

Title: Sweet Worship
Text: Exodus 30.1-10
Theme: Life as incense for God
Series: Exodus #46
Prop Stmtnt: Prayer is a necessary expression of the very reason for which we exist.

Read Text: Exodus 30.1-10

Kid's Connection

When you read the Bible, I encourage you to talk back to it. God speaks to us through His Spirit who directed men to record his Word. When we read the Scriptures, God is communicating with us. So, not only is everything written for our benefit, but it is written intentionally in a particular order for a specific reason as well. I was reading this chapter this week and talking back to it, wondering why this piece of furniture was not mentioned until chapter 30. There has to be a reason why the altar of incense is not spoken of back in chapter 26. Now, tuck that away for just a minute but not too far. Because there are two questions that I want to raise and answer in this message:

- 1) Why is the altar of incense not mentioned until chapter 30?

Now, for those of you are thinking to yourself, "You've got to be kidding me. I got up this morning, got dressed, got the kids all ready and came here for this?! Hold the phone.

- 2) What does this teach us about God and us?

We are 75% of our way through the book of Exodus. (30 of 40) In this book we have seen how God has kept the promises he made to the patriarchs in Genesis. The people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became a nation whom God rescued out of slavery in the land of Egypt in order to take them back to the land that he had promised to give them. Along the way he is teaching them about himself and teaching them about themselves. The big idea is this: God rescues his people to worship him. God's people are uniquely set apart by him because there is no other God. Out of all of the gods that are worshiped by the nations of the world, there is no God like the God of Israel. Even the construction of the tabernacle is evidence for that.

Now, other nations had temples for their gods, so in that sense there were some similarities between this tabernacle and the temples of the gods of other nations in that this structure was the place where Israel's God lived. But since the God of Israel was the only true God, this dwelling place would also be unique (Holy). God designs the tabernacle in such a way that he reveals manifold purposes. For example, in the inner sanctuary of pagan temples there was an idol of their god. In the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, there was an ark, a mercy seat, a footstool, where there was an image of seraphim representing these holy, sinless beings who minister in the presence of God. In the pagan nations there were many temples for their many gods, while in Israel, there was one tabernacle for the one true God. Pagan priests practiced incantations and divination

in an attempt to manipulate the god. This sort of activity was so strongly forbidden in Israel, that anyone found participating in such a thing was to be executed. Why? God cannot be manipulated. In the pagan temples, the priests had to feed their god. Pagan gods are dependent upon their followers to keep them happy and alive. The true God is self-existent and is in need of no one. This was not the place where God lived in the sense that he was confined to this space. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. You cannot build a structure that can contain him. Yet he ordained the construction of this tabernacle to teach his people about himself even as he chose to use the tabernacle as a means to reveal his presence in a unique way.

For example, the Bible teaches that God is omnipresent. So why do we say that God dwelt in the tabernacle when God is eternally present everywhere? The answer is, while God is present everywhere, he chose to reveal his presence in a special way in the tabernacle. Just as, while God is still eternally present in this world, when believers gather together as the church, God's presence is uniquely evidenced in the preaching of the Word, in the observing of the ordinances, and the worship of God's people.

God used the tabernacle as the means by which he could live with his people and the means by which his people could approach, worship and live with him. Since this was God's very reason for creating us in the first place, it should not surprise us to find similarities between the accounts of God creating the world and the construction of the tabernacle. In fact there are some very clear parallels.

Chart:

Genesis 1.31 and Exodus 39.43

Genesis 2.1 and Exodus 39.32

Genesis 2.2 and Exodus 40.33

Genesis 2.3 and Exodus 39.43

This helps understand why God at the end of these instructions (31.12) repeats his instructions about the Sabbath. Do you see the connection? The tabernacle/temple was a place of rest for God. It represented the end for which God had made the world. Now, when I say rest, I don't mean the kind of rest where you take lay down and sleep because you are so exhausted. No, God rested from his work of creation in order to enjoy that which he had made. That is why God commanded his children to stop working one day a week, so that they could do what he did and that is enjoy what they were working for. Enjoy God! That's worship. Enjoy each other! That's church/family. I will address this more fully when we get to the end of chapter 31. But there is another parallel I want you to see. The account of creation and the account of constructing the tabernacle are based on seven acts of God. Seven times the account of creation records that, "And God said." (Genesis 1.3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, and 26) Seven times the design of the tabernacle records the words, "The LORD said." (Exodus 25.1; 30.11, 17, 22, 34; 31.1, 12) I think that it is more than coincidental that it took Solomon 7 years to build the Temple and that it was dedicated in the 7th month during the Festival of Tabernacles, which was a God-ordained holiday of 7 days and that Solomon's prayer of dedication was organized around 7

different petitions. Now, all of that is just flat out fascinating. But, don't miss the point! Everything that was in this tabernacle had a practical, theological, Christological, doxological and eschatological purpose. In other words, it all worked together to allow his people to worship him in a manner that revealed his purpose for the universe which was to create a kingdom and a people for His glorious Son Jesus Christ. All of that is in this little tabernacle. That means that this little piece of furniture, called the golden altar, or the altar of incense, was part of this divine design and was not mentioned until this point because of the picture that God was painting. Here is what I mean.

The description of the tabernacle began with the Ark of the Covenant (testimony), then the table for the bread, the lampstand, and then the tabernacle itself. Remember, that one of the purposes of the tabernacle was for God to reveal himself (dwell among) to his people. And that is what these pieces do. The Ark of the Covenant, table for bread and lampstand all speak of the presence of God. The description starts with the Ark but then moves into the Holy Place. Notice the direction. God is coming out. God's presence is uniquely manifested in the Holy of Holies, but God is seen and known by the symbolism and significance of these pieces. But another purpose of the tabernacle was for the people of God to be able to live with God. So, now the attention shifts in direction. The bronze altar that stood in the courtyard makes it clear that you can approach God by means of a sacrifice of his choosing. Then, the person who offers that sacrifice and who goes in to the holy place is the priest, so chapters 28-29 explain the attire and the ordination process for the priest. Then we come to the Altar of Incense here in chapter 30. While the other two pieces in the holy place (lampstand and table of bread) reveal the presence of God (light and fellowship) the altar of incense speaks of our most intimate and personal closeness to God. This altar is a reminder of how we can and how we must approach God. So, here is the question that I want us to answer this morning. What are we supposed to learn about God and ourselves from the altar of incense? What does this say about how we approach God?

What was it?

The altar of incense was perfectly square at the top. (1.5 x 1.5) It stood two feet high. This square piece of furniture sat in a rectangle area, like the bronze altar which was a square piece in a rectangle area. They were both proportionate to the area in which they stood. The square-ness of the different pieces is consistent. The Holy of Holies was perfectly square. The bronze altar was square. The breastpiece on Aaron was square, and now the altar was square. At the same time, it was similar to the table of bread in that it was as tall as the table was long.

It was also an altar. What do you do at an altar? You offer a sacrifice. The offering that was given here, was (like on the bronze altar) burned as opposed to the bread that was offered weekly on the table and was not burned up. This altar, like the Ark of the Covenant and the Table for bread was made out of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. And it was holy (set apart). Both the actual piece of furniture and the incense that was offered were set apart for this purpose and purpose alone. You were not permitted to use

the altar for anything else, and you were not permitted to use the incense for anything else.

What did it do?

When you light incense, it burns. The smoke that ascends from the incense would create a sense of a barrier or a protection between the priest and the Holy of Holies. The area of the Holy Place was not that big and the burning of this incense would create a bit of a fog-like setting. It was in that sense like a wall of protection. I say that based on Numbers 16 where we see this incense playing a major part in an event.

Let me set the stage. In Numbers 10, the nation of Israel finally packs up camp and leaves Sinai. They have received the law, they have constructed the tabernacle, they have learned about the sacrificial system and in short they have learned that they are the people of God. Now is the time to put all of this into practice and head for the land they have been promised. However, on the way, it becomes clear that for the most part, their hearts have not really been changed. In the beginning of chapter 11 the people start complaining about the difficulties of the journey. You know, it takes no depth of character to complain. It takes no humility, no grace, no compassion, no patience, no godliness, no gentleness, no faith, no love, and no hope in God to complain. Anybody can complain. It takes no leadership, no insight, no maturity, no resolve, and no understanding to complain. Complaining is very, very easy, which is why it is so common. Anyone can do it. What makes the people of God different than those bound in the kingdom of darkness? We are people who have a gospel-driven humility. We recognize that we deserve the wrath of God but that wrath was instead poured out upon Christ. I have no complaints! Complaining is NOT a mark of the people of God. At the beginning of Numbers 11, there was a general spirit of complaining. It was like a toxic virus. It was spreading fast. So, God responded in judgment. The complaining stopped for a bit, but then someone started complaining about the food. This complaint went throughout the entire nation and it was bad. Moses was at the end of his rope and worse, God was angry. Although God provided them with some meat, they violated the law that God had given them by eating it raw. So, God judged them again. In chapter 12 Miriam and Aaron started complaining to others about Moses' wife because Moses had an interracial marriage. Again God's anger was aroused and he dealt with that. In chapter 13, 12 spies survey the land of promise and come back and give their report to the nation. Ten of them are convinced that the people in the land are too powerful and that Israel can never take possession of the land. So, in chapter 14, the people rebel again and again God judges them. In chapter 16, there is a revolt by some prominent leaders that results in a severe judgment of God, and the next day the nation is grumbling again against Moses and Aaron because of God's judgment against those who were in rebellion. Moses and Aaron go before God, and God tells them that he is going to consume the nation in a moment. In fact, a plague had already started and people were dying. At this point, Moses tells Aaron to take his censer, put some fire from off the altar in it, lay incense on it and run to the congregation. Aaron does so and runs to where the plague is spreading. Numbers 16:48 says that Aaron stood between the living and the dead. The

incense was a barrier that protected the people from the holy and absolutely righteous justice of God.

The other thing that incense would do is create an aroma. The aroma produced by this incense was unique because this incense was unique. God did not permit this recipe for incense to be used for anything else, nor did he permit any other kind of incense to be used. The result of this would be that every time the priest entered the holy place to trim the lamps, replace the bread, or offer the evening and morning incense, he would smell this one smell that would always remind him that he was in the presence of God. It was all part of the design that God established to teach his people about his presence, his holiness and their uniqueness.

Why was it significant?

The altar of incense was a physical symbol of prayer.

David said in Ps 141.2 – “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

Read Luke 1.8-11

The people of God associated the burning of incense with the offering up of prayers. And you can see why. The sacrifice that was offered on the altar in the courtyard enabled the priest to be able to enter the holy place. The burning of incense resulted in both smoke and smell that would penetrate into the Holy of Holies. God is influenced by the prayers of his people. We are able to enter into the presence of God.

Read Rev. 5.8 and 8.3-4.

John’s vision of the throne room of God is the heavenly tabernacle of which the earthly tabernacle was a model. An angel offers these prayers before God along with the burning of incense and then upon the command of God, the angel takes the fire from the altar and hurls them to earth in judgment. Do you understand what that is saying? The breaking of the 7th seal and the resultant judgment of God on this earth in what we call the Tribulation comes as the result of the prayers of God’s people crying out for the vindication of the glory of God. Doesn’t God have everything planned out? Yes! So then why does he command us to pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? Because God uses the prayers of his people as the means to carrying out his unalterable plan that he has established from the beginning.

There is something truly awesome and other-worldly that takes place when the people of God come together as the tabernacle of God and offer their lives in worship and prayer.

But there is something else that you need to see and smell. I have mentioned a couple of times that the recipe for this incense was given by God with the warning that it could

only be used for this purpose. But something also is mentioned in this passage that gives another couple of strings that are tied together later on.

Read 30.22 – 38

Earlier we are told that Aaron and his sons are to be anointed with the anointing oil. Here we are given the recipe for it. We find out that one of the main ingredients is myrrh. Then when we read about the recipe for the incense we find out that one of the main ingredients of that is frankincense. So, then we stand back and realize that the anointing oil of myrrh was poured over the golden altar of incense and then the incense was burned on this twice daily with frankincense. Hmmm, gold, frankincense and myrrh – have you ever heard of that being offered as a gift in worship before?

It all makes sense, because the only way that we can enter into the presence of God is through the sacrifice of Christ, our sin offering. But Christ who is the sacrifice is also the priest who brings our petitions before the Father. We pray in his name, because it is only by means of his life and death for us that we have the right to enter into the presence of God. But, when we, the people of God gather together as his tabernacle, our prayers, and worship based on Christ are like a sweet aroma to God. By his grace we are able to bring him such pleasure. And for his glory, he responds to our prayers by carrying out his plan. At the same time, when we, as the tabernacle of God enter into his presence in worship and prayer, the aroma of God settles upon us. So that, when we live in this world the manner in which we live is to remind people of another world. When we are around other people, they should smell God.

On the altar, the offering was consumed. Your life is only sweet when fully offered to the King. When you hold back your life, it only smells of decay because those who hold back their lives are still in the kingdom of darkness. Christ has come to save you from that. But he will not take a backseat to anyone, not even you.