

## God With Us | The Tabernacle and the Advent

### *The Incense*

Exodus 30.1-10; John 17.1-5, 20ff; and Hebrews 7.25  
12.20.15, Week FOUR

*(Exodus 30.1-10) "Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. <sup>2</sup> "Its length shall be a cubit, and its width a cubit, it shall be square, and its height shall be two cubits; its horns shall be of one piece with it. <sup>3</sup> "You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around for it. <sup>4</sup> "You shall make two gold rings for it under its molding; you shall make them on its two side walls-- on opposite sides-- and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. <sup>5</sup> "You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. <sup>6</sup> "You shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you. <sup>7</sup> "Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. <sup>8</sup> "When Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations. <sup>9</sup> "You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on it. <sup>10</sup> "Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD."*

*(John 17.1-5, 20ff) Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, <sup>2</sup> even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. <sup>3</sup> "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. <sup>4</sup> "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. <sup>5</sup> "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*

*<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. <sup>22</sup> "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; <sup>23</sup> I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. <sup>24</sup> "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. <sup>25</sup> "O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; <sup>26</sup> and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."*

*(Hebrews 7.25) Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*

This Advent Season, this season of preparation in which Christians meditate on the coming or arrival of God...in Jesus Christ...WE HAVE TRIED TO GET A NEW OUTLOOK on the whole Jesus-Event by looking at the Tabernacle in the Book of Exodus.

That Tabernacle was the portable worship space that Moses was command to construct about 1500BC. The Israelites were liberated from generations of slavery in Egypt...They were set free in

order to realize their national destiny, their PURPOSE (actually the purpose of all HUMANITY) which was/is to know God...to admire God who is the source of all TRUTH, BEAUTY and GOODNESS.

And this central purpose of knowing God would sort of emanate from the center of the CAMP...they were to set up this DWELLING PLACE for God. The glory of God would “shakk-en” there...would “shekinah” or dwell in that place. And this TENT or Tabernacle would be described in painstaking detail...

Later, the Apostle John would USE this Tabernacle as a kind of outline for HIS TELLING of the Jesus-Story. John saw that where the Tabernacle was a sign or symbol...it was pointing ahead to Jesus Christ. He is the actual dwelling of God, God with us...the Mind or Logos or Word of God tabernacling among us (Jn 1.14).

Today, we consider the last piece of furniture the priest would encounter before entering the Holiest Place (where the presence of God was symbolized on the Ark of the Covenant) and that is the Altar of Incense.

Not every approach to God...to spiritual practice or spirituality USES incense...but what this furniture symbolizes/represents is something pretty universal in virtually every religion or form of spirituality...and if you ARE a spiritual person it's ALMOST certainly something you struggle with...and the altar of incense POINTS to a source of help...so let's look at it:

#1 – A Central Feature in All Spirituality

#2 – The Bible's Unique Contribution to This Practice

#3 – How This Might Change YOUR Spirituality

The word “spirituality” has made some Church people nervous...Older writers would sometimes speak of “the spiritual life” or “spiritual practice” or “piety” or “the means of grace”... In the seventies, Francis Schaeffer coined the phrase True Spirituality and that made American Protestants feel better...

But whether it's true spirituality or not...every religion and every plan and program of spiritual practice has some form of PRAYER...some form of meditation and communication between the worshiper and the deity...even Buddhism which is officially an atheistic or agnostic (at least the Buddha was) but even Buddhism has prayer...

And people struggle with that discipline...people (maybe especially Western people...living in a very fast-paced world...with our devices...and let's face it our devices DO...as some have noted DO provide us with an artificial sense of transcendence or synthetic spirituality!)...but people struggle especially in our day...struggle to slow down...to stop moving...to reflect and commune with God...and pray.

Unless you're an atheist (and that's another sermon – i.e. how even atheists pray – no atheists in a foxhole or a final exam...as they say) but how many here, if you have any spiritual life at all, would say, “Nope...my practice of prayer is really vibrant...really intense...I'm satisfied with my prayer-life...” I haven't met many people who would say that.

And IN the ancient Tabernacle...there is this altar...a symbol that is developed in the rest of the Bible...a symbol of prayer. Like the other liturgical furniture, it's carefully described...its function (to hold incense), its dimensions, instructions for carrying, materials (acacia wood overlaid with pure gold), the officiants (i.e. Aaron...the priests only)...prohibition against using just ANY old incense (“strange fire”), the TIMES (i.e. morning, evening...and always...perpetual...ongoing burning of incense)...it's all carefully designed.

And it's placed as the last furnishing before the priest enters that chamber where the Ark of the Covenant is...the priest walks through the fragrance ...He prays and is shrouded in the fragrance of prayer as he enters God's Presence.

In the Gospel According to John...Jesus Christ has now entered the Upper Room where He eats the Last Supper with His disciples. As He does, He leaves them with parting words...prepares them for what they are about to see as He'll be betrayed...taken from them and all their fondest hopes will be shattered as they see Him shamed...and falling under the weight of a cross...showered in spit and hanging to death...

And AS Jesus Christ speaks very openly...as He preps them for this unimaginable tragedy...He stops...and looks away from THEM...looks UP and he begins to address His Father. He is the Great High Priest and He is consecrating Himself for the sacrifice in which He will be SIMULTANEOUSLY both the Priest AND the Victim. This is the Altar of Incense in the Gospel According to John. It's sacred space. We feel like we don't belong here...like we're intruding into a Holy Place...like we should take off our shoes.

The prayer itself is shrouded in mystery...like fragrance wafting upward...He lifts His eyes and He raises His words... “Father...the Hour has come...”

He once told Mary, “Woman, My hour has not yet come...” (2.4) but now that dread hour...planned from before the foundation of the world...the worst hour our planet had even known (and the BEST) THAT heaviest/holiest of all hours has arrived.

The prayer has a number of themes (we cut out the center of it...we printed just the start and finish)... He speaks of GLORY...remember the Tabernacle was the Glory Dwelling...shekinah (i.e. remaining)...

The prayer is UNIQUE...i.e. can't be a WWJD thing (I can't ask "What Would Jesus Do?" here...because I can't pray this way!) He speaks as an eternal Being who was with God from the beginning "the glory I had with YOU before the world was." (5)

He uses the words "give", "gave" and "given" a lot in this prayer... He was given authority. He speaks as the Last Adam...who has dominion over all creation (2) and who has accomplished all the First Adam failed to do (4) "having accomplished the work which You have given Him..." He completed the task He was "given"...on behalf of the people he was "given"... for the "glory" He was GIVEN...

He speaks of His desire...that the ones GIVEN to Him, the ones who (believe) those disciples and those who in future generations will believe because of their witness...He desires (v.24) to be with THEM, "That they...whom YOU have given Me would be WITH ME...that THEY would see My glory...might see the way YOU LOVE ME...and have from before the world was even planned."

And it ends how it began...on the idea of KNOWING... to KNOW GOD...he prayed in v. 3 IS to know eternal life... to be in right relationship with God is to be connected to the source of life...to LIFE HIMSELF!

And again at the end of the prayer (25-26)... O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

It answers the question: Just how fallen ARE we? How bad off is the human race and what will it take to fix us? AND the answer is: We are in the DARK about God...and about spiritual things and WE are far worse off than we think? (QUOTE) "The world has not KNOWN You..." We could NOT reason our way to God...could not deal with our own guilt...it separated us from God and created the insurmountable wall... the impassable gulf...the impenetrable barrier..."The World has not known you".

It's the BAD NEWS and GOOD NEWS of Christmas... "Long lay the world in sin and error pining...then He appeared and the soul felt its worth..." Help came from outside our capabilities – God broke in, God came among us...and HERE He is...in the awful hour consecrating Himself for the sacrifice the Priest and the Victim and before He enters in...He walks through the incense of His own fragrant prayers.

How does Christianity ...how does the God-News, the spell about God...the Gospel...how does it change the practice of prayer? Well, this alone among all the world's programs and religions and spiritual OR secular practices...THIS alone has God coming NOT only to teach us to pray...but to pray for us!

We are marred incense...we are strange fire...our prayers...our very SELVES...are NOT ACCEPTABLE ...but Jesus Christ IS the fragrant aroma... and when I see that I AM DISQUALIFIED...but He is the satisfaction of His own demands ON MY BEHALF... to the degree that I believe that and it's real to me... THAT changes my prayer life...So HOW?

How does Christmas, how does God with us in Jesus Christ (God as a Man living, dying and rising FOR me) how does that change prayer and lead to "True Spirituality"?

Well...it doesn't do away with prayer or eliminate the practice of prayer...Just like the Tabernacle would have incense burning at morning and at dusk...and perpetually forever...so St Paul will say "pray without ceasing..." Instead, the Gospel enables prayer; it liberates prayer. I pray NOT according to a prescribed formula where the answer depends on my getting it just right... I pray knowing that quite often I don't get it right. My prayers are often selfish and fixated on my own comfort and relief...but HIS prayer is perfect...and always will be!

He is risen from the dead and has carried our humanity into the very throne room of God: He is God's Word to us and He is OUR Word to God! (Hebrews 7.25) Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

As the old writer, Thomas Watson put it, I want my prayers to be like a bouquet of flowers to my Heavenly Father but I've included daisies and milkweed and Poison Ivy and it's as if, while the dusty smoky prayers come out of my mouth "when we have put up our prayers, Christ comes, and picks away the weeds, the sin of our prayer, and presents nothing but flowers to His Father, which are a sweet-smelling savor."

Jesus Christ the consecrated Priest consecrates my sour smelling prayers.

This is a receptive kind of spirituality...and that comes out so strongly in Jesus Christ's prayer, "give...gave... given." And Christian spiritual practice, True Spirituality is always about "rest and receive"...God is the Giver...Jesus Christ the DOER, the Mediator, the High Priest, the Obedient Adam who accomplished the Father's will...and WE are recipients...and that KNOWLEDGE helps me see prayer as the gift it IS.

This is the Great Prince...my Older Brother...He says to me, "Here's a wheelbarrow...it's called prayer... take it into My Father's goldmine (because He's YOUR Father too!) and take all the gold you want! Pray without ceasing!"

And when I hear it that way...it's not like someone shouting and demanding "GO!!! GET that GOLD! I demand it...YOU MUST...YOU SHOULD...I REQUIRE..." No...it's an alluring and fascinating invitation! You may have to force people into a coal-mine...but not a gold-mine...and because

Jesus Christ has prayed for me...and DOES pray for me and because He sanctifies and purifies the strange fire of our prayers, He turns the greasy vapors of our selfish requests into the costliest loveliest incense...therefore...I can pray ...prayer becomes BOTH a command (pray without ceasing") AND a gift, an invitation to be received.

And it's relational...that's the emphasis on KNOWING and the unmistakable stress on intimacy...My older Brother, the infinitely fascinating Person who is the Beloved of the Father...wants me to be with Him.

Our Father...who loves the Son with perfect tenderness and warmth and truest admiration...also, because of what Jesus Christ did...the father loves us with that same quality of LOVE...the guilt is gone...the barrier has crumbled...the divide is bridged...God is With Us...for US... and loved them, even as You have loved Me. "(You) ... "loved them, even as You have loved Me...for You loved Me before the foundation of the world." The gold I take out of the MINE is God Himself...it's a love unimaginably great...

And lastly...it's a familial and communal practice. The Gospel enables a practice of prayer that actually leads NOT to competition where we pray to sound super-spiritual and holier-than-thou ...but just very simply (That's why the model prayer, The Lord's Prayer is just ONE short paragraph)...and here, in the incense before the Crucifixion...Jesus Christ prays again and again, "That they may be ONE..."

True Spirituality thrusts you into community with others...it's NOT a private thing...Solitude? YES! Privacy? No?

Ask yourself...as we finish today...all this stress on "the ones YOU, Father, have given Me..." Are YOU in that number? Do you know the Older Brother whose prayers for His people...change His people's prayers?

OR are YOU in some other form of spirituality...where prayer is a drag and where prayer really depends on YOU...if so...why not come and receive...?