

Sermon	
Passage	Ex 30,1-10
Place & date	Denver Nov 25, 2007
Series	Tabernakel #6
	DMB

THEME

	God loves the aroma of prayer.
Theme	Therefore, bring your prayer:
1	before God's throne
2	through Jesus
3	for God's glory

Congregation / believers / disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Do you think Old Testament believers never wondered what happened in that tent? The tabernacle stood there and they only got to see the altar. The rest was closed. It was like there was a sign 'Keep out! Authorized Personnel only'.

if you children, had lived in that time, what would you think was going on inside? Would it be dark in there? Oh no, we just heard there was a lampstand with seven lights. Everybody knew the inside was gold and the light must have been beautiful.

All the people knew was what they heard from their parents and maybe from the priests. The priests did not only serve in the tabernacle but were also teaching classes on how to serve God. They probably told everybody what they did. It was no secret, but the people could never enter. Only Aaron and his sons were allowed to enter.

Imagine that you were the high priest.

You would enter the Holy Place every day. The first thing you had to do was burn incense. There was a special altar for that. It was smaller than the altar outside, and quite different. It was clean and smelled great. That was because of the incense that you would burn there everyday.

If you don't know what incense is, you could smell it in one of the stores in Boulder. The smell is kind of sweet and penetrating. It remains in the room and in your cloths for a long time.

The incense for the tabernacle was made with a special recipe and must have smelled better than anything we know.

So every morning you would burn incense on the golden altar. Then you would take a look at the lamps, and clean them. They had burned the whole night. It was your job to make sure they were in good shape and no lamp would go out. You would return in the evening, burn incense again and light the lamps so they would shine all night long before the Lord. And every week you would place bread on the table.

Believers represented

Why would you do this? There was a reason for it: God wanted these things to represent the believers.

It would be your task as high priest, to represent them.

You would light the **lampstand** and think: all believers are shining like a light for God. He loves to see their lives, because his life and grace are reflected in them!

You would place the **bread** on the table and think by yourself: these loaves of bread are the lives of God's people. I present them before God. His eyes look at all of us with pleasure. He has set us free from sin by the sacrifice, and now he is interested and involved in our lives!

And when you burned the incense on the altar, you would smell it and say to yourself: God loves this smell. Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, accept this aroma and listen to the prayers of your children.

You saw the smoke go up and know that all our prayers reach God and he loves to hear them.

Every morning and every evening you would do the same. But it would not be boring, because it had so much meaning. God's people were there before God, and he enjoyed seeing and hearing them.

Maybe you would not know from what we read in Exodus that the incense speaks about the prayers of believers.

You read it in Rev 8:

"He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. [4] The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand." (Rev 8.3-4)

Symbols

Is there something that strikes you when you see the tabernacle?

The tabernacle is a tent full of symbols. There are the sacrifices, the colors (white, red, purple, blue), the washing, the priests, the light of the lampstand, the table with the bread, and the ark. Every part tells us how God is present on earth and how he opens the door for us so that we can meet him.

The three things inside show us that Israel is present before God.

But they did not show up, one by one, but they were **represented** in God's house by these things.

How close can you get to God?

1. before God's throne

There was something special about this altar.

The table and lampstand stood to the side, along the longest walls of the Holy Place. (**see the overview in the bulletin**)

The altar, however, was placed right before the curtain that separated the Holy Place and the Holiest Place. God told Moses:

Put the altar in front of the curtain that is before the ark of the Testimony — before the atonement cover that is over the Testimony — where I will meet with you.

How close can you get?

The high priest would bring the prayers of God's people on the altar right before God's throne. That's how near God allows you to come!

Hebrews 9 even says:

"Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant." (vs. 3-4)

Is the Bible contradicting itself?

Does it stand in the Holy Place or in the Holiest Place?

On the Day of Atonement (Lev 16) the altar was really in the Holiest Place. We read these instructions for Aaron:

"He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. [13] He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die." (Lev 16:12-13)

Maybe the altar was put there only for that occasion? We don't know for sure.

It is likely that God's throne and the altar belong so closely together that the altar, although it is standing in the Holy Place, is counted as part of the Holiest Place.

Altar closest to God's throne

This is important.

If the altar is so close to God's throne that it is practically seen as standing in the Holiest Place, in God's throne room, can you see what this means for the prayers offered to God on this altar?

There are right there before God's throne. And this was God's design, remember? He said: I want the altar of incense to be the closest thing to my throne. That's how much I value your prayers!

Still, there was a curtain between the altar and the ark. The prayers of believers were very close, but not close enough.

No curtain any more

Until... Jesus tore the curtain apart. Matthew tells us what happened when Jesus died on the cross:

"At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The earth shook and the rocks split." (Matt 27.51)

From top to bottom. That is no coincidence. This is symbolic: this was done from heaven, by God. The death of Jesus opened the Holiest Place of the temple.

With that curtain, the last barrier between God and us was removed. Jesus died, rose from the dead, and was exalted to the highest position: he sits at God's right hand.

That brings a huge change to our prayers: in the tabernacle they were as close to God as possible at that time: just behind the curtain.

God wanted our prayers to be even nearer: now his Son, our high priest, is sitting right next to him. You can imagine the Son leaning over to the left, to reach the ear of his Father, saying: 'Father, listen to their prayers!'

Meaning

What does this mean for your prayers?

God has made sure that your prayers are as near to him as possible. The symbol in the Old Testament, the altar near the ark, was a faint sketch of what is really going on in heaven: Jesus sits at God's right hand, bringing your prayers to the Father.

Your prayers do not disappear like stones thrown in a pond: they leave a few circles, but they ebb away and are gone. That's not prayer.

Did you know there is an array of 42 radio telescopes in California to listen for radio signals from space? They have been developed by the SETI institute, which stands for Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence. They hope they will receive signals from other creatures, intelligent enough to send signals to us. 350 of these 18' diameter dishes are needed so that SETI has an ear that's large enough to hear anything.

In 2005,

"The SETI Institute predicted that we'll detect an extraterrestrial transmission within twenty years."

All those dishes are needed to hear something from people we're not sure exist.

God's ear is not like that. He is attentive to the prayers of his people. Remember that, when you think your prayers fall on deaf ears and when you don't see change in your life.

2. Through Jesus

The altar was close to God's throne.

But that did not mean they could just sacrifice anything they wanted on this altar.

The altar had to be consecrated every year with the blood of the atonement sacrifice.

And no other incense or offerings were allowed on this altar, as Ex30 says:

"Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it. [10] Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come. It is most holy to the LORD."

This is a very special thing: bringing the sacrifice of incense to God. It was most holy because it was so close to God. The high priest only was in charge of this to ensure that it was kept holy.

This is how special it is to approach God in prayer.

It makes you tremble: when I read this, I tremble at God's holiness. How can I ever pray in a way that is acceptable to him?

Do you ask that question when you look at the way you pray?

You can pray short and quick prayers in time of need, but can this be the regular way to pray? If this is how you always pray, something is wrong.

The prayers that were represented in the incense passed through a filter, you could say: first, sacrifices had to be brought and the altar had to be made holy. Drawing near to God was not a casual affair, something you did in passing. It was a full-time task for the high priest and his sons to burn incense and bring all the sacrifices every day. Such great care had to be taken to bring the people and their prayers before the Lord.

We would almost stop praying, for fear we do it wrong, without proper respect. We do not want to step on holy ground wearing flip flops!

But look, there is someone who helps us: Jesus Christ, the perfect high priest.

Jesus sanctifies you and your prayers (as the high priest)

Hebrews 5 explains this function of the high priest:

"Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. [2] He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. [3] This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people." (Heb 5.1-3)

The high priest who burned the incense was the same person who sacrificed the burnt offerings on behalf of sinners.

He represented the people before God and made atonement for them so that their sins would be forgiven.

Then it explains how Jesus is our perfect high priest:

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered [9] and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him [10] and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek." (Heb 5.7-10)

While he was on earth, Jesus prayed often and intense. And he obeyed God, even to the point of dying on the cross.

He learned obedience through these prayers and through his sufferings on earth. And therefore God accepts your prayers if you obey Jesus and pray in his name. He will accept them because of the obedience and the atonement Jesus made for you.

This means that all our worship, including our prayers, is only acceptable to God because of Jesus' obedience and his perfect sacrifice.

Prayers consecrated

The high priest was to make atonement first and then, on that basis, offer up the prayers of God's people on the altar of incense. So he consecrated the prayers of God's people, he made them holy.

God told them to offer these prayers on the altar with incense, made with a special recipe. The recipe was unique and it was forbidden to be used at home for yourself. It was very holy.

Remember, the prayers of the Israelites were not perfect, either. **They were made holy by the sacrifices, through the work of the priests.**

Jesus does this for us when he brings our prayers to the Father. His sacrifice sanctifies us, makes us holy, also when we pray. Believers who trust and obey Jesus by repentance and by cleansing themselves from sin will be acceptable to God.

Jesus will bring your prayers before the Father after he has sanctified them.

This is an encouragement to pray.

Don't think your prayers are too imperfect to be heard by God.

Jesus the high priest burns incense for you. Your prayers go up with the sweet smell of the incense. The incense is the sacrifice of Jesus, which he always brings to God's attention.

Therefore, the only right thing to do when you pray is to rely on Jesus and on his sacrifice for you as the incense that is pleasant to God. Then, obey him by cleansing yourself from sin and dedicating yourself to prayer. When you pray like this you may be sure that God will hear you because of Jesus.

Do you realize the beauty of prayer? You have an intimate relationship with God your Father. This relationship is completely based on what Jesus did for you.

Jesus calls you to *"approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Hebr 4.16)

3. for God's glory

The strict requirements for this sacrifice of incense should not only make us wonder 'Can I meet this standard'?

There is another question we should ask: what do I learn about the purpose of my prayer?

In everything you read about this altar you smell the holiness of God.

We rejoice that God listens to our prayers and loves to hear them. But we don't pray to get things from God.

The prayers, the incense, our approaching God is about God himself. He must be praised and served by the prayers of his people.

The tabernacle or temple was a house of prayer and worship. It's all about the glory of God. He shows it here and he receives it from his people: when we reflect his light in his presence, when we offer our lives to him (everything we have done), and when we pray.

This gives direction to our prayers.

We should not think of prayer as sending up wish lists: 'please Lord, give me this or that', 'please Lord, be with so-and-so', and is your prayer all about making requests and nothing else?

Yes, there will be things you ask for. Things you need so that you can serve God. Things you are concerned about and ask God's wisdom and intervention for.

Let us realize the overarching goal of all these prayers: **that we glorify God.**

So we begin by mentioning the great things he has done through Jesus. That was the incense of prayer in the first place, remember?

God loves to be reminded of Jesus' sacrifice. He deserves the praise for his choosing of sinners, for sending his son, for the miracle of his birth, for the wisdom and patience and love and powerful miracles Jesus showed and performed, for his sufferings and death, his submission and obedience, and ultimately his resurrection and glory, and the sending of his Holy Spirit.

If our prayers do not mention these things and we don't exult and rejoice in the things God has done through Jesus and his Spirit, our prayers are only a whiff of smoke without any sweet aroma.

So let us rejoice in these things and see how God has saved us through them. Let us praise God for them in our prayers. Then our prayers will be glowing with a passion for God's glory, they will sparkle with joy and hope, and they will be a sweet aroma to the Lord.

Prayer is our sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to the holy God who saved us.

When you pray with this attitude your requests will also serve the goal of the glory of God.

Even asking things from God can be a way to glorify him. When you ask for his help, you glorify him by trusting in him.

This helps you to sift through the many things you would like to ask: now you begin asking: what is really important? Do I really need this thing I'd like to have? Will it help me to serve God and people? Or do I just want it for myself?

When you pray for others, God's glory guides you in praying for his children who are in need, who are persecuted, and who need to grow in holiness. When God's glory is on

your mind you begin to take an interest in what happens in the rest of the world, outside Denver, and you discover the world is bigger than the U.S.

You begin to think and study the Bible more: how can I pray for the situation in Sudan I just read about, so that I will pray in a way that pleases God? It is not primarily that Christians need to be taken out of trouble, but rather that God shows his grace and power in such situations and that the gospel of Jesus is promoted.

When you know nothing to pray about, or always find yourself repeating the same requests every day, you know there is something wrong: you need to understand what prayer is.

When God's glory is on your mind, there is a lot to pray for. You can count on it that you will spend more time in prayer because you find so much! Your prayers will deepen and will span the globe, as your knowledge of God's work grows.

This is how Jesus teaches us to pray. When he gave his disciples the strong promise that he would do what we ask in his name, he gave us the goal of such prayers in the same breath:

"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father." (John 14:13)

Amen