

The Altar of Incense

By Paris Reidhead*

Will you turn, please, to Exodus, Chapter 30. Our meditation and study this evening shall be concerning this wonderful piece of furniture in the Tabernacle, called the altar of incense. I am going to read several verses, because I want you to understand what God said to Moses concerning the altar of incense. Then we shall derive certain lessons from it for our own spiritual lives.

“And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. ²A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof: the horns thereof shall be of the same. ³And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about. ⁴And two golden rings shalt thou make to it, under the crown of it, by the two corners thereof, upon the two sides of it shalt thou make it; and they shall be for places for the staves to bear it withal. ⁵And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. ⁶And thou shalt put it before the vail that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. ⁷And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. ⁸And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. ⁹Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon. ¹⁰And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord.” (Exo. 30:1-10)

Then, please, if you will to Chapter 30 and verse 34. We are going to read a little about this incense:

“And the Lord said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: ³⁵And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: ³⁶And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy. ³⁷And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the Lord. ³⁸Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.” (Exo.30:34-38)

Now God was very concerned about this altar of incense. First, it speaks of *our Lord's high priestly ministry*. “He is able to save unto the uttermost all them that come unto God by Him, seeing that He ever liveth to make intercession for them.” (Heb. 7:25) We have a wonderful Lord that is continually representing us in the presence of the Father. He knows all of our weakness, and frailty, and sin. He knows everything about us. And He has loved us when He has known the worst about us. My, this is marvelous you know, that He loved us when He knew what we are just so slow in finding out, that in us and our flesh there is no good thing. He knew it, and this did not change His love for us at all. And so our Lord is there, in the presence of the Father, continuously upholding us before the Father.

But it not only speaks of His ministry for us, it also speaks of our ministry in prayer. The Word is explicit: “Pray without ceasing.” (I The. 5:17) This was a continual incense. I have often wondered about this in days past. Have you been intimidated by any chance by those whom you have met and seen who have told about their long hours spent in prayer. I think I may have related this to some of you sometime.

Years ago, I read that Martin Luther¹ spent three hours a day in prayer, and the Reformation came. Well I knew I wasn't the stuff he was, but I figured I could probably spend two hours a day in prayer, and so I made up my mind I was going to do it, back in Little Falls, Minnesota. To be honest with myself, I wouldn't guess, I put the alarm clock over on the desk, and I knelt. I armed myself with some prayer manuals, with some lists of missionaries' names and other things, and went to prayer. Oh, I was there a long time. I prayed around the world, went over the list of the church members, I went back and forth from need to need, and work to work, and situation to situation, mission field to mission field, and I was acquainted with them. I felt

¹ Martin Luther (1483-1546) German monk, former Catholic priest, who wrote the Ninety-Five Theses.

certainly I must have spent several hours in prayer and outdone Luther. But finally I decided that I didn't want to overdo it the first day, and that I had better just check. And I peeked through my fingers and discovered to my grief and chagrin that I had been there about 22 minutes and 37 seconds. And I didn't know of a thing more to pray for. I just prayed for everybody and everything, and everywhere, and I was finished. And how I would ever pray without ceasing was beyond me at that time. And I began to realize why it was so hard to have a reformation, because it was so hard to pray three hours.

But you know, as the years went on I discovered that everything is not prayer which is said to be, and many things are prayer which are not recognized as such. And that God's desire for us in our prayer ministry can be represented by the fact that there were sweet spices in this incense. It was not all one kind. There are many different kinds of prayer, each has its place, and each is important; compounded together, they become the incense that pleases Him. This is a week of prayer. We are preceding our convention by having prayer meetings in homes four nights of this week. I think it is extremely important that we should realize that God wants this to be something more than an exercise we have for four days. He wants this to enrich our total ministry, our total prayer life, and so I am suggesting to you the sweet spices that you will find in your prayer life, if it is the incense that pleases Him, one of the aspects or kinds of prayer that should always be in your proper prayer ministry is that of **confession**. As long as we live there will never be a time when it is not necessary for us to take the place of brokenness. He said, When you have done your best works, and then you say, unprofitable, unworthy servant. And who is there of us in any ministry or any service that can have any other attitude than, How can such humble work ever honor such a glorious Lord. And then to think that we have been in so dilatory and so indolent in the most important work of the world, the privilege of going into the King of Kings. Always we must have brokenness in respect to failure, things we have done that we should have not done, things that we have not done that we should. I believe that God honors the transparent heart, the heart that is perfectly honest with Him. And it behooves us to maintain this honesty always. In coming to the Lord in prayer, privately and in a sense even corporately, the point of beginning is the point of our utter dependence upon Him. And so in your prayer life there will always be this spice of confession, as part of the incense.

But then with that there is another. It is joined very closely and much the same. This is **affirmation of our faith and acknowledgment of our relationship to the Lord**, our testimony. In revelation we read, They overcame him, that is Satan, by the word of their testimony and the Blood of the Lamb. It behooves us, as Spurgeon² told the young students at Pastor's College in London 50 years and more ago; considerably more than that, it behooves us to make much of the Blood. And our prayer ministry must include an affirmation of the fact that we are included in Christ, that the Father put us in Christ, that when He went to the Cross we went with Him, when He died, He died for us, when He shed His Blood, He shed His Blood for us. We ought to affirm that we are under the Blood.

Dear Gladys Derterly the one woman Dr. Tozer³ said that if she ever came into the Service and He was preaching, he would stop and invite her to the pulpit any place that he was, because she ministered with such blessing. But she has written just a little folder, the secret of joy, and in it she uses a sweet analogy. She says that every morning we ought to begin our relationship to the Lord the same way that a soldier begins his. Revel is blown; he dresses, goes out, stands at attention, presents himself, and salutes the flag, affirming his loyalty, affirming his patriotism and availability for the day's work. And so it ought to be that our prayer includes this, this affirmation that we are in Christ, that He is our Lord, that all we have and are is His, that we are — our only confidence is that He shed His Blood; and our Christian life ought to have not just the time of day, but this ought to be the continuous, continuously repeated attitude of our heart, an affirmation, a declaration, a testimony.

So now we have two spices in this incense of prayer, confession and affirmation. Do you have this in your life? Do you begin your prayer time with brokenness and confession; know He has said that we are to have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men.

Then we discover there is a third ingredient in prayer that is acceptable to the Lord, and this is **thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving. Paul writing to Timothy said that there would come a generation from which you should turn away. They would be religious, and devout, and even fundamental, possibly evangelistic. But he should escape their clutches and avoid them at any cost, because

² Charles Haddon (C.H.) Spurgeon (1834-1892) British Particular Baptist Preacher

³ Aiden Wilson Tozer (1897-1963) Pastor and Author, Christian and Missionary Alliance Magazine Editor

they would nothing but destroy the effectiveness of his Christian life. And you what it was that characterized these. Among other things they were to be unthankful, and unholy. I would say that ingratitude and unholiness are like handmaids that skip along together; if you have one, you have the other. There is the sin of ingratitude, the sin of thanklessness. And so this incense that rises continually in the presence of the Lord in your heart ought to include thankfulness, gratitude, and thanksgiving.

Now, lest there should be any mistake about it, we are expressly taught in the Scriptures that for which we should give thanks. There is a tendency on the part of us to be grateful for the pleasant, and to be dutiful and enduring with the unpleasant. But God has dealt with us on this score by explicitly telling us what is that for which we should be thankful. Now obviously if we are derelict here we are going to have to suffer the consequences as in all of our Christian life. What is it? Well if you write down, if you are keeping notes, I Thessalonians 5:18: "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." In everything. In everything.

I had an opportunity to do that last night when I got on the plane in Denver. I wasn't feeling too well. We had not gotten up to the 33 thousand feet and I was going through chills and fever, and had my raincoat and two blankets around me, and was shivering so I could not keep my teeth together, and then finally got off and got into town, got into the car, and drove home so utterly ill. And all the time home last night I was thanking the Lord. Now this sounds strange, but I knew that it could not have touched me if He had not let it. And if He let it there must be a purpose in it, and if He had a purpose in it, that purpose among other things was to conform us to the image of His Son. And so, just as miserable as I could be, I was thanking the Lord all the way home that somehow by His grace He had let me be on the plane, where I was protected and had some help, rather than some places that I might have been, and that He had arranged it. And I am so grateful that I am here today quite recovered from it, and am happy that God has given me another opportunity to try to prove this. I am not talking through my hat when I'm ... It is like the little boy said, Dad, that that you said this morning in the Service, was that really true, or were you just preaching. Well that is not the case at all. I am not just preaching; this is true. "In everything give thanks." "In everything give thanks." Even the most difficult, give thanks, because God has set His sovereign love upon you when He drew you to Himself. And He said that nothing could touch you unless it would be to the end of making you like Christ. Great harm will come if we do not do this, and if we do, we release God to bless us and to meet us, because regardless of what touches us, it is not there to stay, like the hammer of the sculptor, the chisel of the sculptor is not to be driven into the statue and stay there; it is just a tool to take the refuse off, just take the scraps away. It is not hard to be a sculptor if you know what is statue and what is scraps, what is refuse and what is to be kept. This is what makes it an art. They can tell the difference. To me, it is all stone. I wouldn't know, see; but the sculptor knows where the statue stops and the refuse begins. So he can put the chisel on and the hammer on, and hammer, because he knows what he is doing.

Now God knows what He is doing, and He has set His wisdom, and His love, and His sovereignty and His power to the end of making you like Christ. So, "in everything give thanks." Now if you do that, you are going to find it a good bit more than 22 minutes are taken up. Just going through your life. And this ought to be the constant attitude of thanksgiving. This is going to just change burden into blessing, pain into joy, grief into grace, and it ought to be one of the ingredients in the incense on the altar of your heart. Confession, affirmation, and thanksgiving. Then the fourth that we present as an incense in this part of the incense is that of **praise**. There is a distinction. Always there is a distinction between thanksgiving and praise. Thanksgiving may lead into praise. Thanksgiving is gratitude to God for what He has done, and because one is grateful that God had done this, it can lead into a recognition of His attributes. For instance, if God in power has reached out to touch you, you can say, Thank you, Lord, for touching me. And then it can turn into praise by worshipping and adoring Him because He is omnipotent. But you see it does not have to begin that way. God might have not touched you, and you would still be responsible to praise Him, because it might be that He is not through with what He is doing with me or you, and therefore it is necessary for Him to continue. We still praise Him. Praise is worship of God, adoration of God, of what He is. It dwells upon His attributes. It dwells upon His character. It is the most frequently given commandment in the Bible, and if you do not properly praise the Lord, you are living in disobedience to the will of God. Now you cannot afford that. The consequences are too great. Thus, to have a Christian life without praise is more or less the same as being in the ocean without a boat. I suppose you can survive, but it is extremely difficult going, and you are spending all your time just keeping above water. Not to have praise in your life means that you have got to continually look to yourself. You see, praise exalts God, magnifies His attributes, and His character, relates

you to Him in such a way that since He is your Father, and you are His child, all He is anywhere He is willing to be to you, and praise is the means whereby your faith is nourished. If you do not praise, then God is getting smaller and smaller, and your problems are getting bigger and bigger. And if you do not learn to praise the Lord then you can understand that you are suffering, going to suffer, from a continually increasing spiritual anemia. There is no escape. It is essential that you have a life of praise. It is absolutely indispensable that you praise the Lord. This is one of the main ingredients.

Well now, you see what I spent 22 minutes doing, we have not even mentioned yet. Confession, affirmation, thanksgiving, and praise. Usually when you think of prayer, you think of asking. A book was written some years ago entitled, Prayer, Asking and Receiving. Well, that is an over simplification. If the author had said, Prayer includes asking and receiving, he would have been right. But to say that prayer is asking and receiving is wrong.

We come to petition. What is this? Well first, you cannot really ask in faith until you know what the Father's attitude about it is, and so if you have a problem, the first thing you have got to pray is, how to pray. Because you find times that you are asked to pray for something and you are really not quite sure whether you should, and it is wrong you know just to go through the motions. There are times when people have come and said, Will you please with me about something? And in all candor I have had to say, Well I can't but I will pray about how I should pray. So, petition has to be approached from the stand point of finding out of what God wants to do. Now if I know what God is going to do, I've got faith, because I know what He is going to do. If you ask anything according to the will of God, He heareth you. Now if I know it is God's will to do something, I've got faith. But if I don't know what He is going to do about it then I can ask Him about it and pray for it, but it has got to stop right about there. This is why I do not approve of that use of the little phrase, If it be Thy will, when we are asking for something, because it is just a nice little, small print rider at the bottom of the thing saying,... It is like the little boy says, Heads, I win, and tails you lose. If God answers prayer, good; if He doesn't, then I have been saved embarrassment. If there is a question as to what God's will is in the matter, let's pray and find out what His will is, and then when we know what His will is we know how to pray. But when someone prays, If it be Thy will, do this, I think they are just spiritually lazy. We ought to have gone ahead to have found out what His will is. If there is an uncertainty about the matter, we should have sought God's mind to know what His will is, not to put it on this basis, as though we were praying for something. How can you expect an answer to prayer when you are already dealing with an unanswered prayer. The prayer by inference is, What is the Lord's will in this matter. That ought to have engaged us until we were sure. Then we know what God's will was in the matter, we ought to have gone ahead and stood on the grounds of what His will was. But if we did not know what His will was, then we have simply built without a foundation, built on the sands.

So **petition** is not simply a little matter of asking, Lord, do this or do that. I am rather troubled by the fact that my great need may be very casually handled by my Christian friends, and your great need may be very casually handled by me and others of your friends. This troubles me. The Scripture says, "Bear ye one another's burdens;" it implies something more than just a casual haphazard dealing with the matter. It seems to me we ought to really get under this thing and get into this thing. And so petition is a very small thing. This part of praying. Now there are some things that are perfectly clear. We know it is God's will for sinners to repent. We know it is God's will for Christians that are backslidden to break and return. We do not need to pray about this. We know about this. We can simply cry out to God in earnest expectant longing. We know some things. We know it is God's will for young people to surrender their lives to the Lord. We know it is God's will for the needs of His work to be met. We know it is the will of God for the truth proclaimed to prosper in the hearts of those to whom it is sent. There are areas where we can go right to it, because we know. We do not need to pray about that on the edge. But when someone comes to you and says, Now I am facing two issues. I do not know whether to do this or to do that. Then is the place where we have got to pray concerning it and about it and into it. So this matter of petition involves all these others.

For instance, if there is unconfessed sin in your life it is foolish to ask God on your behalf or anyone else's. If there is ingratitude in your life, if there has been no praise, these are all part of petition, getting the foundation right, foursquare, properly founded, is all essential to the answer. This is all part of the incense. You cannot separate them. So prayer then is in the realm of petition; asking with the expectation of receiving, must have these other sweet spices of which we have spoken.

Now there is one other that is extremely important. This is very personal, this is very individual, and I call this and it is an arbitrary distinction, and I might be called to task for being too sharp in cutting here, too fine a distinction, but I call this last

spice in the incense, **Worship**, that closet worship, that worship that is just between the bride and the bridegroom, that which is yours not in the company of others, but when you are all alone with Him. And my friend, if you do not have some time every day when you are all alone with Him, you are robbing Him of what He wants, and you are robbing yourself. Now all of these other can be in company with our folk. We can have confession and affirmation, and thanksgiving, and praise, petition. All of these can be in a group. But that of which I speak now has to be alone. And I wonder if our Lord did not have this in mind when He said, If you will pray in your closet I'll answer in public. I wonder how long it has been since some here have gone into the closet; shut the door in their room... Now I am not talking about the closet in the usual sense of where your clothes are hanging. I went in one room where a brother had put in a little nice bench in there, and he came behind his suits and kneeled, and he felt sure that this was literally what the Scripture meant. I think it has reference to any place that you can be alone, any place that you can shut the door.

One of the benefits of civilization are homes with rooms and doors that lock both ways. The Africans you know, living with eight people in one little room, are deprived of privacy. Mona, this boy from the Udur Tribe that I told you about, had to build a little house, a little split bamboo house, next to his hut so he could have some place where he could be alone with the Lord. Of course, out in the bush, you can go away and get a quiet place under a tree somewhere. But some of our homes, perhaps you live in a place where it is terribly difficult to get privacy. You had better ask the Lord if there is not some place, some way, that can arrange to have time alone in.

I think that is very well for us to have a time when we are completely relaxed. You know that verse that says, "Be still and know that I am God;" literally says, Be relaxed, and know that I am God. (Psa. 46:10) That is what the Hebrew was. Be still in the sense of bodily motion and agitation. And I think if we understood it, is, Be relaxed. These are days of great tension, physical, emotional tension, mental pressure; and if you could cultivate sometime during the day before you... when you wake up, before you get up, or some time if you have the freedom in your room during the day when you just lie down and your body relaxes and your mind relaxes, and you tell the Lord that you love Him. Oh, I know, you are going to go to sleep, but you probably will be benefited by that too. That will be helpful. Don't worry about it.

You know it is funny, When I went to the Mission field they made me promise that I would take a rest hour every day. And you get into the habit of doing that. When they come home it is hard to break. I think it is a wonderful thing. There ought to be a quiet time, not in the usual sense of reading, not in the usual sense of even these other kinds of praying, but somewhere along in the day, you ought to just tell the Lord Jesus that you love Him. Don't ask Him for anything, just worship Him, the pouring out of your love. A dear, unnamed saint of the middle ages, wrote her little booklet entitled, The Cloud of Unknowing in which she said that there were many phases of praying. First there was the phase we have talked about of **confession, affirmation, thanksgiving, praise, and petition**. But she said, "When you came to worship there was simply an entering into His presence where the wonder of all He is became so transcendently glorious that you could not use words any longer, that the affection of your heart, the love and the devotion of your heart, was just such that it could not possibly be expressed with words, and it had to be," she called it, The Cloud of Unknowing, where you had reached the place that it was simply the pure love of your heart poured out to Him.

Now incense before the door, and it is right there at the place of revelation. You are hungry for the revelation of God? and you are concerned to know Him better? Well remember that there had to be incense on the altar night and day if there was to be proper access into His presence. And so as we go to prayer tonight and tomorrow, and the next days following, and in the whole of your Christian life to come, see to it that you have these several spices in the incense of your heart.

There is confession. Let it be there when it is needed constantly. **Affirmation** of your faith and relationship. **Thanksgiving. Praise. Petition**. And then that rise of incense of **worship**, poured out love to Him.

We are going to go to prayer now...

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