

RTO™ School of Prayer

Bowls of Incense, the Prayers of the Saints

Revelation 5:8, Psalm 141:2

by Dave Mozdin

“And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!”

In previous lessons, we’ve frequently said that the Bible, God’s holy word, is very instructive about prayer (in my estimation, unquestionably, the BEST prayer book) in many ways. One of the ways it teaches about prayer is to analogize it to tangible items we use in our day-to-day lives, and in this lesson, we will see how the Bible describes prayer as it relates to incense.

To begin, we’ll ask a few questions. What do our prayers have to do with bowls of incense? How does God’s word relate prayers to incense? Do we ever view our prayers this way? And to drill down to the heart of the matter, how can an understanding of verses like these help us to pray prayers that are pleasing to God, “the effective fervent prayer of a righteous person”?

Also, as we have mentioned before, prayer is the active vehicle we use to enact our relationship with God, both in talking and listening. As in any intimate relationship that we count as valuable, we long to please the other person, and our relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit is without question the most important relationship we will ever have, for He is our life, the very air that we breathe! Since He has given us His Son, His Spirit, our salvation and “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), would it not stand to reason that we would make a serious attempt to please Him through our prayers?

As we are also prone to do in these lessons, we look to God’s Holy and perfect word, the Bible, for ways to pray that please Him, and examples of His people who have done so. The Bible also uses word

pictures and symbols to illustrate this. In our key verses here, incense is used as a type and sign of prayer that pleases God, and the Bible has much to say about it.

Many of us are familiar with incense, which is defined as a resin substance, usually in a thin stick form, that produces a pleasant aroma when burned. Many people use it to create a pleasant atmosphere in a room, often during times of prayer and meditation. Some people and some churches use it as part of religious rituals. Some people use it during a time of doing a physical meditative activity such as yoga. The goal of using it is to produce a pleasant overall atmosphere which is pleasing and relaxing to the senses, and in the case of a religious ritual, pleasing to God.

In the Bible, the first mention of a God pleasing aroma appears in Genesis 8:20-22 after the flood.

20”Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **21**And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. **22**While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

Noah did this in response to having been spared of death, unlike the remainder of all living things, both human and animal, making an offering of thanksgiving and an offering for sin, that the death of the animals sacrificed were offered to God to redeem them from their sins and to receive God’s mercy. This was a forerunner of the Levitical sacrifices soon to be prescribed by God for the people during the time of Moses and the Exodus, and a forerunner to the once-for-all perfect sacrifice by Christ on the cross. According to the Benson Commentary, “the Lord smelled a pleasing aroma” was “In the Hebrew it is a *savour of rest*: that is, he accepted the person, and faith, and thank-offering of Noah, and was well pleased therewith, and with these hopeful beginnings of the new world, as men are with agreeable and fragrant smells.” When you smell something pleasing, does it not give you a feeling of relaxation and peace? Don’t good smells that you haven’t experienced in a long time provoke good and pleasant memories/feelings when you come upon them again? For example, Grandma’s chicken soup simmering on the stove? Or steaks or ribs being charcoal broiled on the barbecue grill?

We see the first mention of incense in Exodus 25, as the Lord is telling Moses what items He shall receive from the people to build His sanctuary, “that I may dwell in their midst”. (v. 8). Among those items are “oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense.” (v. 6). In Exodus

30, we read in v. 1, “You shall make an altar on which to burn incense”. In v.v. 7-9, **2**“And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, **3**and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. **4**You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it”.

Please note that the Lord tells Moses to “not offer unauthorized incense on it” (Exodus 30:9), denoting very specific ingredients and purposes for the use of incense, in Exodus 25:9 we read: **9**“Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” The specific composition of the incense is given in Exodus 30:37, **34**The LORD said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), **35**and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. **36**You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you. **37**And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the LORD. **38**Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.” According to Gill’s Exposition, “holy to the Lord”, means “separated entirely for his service, to be burned upon his altar, and to be no otherwise used.” And “cut off from his people” means to be put to death.

God was *serious, very serious* about following His specific instructions in these matters and about the stated consequences, an example being Leviticus 10:1-3, **1**“Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. **2**And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. **3**Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’ And Aaron held his peace.” While he witnessed the horrifying death of his sons, Aaron accepted God’s stated consequences for disobedience, acknowledging God’s seriousness.

While there is no evidence from this passage that their offense directly involved the incense, but only the unauthorized fire, the implication can be drawn Exodus 25:9, “exactly as I show you “and 30:38 “cut off from His people” about God’s strict adherence to proper construction and use of incense. These are by no means the only specific instructions with serious consequences that God gives in the Old Testament, there are many throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

You may wonder, why all this emphasis on so many specific details with such extreme punishment for disobedience? This can be best understood in the context of Israel's history. The Exodus occurs after a period of 400 years of their slavery in Egypt, a land filled with pagan gods, their only exposure to any type of god. They had no idea of the true God, how to worship the true God, no idea of any structured God ordained moral code. In MacLaren's Exposition we read, "Unquestionably, their punishment was awfully severe. But we shall entirely misconceive their sin if we judge it by our standards. We are not dependent on forms as Israel was, but the spiritual religion of Christianity was only made possible by the externalism of the older system. The sweet kernel would not have softened and become juicy without the shelter of the hard shell. Scaffolding is needed to erect a building; and he is not a wise man who.... despises.... the scaffold poles." While God did not always use such severe punishment, He "picked His spots" to show the seriousness of rightly following Him, especially among the leaders, such as the priests.

In summary, the people of the Old Testament time of the Exodus needed a specific detailed structure to act as a worship guideline, and Christ's appearance and ministry rendered that obsolete and instead brought a new structure with much less detail, but with no less serious consequences for disobedience, that is, eternal condemnation in hell. This is based on His fulfillment of applicable Old Testament prophecies. Since God is immutable, that is, never changing (Hebrews 13:8), His wrath is no more or no less today than it has ever been.

References to incense occur throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, such as the consecration of the temple, Numbers 7:14 through 80, and Moses' blessing of Levi in Deuteronomy 33:10. There are many instances of God's wrath for disobedience and rebellion that involve incense, Korah's rebellion, Numbers 16:17, 18, 35 (NKJV), the Lord's rejection of Eli's family, 1 Samuel 2:28, Solomon turning to idolatry by burning incense to idols at high places, 1 Kings 3:3 (NKJV), yet also burning incense "on the altar that was before the Lord 1 Kings 9:25 (NKJV). In 1 Kings 11, Solomon completely turns away from the Lord God because of his intermarrying many (seven hundred) foreign wives in disobedience to God's commandment (Deut 7:3-4), "Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." (v. 3). He also built high places for all his foreign wives, "who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods." (v. 8 NKJV).

Throughout the remainder of the books of 1 and 2 Kings (NKJV), 1 and 2 Chronicles (NKJV) there are multiple references to the use of incense during worship, sometimes in obedience to God's commandment, many times in rebellion and disobedience as it was used to sacrifice to foreign gods, to idols. A noted incident of disobedience and rebellion is given in 2 Chronicles 26:16-21, where King

Uzziah, who had a long, blessed and fruitful reign in Judah until he one day he decided, “....when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense.” (v. 16). This duty was restricted to priests only (Numbers 3:10; 18:7), and the priests “withstood him” (v. 18) and told him of his disobedience and warned him of the sure punishment “it will bring you no honor from the Lord God” (v. 18). Uzziah’s reacted angrily towards the priests, and “leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense.” (v. 19). He was then sent away and remained a leper until the day of his death, (vv. 20-21).

Continuing through the Old Testament, virtually all the major prophets and some of the minor prophets cite incense in their writings, by recording some episodes of the people’s obedience, and many of the people’s disobedience as they descend into gross idolatry, which the Lord eventually judges.

Among the prophets, one key passage of note is found in Isaiah 59:16 through 60:6. At 59:16, some Bibles have the heading “Judgment and Redemption”, where Isaiah has been writing about the peoples’ separation from God and impending judgment because of their unrepentant sin. God Himself steps in at this point to help, through the intervention of His Suffering Servant, His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In chapter 60 we read about God’s future glory through the Redeemer and how His glory will impact nations all around the world who will look to Him. In 60:6 we read, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.” According to the Benson Commentary, gold and frankincense were “The principal commodities with which this country abounded, by which we are to understand whatever is precious.”

Over 700 years later, this prophecy comes to pass, as we read in a familiar Christmas passage in Matthew 2:1-2 “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men (also known as the Magi) from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’” Historical records show that they came from Persia, east of Jerusalem, and their entourage numbered a great many camels. Besides seeing Christ’s star, scholars also theorize that the Magi’s knowledge of Christ may have come from the historical records of the prophet Daniel, who was in their land during the time of Israel’s exile and prophesied about the coming of the Messiah.

In continuing fulfillment of the Isaiah 60 prophecy, we read in Matthew 2:10-11, ¹⁰“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” This is also a fulfillment of what was written in Psalm 72:10, “May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!”

We need to understand here that the Magi were rightly informed by God and directed by the divine sovereignty of God, who provided the star and were in search of a true and real king. And they responded with great honor, as one would when meeting royalty. As they “fell down and worshiped Him “ (v. 11), the Jameieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary notes, “Clearly this was no civil homage to a petty Jewish king, whom these star-guided strangers came so far, and inquired so eagerly, and rejoiced with such exceeding joy, to pay, but a lofty spiritual homage.” This Commentary continues: —“Visits were seldom paid to sovereigns without a present. ‘Frankincense’ was an aromatic used in sacrificial (worship) offerings; ‘myrrh’ was used in perfuming ointments (and for embalming). These, with the ‘gold’ which they presented, seem to show that the offerers were persons in affluent circumstances. (Scholars theorize) That the gold was presented to the infant King in token of His royalty; the frankincense in token of His divinity, and the myrrh, of His sufferings;” God was sovereign is providing gold as one of the gifts, as Joseph and Mary would need that for the soon-to-be flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15).

There are three more passages in the New Testament which are of great importance and are all related. In Luke 1:8-9, we read ⁸“Now while he (Zechariah) was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.” This is the scene where Zechariah goes into the Holy of Holies to burn incense and receives the vision of the angel and the message that he and his wife Elizabeth are about to bear a male child who will be John the Baptist, the first New Testament prophet, the messenger to announce the beginning of Christ’s ministry. Ellicott’s Commentary says: “That of offering incense, symbolizing, as it did, the priestly work of presenting the prayers of the people, and joining his own with them (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8), was of all priestly acts the most distinctive (2Chronicles 26:18). At such a moment all the hopes of one who looked for the Christ as the consolation of Israel would gather themselves into one great intercession.”

The phrase “consolation of Israel” bears consideration. In Luke 1:10 we read “And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.” The Benson Commentary says, “This the pious Jews constantly did, choosing to present their supplications to God at the hours of sacrifice and incense, while the ministers of religion interceded for the nation.” This consolation of Israel (which is mentioned concerning Simeon in Luke 2:25) is defined by Barnes as “That is, waiting for the ‘Messiah,’ because he would give comfort to them by his appearing. This term was often applied to the Messiah before he actually appeared.” That this was done during the time of burning incense was to offer God a sweet aroma of their earnest prayer for Messiah to appear to bring them the comfort they sought through Him.

This theme is continued in the final book of the Bible, Revelation 5:8 (one of our key verses) and 8:3, 4. This too is the earnest supplication for the consolation of Israel, for the comforting appearance of Christ while engaging in corporate worship, same as Luke 1, the prayers being symbolized as bowls of incense and as being offered up to God with incense as a pleasing aroma to Him. This is also for the comforting intercession of Messiah, the Christ. The Benson Commentary notes for Revelation 5:8 on the incense being prayers of the saints, “in allusion to the incense offered in the temple, while the people were praying, this circumstance had a reference to prayer, and was intended to show how acceptable it is to God, when it proceeds from a holy and an upright heart.” Gill’s Exposition: the prayers of the saints are compared to “odours”, or “incense”, as the word may be rendered, and as they are called, Psalm 141:2; partly because as incense goes upwards, so do they go up to God, and are received, regarded, and had in remembrance by him; and partly because as incense is of a sweet smell, so the prayers of the saints, put up in the name and faith of Christ, are very grateful and acceptable to God: the “golden vials(bowls)” said to be “full” of them, may design the hearts of believers, in which they first are, and from whence they proceed; true prayer is that which is inwrought in the soul, and comes from the heart, even from a heart pure like gold, purified by faith in the blood of Christ, a true heart, that asks in faith, nothing wavering; such as are really saints, true believers in Christ, are praying souls;”

The application for us today is that we too are praying for the consolation of Israel, for the comforting appearance of Jesus Christ, who will judge with righteous judgment and set all things right. While waiting for His glorious appearing, “Come Lord Jesus”, we pray by faith, and long for our prayers to be a sweet-smelling incense aroma to Him. We can connect this to the other key verse for this lesson, Psalm 141:2, “Let my prayer be counted before you as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

In MacLaren's Expositions, we read of Psalm 141:2: "So here this Psalmist, because his soul was filled with true longings after God, passes clear through the externals (of the ritual worship) and says, 'Here am I with no incense, but I have brought my prayer. I am empty-handed, but because my hands are empty, I lift them up to Thee; and Thou dost accept them, as if they were-yea, rather than if they were-filled with the most elaborate and costly sacrifices.'" This speaks to our utter dependence upon God in our prayers as we pray in faith to Him through the intercession of Christ. "Nothing in my hand I bring, but only to Thy cross I cling".

MacLaren's beautifully continues "I need not dwell upon the careful and sedulous (diligent) preparation from pure spices which went to the making of the incense. So we have to prepare ourselves by sedulous (diligent) purity if there is to be any life or power in our devotions. But I pass from that, and ask you to think of the lovely picture of true devoutness given in that inflamed incense, wreathing in coils of fragrance up to the heavens. Prayer is more than petition. It is the going up of the whole soul towards God. Brother (and Sister)! do you know anything of that instinctive and spontaneous rising up of desire and aspiration and faith and love, up and up and up, until they reach Him?" And "I fear me that for the great mass of Christian professors (of the Christian faith) the great bulk of their lives creeps along the low levels like the mists in winter, that hug the marshes instead of rising, swirling up like an incense cloud, impelled by nothing but the fire in the censer up and up towards God. Let us each ask the question for himself, Is my prayer '*directed*'-as is the true meaning of the Hebrew word-'before Thee as incense'?"

That, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is what I believe to be a brilliant description of what pleasing prayer is, what our prayer ought to be to our great and magnificent God!

So how do we get there from here? First, get right with God. If you have not already done so, commit to repent, to change your ways, embracing Jesus Christ by faith for the forgiveness of your sins, and be welcomed into His forever heavenly kingdom, avoiding the certain wrath of God in eternal hell. Make that decision *today, now*, because tomorrow may be too late. "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." (Hebrews 9:27). "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23). "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9).

If you are a saved believer, then put your salvation to work for God's kingdom, remembering that "His divine power has granted to us all things for Life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who has called us to His own glory and excellence." (2 Peter 1:3). Remember too, that knowledge of Him is acquired through spending time in His word. "...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious. (1 Peter 2:2-3).

As you pray for His comfort, His consolation, for His sure return, be aware that "we know that when He appears we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure." (1 John 3:2-3). Sanctify yourself, that is, set yourself apart as being "holy to the Lord", "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." (1 Thess 4:3). "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith." (2 Corinthians 13:5). Confess your sins, ask God for His forgiveness, "but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear". (Isaiah 59:2) "...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith," (Hebrews 12:1-2).

When you pray, pray according to God's will ¹⁴ "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." (1 John 5:14-15). (We have a School of Prayer lesson which specifically addresses this topic, copies available upon request). Look up "will" or "God's will" or "the will of God" in a concordance or an online site such as Bible Gateway, these will point out specific passages that identify God's will.

And while the list presented here is by no means exhaustive (there's an entire Bible's worth available!), I think it would be good to conclude from Psalm 15:1-4, "O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? (Appear acceptably before God in worship) ² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; ³ who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; ⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change;" On this, the MacArthur Study Bible says, "With its focus on moral responsibility, the psalm offers a sequence of responses to the question of acceptable worship." This combined with all the other biblical exhortations listed will, I believe, give you a clear example of how to pray prayers that rise up to God like incense, a pleasing aroma to Him, to the glory of His Holy Name. Amen and Alleluia!

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