

The Other Sweet-Smelling Savor – Psalm 141:1-2

I. Introduction:

- A. During their years in the wilderness, Israel was to worship God at His Tabernacle.
1. I hope you can picture that place. First, there was the **courtyard** surrounded by a wall of **curtains**.
 2. Inside were several things, including the inner tabernacle made up of the **Holy Place** & the **Holy of Holies**.
 3. Outside the Holy Place were the **brassen laver** for the ceremonial washings and the **brassen altar** where the sacrifices and blood were consumed by fire.
 4. Inside the Tabernacle proper were several articles, including the **Mercy Seat** and the **Golden Altar** – also called the **Altar of Incense**.
- B. Tonight, once again, I'm stepping out of my comfort zone.
1. Many preachers and writers enjoy taking the Tabernacle apart piece by piece, telling people that each and every part has some sort of spiritual application.
 2. For example, my soul was thrilled years ago to read a message about the silver sockets in which the posts or vertical boards of the Tabernacle walls were set.
 - a. There is no Biblical authority to say that those pots are types of the Lord Jesus, but that message did.
 - b. And the preacher did a good job, blessing my heart.
 3. But in reality, not every aspect of the Tabernacle has a God-proscribed lesson for us. However some do.
 4. For example, the Bible authorizes us to use the **brassen altar** as a picture of **cross of Christ**.
 5. And the New Testament tells today's pastor to preach about the **Mercy Seat** as the place of salvation.
 6. But does that mean the preacher should say that the wings of the Cherubim over the Mercy Seat had feathers and every feather has a lesson for us? I think not.
- C. Inside the Holy Place, and just before the curtain into the Holy of Holies, there stood the Altar of Incense.
1. There are no direct Biblical statements anywhere in the Pentateuch, telling us that the smoke rising up from the Altar of Incense carried with it the prayers of Israel or the priests.
 2. Yet there are other scriptures which speak of to the burning of incense as **illustrating** prayer.
 3. David besought the Lord, *"Let my prayer be set forth before thee **AS** incense."*
 4. And in the **Book of Revelation 5:8** we read, *"the four beast and four & twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, & golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints."*
 5. What are those vials full of odours? Doesn't **Revelation 8:3** tell us?
 - a. *"And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne."*
 - b. *And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand."*
- D. I think that I have Biblical authority to say that incense in God's Word, at the very least, points to our prayers.
1. The question which still sits in my head is: *"How far should we push that illustration?"*
 2. At this point I am just going to say, *"I will push it a bit tonight, & you may do with it as the Holy Spirit leads."*

II. The incense Israel used in the tabernacle was **SPECIALLY PREPARED**.

- A. Please turn to **Exodus 30**.
1. The chapter begins with the construction and placement of the Tabernacle's Golden Altar of Incense.
 2. Then **verse 7** says, *"And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations."*
 3. Should I tell you that in addition to praying without ceasing throughout the day, each morning should begin in fellowship with God, and it should end in thanksgiving for the Lord's blessings that day?
 4. Would that be an unbiblical exhortation?
 5. At the very least there is a parallel between Israel's daily sacrifices and the Christian's devotions.

- B. Later in **Exodus 30** God tells Moses about the composition of this incense.
1. *“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:

 - a. *And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy:*
 - b. *And 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.”**
 2. I am not even going to try to describe or apply the four ingredients in God’s incense.
 3. I’m not even confident in pronouncing their names, except perhaps for the frankincense.
 4. But I will boldly tell you this: God was very specific in His directions about that incense, and the priestly apothecaries who blended these ingredients knew exactly what they were doing.
- C. So this incense was carefully, even meticulously, prepared. What does that tell us about prayer?
1. Throughout the day, our hearts and minds ought to often rise from our earthly responsibilities into the throne room of the Lord.
 - a. We don’t need to kneel, fold our hands, or even close our eyes to commune with our Saviour.
 - b. We should be so close to the Lord throughout the day that there is only a breath or thought between us.
 2. But on-the-other-hand, at the end of the day, when we take time to thank the Lord, we need to become specific and contemplative.
 3. And in our specific requests, we need to make sure there isn’t anything foreign mixed into that incense, like powdered peanut butter – or any earthly dust or dirt.
 4. There shouldn’t be any animosity, anger, or jealousy in our prayers. There shouldn’t be any greed or pride.
 5. *“Thy will be done, Lord. Yes, I am expressing what I would like, but give me a willingness to stop my mouth and silence my heart, if these things are contrary to your will.”*
- D. I am assuming that Israel’s four-ingredient-blend was made up of dry materials.
1. There is no mention of olive oil or water being mixed in. This is not anointing oil, a lotion, or a cream.
 2. The incense to be burnt on the Golden Altar was dry and then **beaten** into a powder.
 3. Some writers apply that to mean that our prayers should come from spiritual brokenness, and I have no objection to that.
 4. In those morning and evening prayers – periods of deliberate verbal offerings – there must be a recognition of our unworthiness. We are small. We are unworthy.
 5. And even though we may think that our requests are huge and earth-shattering, they need to be beaten down and thoroughly mixed with reverence, humility and thanksgiving.
 6. What do you think God would do to the priest who threw whole, unbroken leaves of galbanum onto the altar
- E. Although there are similarities, **incense** is **not** the same as **potpourri**.
1. The definition of **“potpourri”** is *“a mixture of dried petals and spices placed in a bowl or small sack to perfume clothing or a room.”*
 2. Incense involves the actual burning, or at least the heating up, of its ingredients.
 3. I know that I’m pushing the envelope, encouraging you to take it or leave it as the Holy Spirit leads you...
 4. But for the incense of our prayers to rise into Heaven, we need the fire of the Holy Spirit.
- F. I hope that you have had the privilege of watching a dozen hot air balloons rising into the sky at the same time.
1. They are beautiful and fascinating, lifting off the ground only because the air inside the balloon is hotter than the air outside.
 2. If I might put it this way, only when the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts, below our burdens and our joys, the sweet smell of our prayers rise up toward the Lord.
 3. **Romans 8:26** – *“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”*
 4. The Holy Spirit *“maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”*

III. The scriptures give us a couple words of **CAUTION** about our incense and the Golden Altar.

A. **Exodus 30:9** says, *“Ye shall offer no **STRANGE** incense thereon.”*

1. I am using the Altar of Incense inside the Holy Place as our illustration.
2. Remember that there was only a curtain separating it from the Holy of Holies and the Mercy Seat.
 - a. Our few moments of daily prayer take us to the very threshold of God’s throne.
 - b. We burn our incense *“before the Lord” (verse 8)* that is, as in His presence.
 - c. The Lord is *“right there”* even though we can’t see Him with our earthly eyes.
 - d. How can we approach the infinitely holy God smelling like earthly manure or even Chanel no.5?
 - e. The Lord is interested in smelling only the sweet savour of the incense He has ordained.

B. Praying for that which we know to be contrary to God’s will, is inviting the ground to open up beneath our feet.

1. **Leviticus 10:1** – *“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, & put incense thereon, & offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.”*

C. Another word of warning comes in **Exodus 30:37** – *“And 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. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.”*

1. Making God’s incense, and using it for personal pleasure was strictly forbidden.
2. Just think about the thousands who came out of Egypt all with different tastes and perspectives.
3. I can imagine some of them catching a whiff of God’s incense and thinking how really good it smelled.
4. Knowing it came from the Tabernacle, it created a little shiver, a little religious thrill.
5. Some might have thought, *“I’m going to run home and create some of the Lord’s incense for myself.”*
6. But, *“whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.”*

IV. Here is one more intellectual and spiritual stretch I’d like you to consider.

A. With the close of the **Book of Malachi** and the **Old Testament** the blessings and revelations of God ceased.

1. There were 400 years when very little took place in the spiritual world, as once again Israel was basically back in the land of Egypt.
2. But then, by the grace of God, a new page was turned; a new chapter began, along with a New Testament.

B. With what did the New Testament begin?

1. The **Book of Matthew** begins with a list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ from Abraham to Joseph.
2. Then we have the account of the angel’s visit to Joseph, and soon after that, the birth of Christ.
3. But something took place before that. Do you remember what it was?
4. In **Luke 1**, the angel of the Lord visited Zacharias, the husband of Elizabeth, who was the cousin of Mary, the mother of Christ.
5. On that occasion the angel announced to Zacharias that he and his wife would bring Jesus’ forerunner into the world.

C. What was Zacharias doing when he received his heavenly visitor?

1. **Luke 1:8** – *“It came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his course,

 - a. According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.
 - b. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.”*
2. Zacharias and his wife were among the more godly and spiritual people in Israel in their day.
3. *“They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”* Almost certainly, they were praying for the parousia – the coming of Israel’s Messiah.
4. And when he was visited, Zacharias was in the temple burning the Lord’s special incense.

- D. If you will permit another application: Zacharias, and his wife, along with a few others outside the Holy Place were praying for *“revival.”*
1. Perhaps they had been pleading with God for years. Perhaps they had been begging with tears.
 2. Now, childless and in their old age, Zacharias and Elizabeth thought that their family wouldn't see the day of the Lord's coming. But they didn't give up.
 3. They continued to pray. Burning some of the incense which the Lord Himself ordained.
 4. And then at the appointed time, after years of faithfulness and fluctuating faith, God's timetable said *“yes.”*
 5. **Luke 1:13** – *“The angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.*
 - a. *And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.*
 - b. *For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.*
 - c. *And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.*
 - d. *And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*
- E. What I am trying to illustrate this evening is the holy nature and spiritual importance of prayer.
1. Let's enter our holy place with the incense which the Lord has ordained.
 2. Let's put the fire of the Holy Spirit under it, refusing to ignite it with strange fire.
 3. Let its sweet savour rise up into Heaven – morning and evening – tonight, tomorrow and next day.
 4. Let's plead with the Lord for His blessings, and His glory.
 5. Let's take David's prayer as our own... *“Lord, let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense.”*