through the altar of sacrifice and because of that, then he says, since he ever lives to make intercession for them through the altar of incense.

Both altars. These two altars, the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense, they remind us about the joint ministry of Jesus, the ministry of reconciliation and the ministry of intercession.

And these joint ministries, they are continual. These joint ministries of Jesus are continual. I love how John puts it in his letter.

[23 : 52] He says, the blood of Jesus Christ continues to cleanse us from all sin. That's the altar of sacrifice. Continues to cleanse us from all sin.

And because of that, Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us. Continual intercession for us. It's the ministry of reconciliation and the ministry of intercession.

And tonight, as those who are in Christ, covered by Jesus, our tabernacle, we have the promise and assurance that Jesus is making continual intercession for us.

In fact, you know, my Christian friend, the altar of incense, it assures us tonight that Jesus is praying for us right now. Jesus is praying for us right now.

And you know, if we were to read his high priestly prayer in John 17, we would know exactly what Jesus is praying for us right now. Because he's praying that we will be kept.

[25 : 00] He's praying that we will be sanctified. And he's praying that in the future, one day, we will be glorified. We'll see him face to face. That's what Jesus is praying for right now.

That's his continual intercession for you. That you'll be kept, that you'll be sanctified, and that one day you'll be glorified. And I'm sure it would be a great encouragement for you that when you go home this evening, that you read what Jesus is praying for you.

It's always a great reminder to know what Jesus is saying at the right hand of God the Father. We can often forget in the busyness of life and all the chaos that comes into our experience, we can forget that we have a great high priest who is praying for us.

And he's praying that we'll be kept, that we'll be sanctified, and that one day we will be glorified. And the wonderful thing about Jesus' prayers is that they're not only continual, they'll never fail.

His prayers will never fail. And so the altar of incense, it's an altar of prayer. But I wanted to see lastly that the altar of incense is an altar of promise.

[26 : 11] It's an altar of purpose, it's an altar of prayer, and it's an altar of promise. An altar of promise. It says in verse 7, 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.

instructions. So when the Lord commanded Moses how to build the altar of incense and what to offer on the altar of incense, the Lord also gave instructions, as we said, when the altar of incense was to be attended to.

And as we said, the altar of incense was to be attended to at the same time, both morning and evening. The altar of incense was to be attended to at the hour of prayer, 9 a.m.

and 3 p.m. And at the same time, every day, both morning and evening, a spotless lamb was offered outside on the altar of sacrifice in the tabernacle courtyard.

[27 : 14] And inside on the golden lampstand and the altar of incense, they were all attended to. And this happened every day at the hour of prayer. And I mention this because when you read through the Bible, it's amazing when you read through the Bible and you see what happens.

When you read through the Bible, we see that amazing things happened at the hour of prayer. Amazing things happened at the hour of prayer. It was at the hour of prayer that Elijah called down fire from heaven.

It was 3 p.m. It was at the hour of prayer that the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel the prophet and assured him that God had heard his prayers in heaven. It was at the hour of prayer that Peter and John healed the lame man who was at the beautiful gate at the temple.

It was at the hour of prayer that Cornelius had the vision of a man standing before him saying, Cornelius, your prayer has been heard. My friend, it was at the hour of prayer that Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It was at the hour of prayer that amazing things happened. and you know, I wish that we would have the same faith to believe that amazing things can happen when we gather together just for an hour of prayer.

[28 : 39] But I draw your attention to the altar of incense as an altar of promise because as we read earlier in Luke chapter 1, it was at the hour of prayer when all the people were gathered together outside the temple, they were gathered for prayer and were told that Zechariah the priest was inside the holy place and he was attending to the golden lampstand and the altar of incense.

And when he was attending to the altar of incense, we're told that there appeared to him the angel Gabriel standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Gabriel said to Zechariah, your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John.

And you know, Gabriel, he promised Zechariah that John would be the forerunner to Jesus Christ. He promised Zechariah that his son John will go in the spirit and power of Elijah who will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord.

And it was at the altar of incense, at the hour of prayer that the Lord promised his servant. And this is the point. It was at the hour of prayer, at the altar of incense, that the Lord promised his servant that all hope was not lost.

You know, there had been a 400-year gap. You know, from the end of Malachi to the beginning of Matthew, this 400-year gap where God said nothing to his people.

[30 : 18] It was the intertestamental period. God was silent. And yet it was after all this time God finally spoke. And he speaks through his angel as Zechariah is attending to the altar of incense, praying, and he reminds his servant that all hope is not lost.

And you know, it's at this time of year that we turn our minds to the birth of Jesus, and rightly so, because it's an opportunity for us to speak about Jesus. But you know, what we see with this altar of incense, this altar of promise, is that before the arrival of Christ, before Jesus even tabernacled among us, the Lord appeared, and the Lord prepared the way with his servant John the Baptist, who pleaded and preached to his community a simple message.

The simple message, behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And you know, that should still be our message in our dark day where we feel God is silent.

That should still be our message as we approach another festive season that takes into consideration, maybe only in a small bit, but takes into consideration the birth of Jesus.

You know, my friend, as we come together for an hour of prayer this evening, we should be assured that all hope is not lost. And we should still keep preaching, keep pleading, keep at people, the people in our community, with the simple message of John the Baptist, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[32 : 06] And so this evening we've seen the altar of incense. It's an altar of purpose, an altar of prayer and also an altar of promise. An altar of promise that all hope is not lost.

May the Lord bless these few thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, help us, we pray, to keep coming to this altar and to know that when we do come, when we come in humility, that thou are a God who hears us and answers our prayers in accordance with thy will.

And our longing is that even like Zechariah of old, that when we come to the altar, that we would see and hear thy word speaking to us promises, great and precious promises, reminding us, Lord, that all hope is not lost, that the Lord are God who is still providing for us, a God who is still preparing the way, and a God who is still promising, that through the death of the Lamb of God, that he will be able to take away the sins of the world.

Oh Lord, help us then, we pray, to keep praying, to keep praying until something happens, and to keep praying for those in our homes and in our families, those Lord whom we love, that they too would come and know who this Jesus is and find shelter in him.

Lord, bless us, we pray in our being together. Remember, Lord, those who are not with us this evening, for wherever they are, Lord, or whatever they're doing, that they would know thy presence with them. Lord, undertake for us, we ask, go before us, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake.

[33 : 53] Amen. We're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 141.

Psalm 141. Psalm 141, it's in the Sing Psalms version, on page 185.

Psalm 141. Sing Psalms version, page 185. We're singing from the beginning down to the end of the double verse, marked four.

And it's wonderful how the psalmist describes his prayer. He describes it like incense arising before the Lord. O Lord, I call to you, come quickly, I'm in need, and when I cry to you for help, to my appeal, give heed.

Like incense, may my prayer before your face arise, the raising of my hands be like the evening sacrifice. Let's sing on down to the end of the double verse marked four of Psalm 141, to God's praise.

[35 : 13] O Lord, I call to you, come quickly, I'm in need, and when I cry to you or help to my appeal day.

Like incense, may my prayer before your face arise, the raising o'er my hands be light, the evening sacrifice.

Watch, Lord, on my mind, and guard my lips, I pray.

Let not my heart to evil thoughts be drawn and let astray.

Give me from taking part and what thee will do.

[37 : 14] Let me not taste their choices through lest I be false to you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.