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MINISTRIES

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The Tabernacle: The Altar of Incense

The tabernacle in the wilderness was God’s dwelling place among the Israelites after he freed them from slavery in Egypt. It can be a chore to read through the passages that describe the tabernacle, but it turns out that the tabernacle is full of symbolism and spiritual lessons that teach us about our relationship with God. For a quick introduction to what the tabernacle was, we recommend watching our teaching, [The Tabernacle: An Introduction](#). In this teaching, we’re going to take a close look at one particular item in the tabernacle: the altar of incense. Let’s get started.

The tabernacle had two altars. One, the altar of sacrifice, was in the tabernacle courtyard, outside of the tabernacle building. That altar was where animal sacrifices were burned. The altar of incense was inside the tabernacle building. This altar was not used to burn animals, but rather to burn incense. We read about the altar of incense in Exodus 30:

Exodus 30:1-10

You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD [YHWH] throughout your generations. You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD [YHWH].”

As we just read, the altar of incense was made of wood overlaid with gold. It was a cubit long and a cubit wide, and a cubit was likely about eighteen inches. Like the other tabernacle items, the altar of incense had rings attached to it so that it could be carried on poles. Also, like the altar of sacrifice, the altar of incense had “horns” on its corners. Incense was burned on this altar twice a day every day. The incense that was burned on this altar was a special blend of fragrant spices and resins. This special incense was only allowed to be used in the tabernacle:

Exodus 30:34-38

The LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. 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. 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 [YHWH]. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”

What is the spiritual symbolism of this incense? Scripture tells us that incense represents the prayers of God’s people:

Psalms 141:1-2

O LORD [YHWH], I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

Revelation 5:8

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.

(see also Luke 1:10)

There is something very interesting about these prayers that are compared to incense. In the very next chapter of Revelation, we find that these saints are praying for vengeance:

Revelation 6:9-11

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Just like Abel’s blood cried out to God after he was killed by Cain (Genesis 4:8-10), these saints cry out to God after they have been killed. Their prayer is that God will avenge them. This prayer is answered later in Revelation, when Babylon, who is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (Revelation 17:6) is destroyed:

Revelation 18:19-20

And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, “Alas, alas, for the

great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste. Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!

The saints' prayers for vengeance in Revelation are similar to David's prayer which he compares to incense. In Psalm 141, David starts his prayer by comparing it to incense:

Psalm 141:1-2

O LORD [YHWH], I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

At the end of this prayer, David asks for God to take vengeance on the wicked who oppress him:

Psalm 141:9-10

Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me and from the snares of evildoers! Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

So, these "incense prayers" are associated with God avenging his people. The Scriptures actually contain numerous prayers of this kind. For example:

Psalm 79:6-7

Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name! For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.

Psalm 69:24-28

Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them. May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded. Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

Psalm 143:11-12

For your name's sake, O LORD [YHWH], preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant.

This idea is not only found in Revelation and the Psalms. Paul also writes about God's vengeance. He says that God's will is to punish those who afflict the righteous:

2 Thessalonians 1:5-8

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus [Yeshua] is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus [Yeshua].

1 Corinthians 3:17

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

So we see prayers for vengeance throughout the Scriptures, and especially in the places that prayers are compared to incense. The saints at the end of the age will pray for God to avenge them, and their prayers will rise like incense before him. If we are saints, then some of those “incense prayers” may be our prayers. But, let’s take a moment to contemplate what that means. Should we really be praying for vengeance? That seems wrong. In fact, it seems to contradict Yeshua’s teachings about loving our enemies, because that includes praying for them. Here is exactly what he said in Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:43-44

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’

Paul says something similar—that we should wish good on our enemies, not evil:

Romans 12:14

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

So, then, what do we make of this? How can a righteous person pray that God punish his enemies, when he is supposed to pray for God to save them? Are we supposed to hate our enemies and pray that they be cursed, or love our enemies and pray that they be blessed? The Scriptures seem to say both things at the same time! Why is this?

To understand this, we must understand some things about God himself. God tells us that we will receive the things we pray for if the things we pray for are God’s will.

1 John 5:14

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

We also know that it is God’s will that everyone should be saved:

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

John 3:17

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

If it is God’s will that everyone should be saved, and we should pray according to his will, then we should pray that everyone be saved, even those who persecute us. That may be difficult for us to do, but

that seems to be the logical conclusion. If we love others, then we should not desire for them to be harmed. The Scriptures seem very clear on that point. So then, why are there these prayers for vengeance?

Well, we have to understand that because God wants people to be saved, he does *not* want people to be destroyed or corrupted. So, what does God do when there is one group of people that is righteous, and another group of people that is wicked and trying to destroy the righteous people? The answer is, he does what he has to do in order to save his people. He destroys the wicked destroyers. God does not do this because he desires destruction or death; he does this because he desires to save the righteous. We see this in God's destructive wrath throughout the scriptures. When he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, he saved Lot, who was righteous (2 Peter 2:6-7; Genesis 18-19). When he destroyed the inhabitants of Canaan, he saved his people Israel (Exodus 23:23-31). When he destroyed the whole earth in a flood, he saved Noah, who was found righteous and "blameless in his generation" (Genesis 6:5-9; 2 Peter 2:5). When God destroys things, he does it for the sake of his people, not just for the sake of destroying things. His will is to save his people.

Now, if we have this same desire as God—if we don't want anyone to be destroyed, but we recognize that sometimes that is what must be done in order to save God's people—then we can understand how it is possible to pray for vengeance. David did not pray for vengeance out of hatred, spite or envy; David prayed for vengeance because he feared for his life. As long as the wicked were around, David was not safe. God's desire was for David to live, and so God heard his prayers and fought for David against his enemies. Notice what David said to Goliath:

1 Samuel 17:45-47

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD [YHWH] will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD [YHWH] saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's [YHWH], and he will give you into our hand."

God's desire is to save and protect his people, and sometimes this means destroying their enemies. So, sometimes it is appropriate to pray for God to afflict the wicked. Sometimes, this is God's will, and so sometimes vengeance is the prayer, the incense that we bring before him. Again, this is not done out of hatred or a desire for others to be harmed. We should love our enemies and desire for them to be saved, just like God does. But we recognize that sometimes they must be destroyed.

Now, just to be clear, even if we pray for vengeance, we must emphasize that God is the one who actually carries out vengeance, not us.

Proverbs 20:22

Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD [YHWH], and he will deliver you.

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Romans 12:19

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD [YHWH].

It is not our job to enact God’s vengeance. It is our job to obey his commandments, and to trust God to take care of us. He’s a much better judge than we are. In fact, when we pray for him to take vengeance on our enemies, we are acknowledging that he is the perfect judge, and that we are deferring to his judgment. We are presenting our case before him, and asking him to make a verdict. We are telling him that the wicked are oppressing us, and that we need relief. We are depending on him to protect us from the evil in the world. By doing this, we are not taking matters into our own hands, but leaving them in God’s hands. We are letting him make the judgments and leaving it to him to execute his righteous vengeance on our behalf.

As a matter of fact, in the passages from Revelation that speak of the prayers of the saints, we see a profound example of leaving vengeance in God’s hands. The incense, the prayers for vengeance, come from saints who are dead. We know that these men do not take vengeance into their own hands. They never even get to see God’s vengeance while they are alive. God does not avenge them until the end of the age, when he judges the world. But, even so, they still trust that God will do the right thing. This is something that the altar of incense reminds us of: God operates on a much greater time scale than our individual lifetimes on earth. We don’t always get to see what he’s doing. Things may not appear fair during our earthly lives. But we can trust that God is indeed doing things on our behalf. Even when it looks like our prayers have gone unheard or unanswered, we should not despair. We must be patient and trust in God’s judgment. Our incense has reached his throne, and he will respond at the right time.

In summary, the altar of incense symbolizes our prayers to God. We pray for vengeance, that is, we pray that God will deliver us from our enemies, and he hears our cry and responds. Even if we don’t see his response—even if we go our entire life without seeing it—we can rest assured that he has heard our prayers, and he will not overlook the wickedness of the world. He is a righteous judge, and we must trust that, in the end, he will set everything right. When we pray to him with that much trust, it is as if we are burning sweet smelling incense on YHWH’s altar.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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