

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

1/6/08

Exodus 30:1-10, 34-39 “Prayer before God’s Throne”

Intro. Every since Adam & Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, man has been out of fellowship with God. As soon as they sinned, they no longer sought to be in God’s presence, but fled from Him. Sin creates the feeling of guilt, and we tend to avoid the ones we are out of fellowship with.

However, God created us to have a relationship with us. He wants to be our Heavenly Father. He loves us as a father loves his children. Or to use another illustration, the Church is compared to a bride. We are called to be the bride of Christ. He loved you enough to die for you. He invites you to have an eternal relationship with Him. He wants you to be devoted to Him, like a bride is to be devoted to her husband. He wants your relationship to Him to be preeminent and special. He is not content with getting together to fellowship just occasionally, but He wants a relationship that is characterized by daily, intimate conversation.

Over 30 years ago I began to pursue a relationship with Cheryl. At first it was a long distance relationship. I was in Bible College in Dallas, TX, and she was at Blue Mountain College in Mississippi. We started out writing back and forth. Now how far would that relationship have progressed if all I did was write a letter once/month? Or I could have done what some people do with God, and made contact just once or twice/year. No, it wasn’t long before I would also call her and we would talk on the phone. The calls became more frequent. Then we decided to meet in Memphis, Tennessee for a date. As our love grew it became clear than a long distance relationship was not going to cut it. I asked her to transfer to a good Baptist college in Dallas to complete her education there, so we could see each other more often. Since I no longer had long distance phone charges, I could call her even more often! We dated on the weekends, and she attended the mission church where I served as pastor. But seeing her mainly on the weekends was not enough. In December of 1977 I asked her to marry me, she said “Yes,” and we married on May 27, 1978. From that point on we have enjoyed an even more intimate, loving relationship on a daily basis.

How is your relationship with God? Do you have one? Do you *know* that your sins are forgiven and that you are right with God? Or are you running from God? Is your relationship with God a long distance relationship? Do you only talk to Him or worship Him only occasionally?

Well in our text today we will see a picture of the kind of relationship we should have with God on a daily basis. I will talk about how to approach God and have a relationship with Him as pictured in the altar of incense. This is the third and final furnishing of the holy place of the tabernacle. It was a small altar, only 18 inches square and 3 feet high. It stood before the veil that separated the holy of holies from the holy place. Its purpose was to burn incense. Incense was commonly used in the ancient near east, and it was incorporated in the worship of the tabernacle.

So let’s turn to the Word of God and see what this text has to say to us about gaining & maintaining a relationship with God. Prayer is one of the main topics we will cover today. As the smoke of incense rose daily in the presence of God, even so our prayers should rise to heaven on a daily basis. As we begin a new year, I hope to challenge our hearts to make prayer a greater priority, and a more consistent practice for 2008.

As I said, sin creates a barrier in our relationship with God. So how can we approach God, and enter into a relationship with Him? Well, once again, we see that:

I. WE MUST APPROACH GOD BY MEANS OF AN ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICE

In addition to the altar of incense, there was another altar in the outer court, whereon was offered the daily sacrifice for the sins of the people. That brazen altar came first, and the sacrifice had to be offered on it first, *before* the priest came into the inner court with the coals from that altar, and the incense kindled by them. We read about this in Lev. 16:12-13 & Num. 16:46. There was, therefore, a very intimate connection between the two altars: the activities of the latter being based upon those of the former.

Do you remember the story of Nadab and Abihu, two of the sons of Aaron. They tried to worship God with “profane fire” and were killed (Lev. 10:1-2). Their fire and coals were not taken from off the brazen altar, but was of their own kindling. They had departed from the plain Word of God. By their actions Nadab and Abihu were signifying that worship may be offered to God on another foundation than acceptance through sacrifice, and they were dead wrong, literally!

What does that say to us? There is no real access to God until our sins have been dealt with, taken away by the Lamb of God, sacrificed for us. Until you trust in Christ as your Savior, you cannot gain access to the throne of grace. The altar of incense, where prayer & worship took place, is not approached until we have been to the altar of sacrifice. This suggests that a relationship with God, and true prayer, must be based on the work of Christ on the cross. Besides, there will be little inclination or desire to come to God with the sacrifice of praise and prayer until we have been to Christ. Because of the work of Christ on the cross, believers today can go through the veil into the very presence of God, and there present their worship and petitions in the name of Jesus (Heb.10:19-22).

I’ve known of people who are angry with God because He did not prevent something bad from happening in their lives. Yet in most cases they have never repented of their sin and trusted in Christ as Savior. They have not established a relationship with God. They most likely did not specifically ask God to protect them, or prevent that bad thing from happening. And yet they have the gall to sit in judgment upon God! Listen, the only prayer a sinner can pray is, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Until you are saved, you have no basis for entering into His presence with your prayers.

So in order to establish a relationship with God, we must first accept the sacrifice He has provided in Jesus Christ. Next, in order to continue in fellowship with God:

II. WE MUST APPROACH GOD THROUGH THE INTERCESSION OF OUR HIGH PRIEST

It was wonderful for the children of Israel to know that their High Priest was in the tabernacle, at the altar of incense, praying for them. Even so, in the altar of incense, we see a picture of the Lord in His ministry as our Great High Priest. How solemn is it to contemplate Christ at the brazen altar, there made sin for us, suffering & enduring the judgment of God in our place. But unspeakably blessed is it to behold Him risen from the grave, ascended to heaven to appear before the golden altar which is before God’s throne, praying for us. Several verses speak of this intercessory ministry of Christ. Rom. 5:10 says, “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be

saved by His life.” Paul is talking about His present life in heaven. Rom. 8:33-34 says, “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.” Heb. 7:25 says, “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” It is wonderful for us to know that Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is praying for us.

The relationship between incense & intercession is seen in Num. 16. Israel had sinned once again, and God was ready to consume the nation in His righteous anger. 250 rebels from the leadership of Israel had already died. So Moses told Aaron the High Priest to “take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them” (v. 46). Then we read, “And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed” (v. 48). What a foreshadowing of the mediatorial intercession of Christ, interjecting on behalf of His erring people, and that, on the ground of His sacrificial death. 1 Jn. 2:1-2 says, “if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

Since Jesus Christ is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) and Intercessor, this means that when we come to God in prayer, we have to come through the Lord Jesus Christ. I have heard lots of people say, “Now that I am saved, I can go directly to God.” No, you cannot! You must go to God through Christ. Jesus Christ told us in John 14:14: “If you shall ask anything *in my name*, I will do it” [emphasis added].

The altar of incense teaches us another lesson about maintaining fellowship with God:

III. WE MUST APPROACH GOD BY WAY OF HOLINESS

The priest could not use just any incense on that altar. They had to use a special formula that was never to be used except in the holy place. We do know that the incense had to meet specified criteria. According to v.7, it had to be “sweet” smelling. It had a delightful aroma to vividly illustrate that God was pleased with the sacrifice He had provided. He is also delighted with the worship & prayer that was to take place at the altar. In v.34 we see that sweet spices used were equal amounts of “stacte¹ and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense.”

Now look at v.35, where we read of other characteristics of the incense. It had to be “salted, pure, and holy.” Salt is a symbol of purity and of a covenant relationship (Lev. 2:13). It had to be pure, without any contamination, just as the gold of the altar had to be pure (v.3-same Hebrew word). The holiness of the incense is stated & expounded beginning in the last of v.36, “It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.” Any Israelite who tried to duplicate this special incense for his own personal use would be cut off, which could mean death. This incense was to be holy unto the Lord, separate & special only for Him. Furthermore, the priests were warned not to use this golden altar for anything other than burning incense (v.9). It was holy, dedicated to that exclusive purpose. I want you to grasp the concept of holiness. Leviticus 27:30 says that tithe “is holy to the LORD.” The tithe is to be set aside and used exclusively for the Lord. You are not to use it for yourself, or for common purposes. Even our bodies are to be regarded as holy to the Lord. Rom. 12:1 says, “I beseech you therefore, brethren,

¹ An aromatic gum resin of a shrub. Onycha and galbanum we probably also fragrant gum resins.

by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

One lesson from these instructions is the fact that we are to worship & serve God *His* way. In John 4:24 Jesus said that we are to worship God in spirit and *in truth*. We must follow His plan of reconciliation and worship. Furthermore, as the incense was characterized by purity and holiness, even so I believe that our prayers should arise from a holy life. Ps. 66:18 says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.” We’re commanded to lift up “holy hands” as we pray, and to remove “anger or disputing” from our hearts (1 Tim. 2:8, NIV). I believe that time should be set aside each week and each day for worship and for prayer. It is to be regarded as holy.

So we have seen that we must approach God by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We also rely upon His intercession on our behalf before the throne of God. Furthermore, to maintain fellowship, we must live a holy life. God has called every believer to be a priest unto Him (1 Pet. 2:5). And one of our most important ministries is that of prayer. So that leads to my last main point:

IV. WE MUST APPROACH GOD THROUGH ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

It is clear from scripture that incense was a picture of prayer. Psa. 141:2 says, “Let my prayer be set before You as incense....” We also see this very clearly in the book of Revelation. In Rev. 5:8 we read of John’s vision of a scene in heaven. “Twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” Likewise, Rev. 8:3 speaks of an “angel, having a golden censer, [who] came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.” Finally, in Luke chapter 1 we read about Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. He was a priest, and it was his turn to offer incense in the temple (1:9). Then we read in v.10, “And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.”

Suppose we had been in that court when in the morning or evening the priest came with the glowing pan of coals from the brazen altar in the outer court, and laid it on this altar, and heaped upon it the sticks of incense, we should have seen the curling, fragrant wreaths of smoke ascending until the tabernacle was filled with fragrant smoke. What could that rising cloud of sweet odors signify but the ascent of the soul towards God? Indeed, incense is a symbol of prayer.

So with that understanding, let us draw some lessons about prayer from the golden altar of incense. First:

A. Prayer Should Be Periodic – Twice a day, morning and evening, the officiating priest came with his pan of coals and incense, and laid it there. Then throughout the intervening hours a faint but continual emission of fragrance rose from the smoldering coals. Furthermore, v.8 tells us that there is to be “a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.” Incense was to offered to God every day without fail.

Even so, I believe it is a good practice to schedule times of prayer in the morning and evening. Two good times to pray would include your morning devotional and at bedtime. But just as incense rose continually before the Lord, even so in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says that we are to “pray without ceasing.” Rom. 12:12 says that we should be “continuing steadfastly in prayer.”

And as incense was offered every day without fail, even so we should pray every day, throughout the day, without fail. It's wonderful to know that we can come to God in prayer at any time. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." So sprinkle a seasoning of short prayers on your daily living. If you see something beautiful, thank God for it. If you are aware of someone's need, ask God to help. You can toss up many such prayers all day long. Make a habit of it.²

B. Prayer Should Be Patterned after God's Plan – Just as the altar & the ingredients of the incense were prescribed by God, even so we should follow the pattern of prayer as prescribed by God. The Bible names some of the "ingredients" of prayer—adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession for others, personal petition, & submission to the will of God (1 Tim. 2:1; Phil. 4:6). We fearfully misunderstand and limit the nobleness and the essential character of prayer when we make petition its main feature. Praise and adoration should be first. Furthermore, Jesus has even given us a pattern to follow in the model prayer (Matt. 6:5-15).

C. Prayer Should Be a Priority – Notice that the altar of incense was placed in the most central and important location within the holy place. To get to "the secret place of the Most High" God, the High Priest had to tread a straight line from the brazen altar of sacrifice, to the altar of incense, and then pass the veil into the presence of God. You can't have fellowship with God apart from prayer.

What does that say as to the place of prayer in the Christian life? It is central. It is all important.

When the great high priest walked by after offering incense, people caught the fragrance. They said, "My, doesn't he smell good!" The trouble with most saints today is that they are not wearing the right kind of cologne. The right cologne is prayer. Let your prayers ascend before God as sweet incense, and it will make your life much sweeter to God and to others.

The golden altar of incense also teaches us that:

D. Prayer Should Be Passionate – The incense rose toward heaven only after it was kindled with fire. Furthermore, there was little fragrance without the fire. John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, said, "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart." James 5:16 says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." In Col. 4:2 Paul said that we should "continue earnestly in prayer."

That is why so much of our prayer is of no delight to God, and of no benefit to us, because it is not on fire with the flame of a heart kindled into love and thankfulness by the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Has your heart grown cold? Has the fire of your devotion to God been quenched? Then contemplate once again what Christ did for you on the cross, and respond anew and afresh with a heart that burns with love for Christ. Ask God to renew a fervency in your prayers!

Finally, if we pray like I have just taught, we will discover the final lesson of the golden altar of incense:

E. Prayer Should Be Powerful – The altar of incense had horns, according to v.3. There was probably one golden horn on each of the four corners of the Altar. Horns in the Bible are often symbolic of power and strength. These speak of the power of prayer to go into the four

² Francis De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* in "Christianity Today," September 2006, page 112.

corners of the world. From right here where we are this morning, we can literally touch a world for the glory of God. There is no limit to what we can accomplish through prayer. Jer. 33:3 says, "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know." Someone has said, "Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of Omnipotence."³ The only limit we place on the power of prayer is through our own faithlessness and prayerlessness.

Think of prayer like you would of a wall outlet. When we take a plug and place it into the wall outlet, we are able to tap into the hidden resources inside the wall. When we take the plug of prayer in the hand of faith and use it properly, we find that prayer does accomplish great things for God and others.

In ourselves, we may be weak. However, when we fall on our knees before a mighty God, we become a force to be reckoned with. When the saints are on praying ground, the demons of Hell tremble before us. There is power in a saint who is in contact with the God of Heaven. All through the Bible, God has proven over and over His willingness and ability to hear and answer pray. All He is looking for this morning is a people who believe Him enough to call on His name in faith and who will believe that He will do what He has said He will do.

Are you among that number this morning? Will you devote yourself to regular, fervent prayer? Will you make it a priority in your life? Will you follow God's plan for prayer? If so, together we will unleash the power of heaven to do a great work for God. Souls will be saved. Lives will be changes. Those who are addicted and bound will be set free. The sick will be healed. Problems will be solved.

Conclusion: In the Roman Empire their army was divided into Legions of about 6,000 soldiers each. One of the more famous legions was called the Thundering Legion. In A.D. 176 the emperor Marcus Aurelius was leading an engagement against the German hordes. They found themselves surrounded by mountains, and the German hordes were in the mountains, ready to rush down upon them. They were also in the midst of a drought. Then the commander said to the Emperor, "There are Christians in this army." Well, facing a difficult situation, the emperor said, "Ask them to pray." So a group of Christian soldiers knelt down and prayed. It wasn't long after that that a great hail storm hit, and the German hordes became afraid, and rushed down the mountain, not to fight, but to ask for mercy. The rain also quenched the thirst of the soldiers. After that, the Emperor diminished the persecution against Christians. Oh, the power of prayer!⁴

Sources: Alan Carr, www.sermonnotebook.org; Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2008; Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

³ J. Edwin Hartill, *The Topical Encyclopedia of Living Quotations*, in "Pulpit Helps," March 2006, page 15.

⁴ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #4574* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).