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The Altar of Incense

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Exodus 30:1-10.

In reading through the book of Exodus you will be struck with the strange break of continuity, that, passing from the most holy place into the holy place where three vessels are found, the table of shewbread, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense, the account stops with the lampstand. Then there is the lapse in these chapters from 25 to 30 before the third vessel in that part is mentioned. So we have this considerable space between, occupied by a great many things, before that third vessel in the holy place is taken up. I think the order of things gives us the clue to this, for it is not an accident, not just that the writer omitted or forgot and then came back again remembering, but there is government, and the very order of things here is full of valuable significance.

The Order of Things

Let us note, then, the order of things as set forth by the Lord. The Lord began in the most holy place with the ark, and then the mercy seat. Then He passed into the holy place, to the table of shewbread and the golden lampstand; and then He took up the matter of the curtains of the tabernacle, and the coverings; then the boards, the sockets, the bars; then the veil; then the door of the tabernacle. From there He passed to the great altar, the altar of burnt offering. Then He dealt with the court, its pillars, its hangings, its sockets; then with the gate of the court. After that He spoke of the olive oil for the light; and then of the priesthood; firstly Aaron, and then Aaron's sons, the garments of the high priest, the garments of the priests, the breastplate of Aaron, the robe of the ephod to be worn

in the most holy place; and then of the consecration of the priests; then of the daily offering; then the altar of incense.

It is remarkable to start right at the centre of things, the most holy place, and work outwards to the very circumference, taking up everything as to the components, as to the ministry, as to the offerings; omitting only one thing, leaving it to the end: the altar of incense. No one who thoughtfully reads this account can fail to be impressed with that, and no one would ever think that it is because this altar of incense is of such insignificance that it can be left to the end. The reverse is the truth.

A Priestly People

All this of which we have been speaking as coming in between chapter 25 and chapter 30 is, on the one hand, a revelation of Christ in relation to man's fellowship with God. It all has to do with how God brings man into fellowship with Himself in Christ, how man's desire and man's need and the very object of man's being is to be realised, that is, fellowship with God. That is all set forth in this very comprehensive order in type. On the other hand, it is all a revelation of the church's vocation, the vocation of the people of God as a priestly people. It is a wonderful vocation. The priestly vocation of the Lord's people is to me one of the most wonderful things that God has ever revealed. It is amazing that God has brought man into fellowship with Himself in a priestly ministry in this universe, to embody and express in a spiritual life the wonder of redemption, of a redeemed universe by the blood of Jesus Christ. The church's vocation is to embody and express not only in doctrine or in word, but in spiritual power and influence, the great fact that this universe is redempto-centric, that redemption is at the heart of this universe. That is the essence of the familiar phrase, "hath made us a kingdom and priests (that is, a holy nation; that is, a holy church) unto our God". This is all, then, a revelation of the church's vocation in that capacity.

Grace and Glory

There is one little phrase in Scripture which gathers up all that this tabernacle and its system represents. It is the little phrase in the Psalm: "He will give grace and glory" (Ps. 84:11). The acacia wood always speaks of the grace, that is man in fellowship with God. The gold overspread, covering, encasing, is the divine glory. The two things are brought together, grace and glory. You find the whole system is shot through with that twofold blessing of God. You can take it as a key. The grace of God issuing in the glory of God! The glory of God resting upon us because of the grace of God!

The Altar of Incense

Now we come to this altar of incense, and as it comes in where it does in this remarkable way after the whole thing has been comprehended and set forth, it shows one thing so very plainly and emphatically. It is almost as though the Holy Spirit had just suspended that and said, "Now then, we will just hold this for a minute. Let Me go over everything, touch on everything, and give you a full revelation. That is tremendously important, and it shall come in when I have set out everything else." So it comes in there, and declares its own emphatic message, that everything is carried on and made effectual through prayer. That is, in prayer which is in virtue of the precious Blood, for the blood of atonement is sprinkled upon the horns of the altar and the altar itself. There is a very clear prescribing of that here in this account, and it is prayer in virtue of the blood of Jesus which touches everything, affects everything, makes everything of living value, and causes everything to be effectual. Paul's phrase is "everything by prayer".

You see how everything in these chapters is made to lead up to this altar. Everything is taken hold of and eventually leads to this altar, and then you see the immediate association of this altar of incense. Look again at this account, and you will find that it is before the veil that is by the ark of testimony; it is before the mercy seat that is over the testimony; it is beside the table of shewbread, beside the lampstand.

The Value of Prayer

Prayer in virtue of the blood of the Lord Jesus touches the deepest things, touches everything and is associated with everything. It is as though the Lord were saying, "Yes, there is an atonement; in the most holy place atonement has been made. Yes, there is a mercy seat for communion. Yes, there is every provision. But for a daily value of that, a prayer life is essential." All this is ministry by prayer, is entered into by prayer. There is nothing — however great and comprehensive the divine provision may be — which can be known independently of prayer. Find a prayerless life, and all the great, wonderful meaning of God's provision in Christ is of little real value. There is no entering gloriously into God's great provision where prayer life is at low ebb. Whether it be communion with God, that communion is in prayer; whether it be in testimony to the world, that testimony is made effectual through prayer; whether it is in feeding upon Christ, the Living Bread, that is by prayer. You say, The Word! Yes, but what is the Word without prayer? If you divorce your Bible from your prayer life you simply have a Book of laws and instructions, a manual, and you become merely theological or doctrinal. But prayer in association with the Word makes the Word live and makes it of spiritual value.

Notice what the Lord said: "When Aaron dresses the lamps in the morning, he shall offer incense" (verse 7). What does he do in dressing the lamps? He takes the snuffers. Some wick has got a bit dry and used up, and it is smouldering and smoking and filling the atmosphere with something that is not pleasant, and that is the flesh. This old man does get up, and this flesh life does manifest itself from time to time. Even though we have the Spirit, the flesh becomes unsteady at times, and there is always the possibility very near at hand of the flesh and the self and the old nature filling the air with something obnoxious, unpleasant, smoky and smouldering. That has got to be trimmed every morning by prayer: "Lord, trim the smouldering wick of my fleshly lips, of my fleshly doing; trim my nature, Lord, this morning. Cut off that which is me, which if not cut off today will make for much that is regrettable, and fill the day with cloudy, smoky, smouldering flesh." Aaron trimmed the lamps with prayer every morning, and every evening when he lit the lamps he offered incense (verse 7-8). There is always darkness about, ready to encroach and overcome the heart which is God's sanctuary, and it has got to be withstood lest the light which is in us become darkness.

The Lamps — the Testimony

So the lamps have to be lit against the darkness, the light has to be maintained as a testimony against darkness. How? By prayer. The light of a testimony; to use the words of Paul about this world: "in the midst of which we shine as lights in the world". Our testimony, the testimony of Jesus in us, can be overpowered by darkness around us, but it has to be maintained by fresh supplies of the oil of the Spirit continually. How are the fresh supplies of the Spirit received? How is the light of testimony maintained against the darkness? By prayer.

Now you see the testimony is in view here: "When he trims the lamps... when he lights the lamps". That lamp is the lamp of the testimony of Jesus in the believer, in the church, so that the testimony of Jesus is always in view. Prayer is related to the testimony of Jesus. That is the basis of prayer, the maintenance of a clear witness, a clear testimony to Him in our lives. As we have said, if the prayer

life is weak, then the revelation of the Lord Jesus in us will be weak, and rather than being a revelation of Him it will be a manifestation of ourselves, and that is the thing the Lord says has got to be trimmed.

The Horns — Power and Strength

Then we read: "... the horns thereof shall be of one piece with it" (verse 2). The more perfect translation of the phrase would be, "the horns shall be itself". *"One piece"*. Of course, that is what it means; not something made apart and joined on, but as wrought of one piece. But the literal translation is very emphatic: "the horns shall be of itself". The point is this. You have prayer in view, and this altar, and the horns in Scripture are always types of power, strength, and the strength is of itself, the strength is of prayer; prayer is strength. Power is not something apart from prayer, not something made in itself and given to us. Power is a part of prayer, and prayer is power. It is *one thing*. We have to learn more and more the power of prayer, and the prayer of power.

The Blood of the Sin Offering

Finally, the blood of the sin offering shall be sprinkled on the horns of the altar (verse 10). That blood is always in the Scripture a witness against what is of the old creation, to cut it off, and to bring in a new creation; a witness against the earthly, the worldly and the fleshly, and therefore the satanic; a witness unto the heavenly, the spiritual, and that which is of the Lord. It means here that the blood of the sin offering being sprinkled on the horns and on the altar makes everything heavenly. Our prayer life has got to be on a heavenly basis. It is not enough just to be praying for our earthly affairs. It is so easy to get up in the morning and hurry through a few words asking the Lord to bless us and ours, and our earthly things for the day, as though these things of this life were all. Oh, no! The Lord would have prayer touching things heavenly, things spiritual, related to that which is not of time but of eternity, not of this world but in relation to His eternal, heavenly intentions. He would have us separated from the merely temporal. There is a place for bringing those before the Lord, but they have got to be lifted in relation to the heavenly and not be dealt with as things in themselves. The blood makes everything heavenly, separating from the old creation. There is a very great deal of the old creation in our prayers; it is our convenience, our deliverance from inconvenience and discomfort, our salvation from what would bring us a great deal of trouble and sorrow. That is the motive behind a good deal of our praying. "Lord, don't let anything bad happen today, because it would spoil our life today!"

But supposing the Lord would lift us into something altogether new through sorrow, are we then going to pray that prayer? No, our prayer must be: "Today, Lord, I want that which is of greatest account in relation to spiritual values and if that must be by way of trial and adversity, I do not pray to be delivered from it." I say, "Lord, there is power to carry me through, and by prayer I come into touch with that power to carry me through the trials of every day in relation to the meaning of the trial." That is heavenly praying. That is praying with your heart in heaven. "If ye be risen with Christ seek those things which are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your affections upon the things which are above, not on the things which are on the earth, for ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3). "Our citizenship is in heaven." Now the life of the believer is to be, therefore, one with heavenly interests always in view, and our prayer life is in relation to those interests.

Warfare in the Heavens

Where prayer counts most vitally and effectually is in the heavenlies. Ephesians makes that perfectly clear: "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers... the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places." Then, providing for that warfare, he gathers it all up, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit". The warfare is in the heavenlies, and the prayer is most effectual there. That is where the power is indeed against the spiritual forces, and that blood brings us out there as our protection for a realm which is spiritual and therefore counts for most. The place of the altar of incense, the holding of it to the end till everything else has been brought in, gives to prayer tremendous significance.

Now one closing thought. There was to be a crown of gold round the top of this altar of incense (verse 3), and that crown speaks of the glorifying of the Lord Jesus as the Victor. "But we behold... Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9). The crown of the Victor over sin and death and the reason for that victory in this connection is in Isaiah 53: "He made intercession for the transgressors." The implication is that by His intercession for the transgressors in His cross He won. There were transgressors doomed under judgement, and His cross was a great work of intercession for the transgressors — and we were among them. By intercession in His cross, His great ministry of intercession in giving Himself, He saved us. You and I are today in Christ, saved men and women, because of the intercession of the Lord Jesus. He triumphed in intercession for us, and as High Priest He ever lives to make intercession, and every day we are living in the benefit of His continual intercession. That is the point in the crown of gold, the crown of glory. Now the Lord is calling us into that ministry. It is not only to share the travail, but to share the glory, not only to share the humiliation but to share the crown, and the crown is not just some objective thing given to us but for the Lord to come and crown our lives. That is to be His seal upon us, and He will say, "Well done! As I have overcome so you have overcome; share with Me My throne." If that can be because my life was a life of prevailing prayer, that is the glory of it; and even now to know what it is to prevail in prayer is glory; it is the crown of glory.

Now you see there is a glory connected with prayer. The Lord calls us, then, to consider our prayer life, because everything depends upon it. It must be the time for trimming the wick, the works of the flesh. It must be the means of keeping the light clear and strong against the darkness and it must be the means of power, the ground of power, and of prevailing. The Lord use His word, then, to bring us back, if needs be, to the strength of a full prayer life.