

## The Altar of Incense

The first mention of an altar in scripture is after the flood receded and Noah left the ark (Genesis 9:20). Noah's response to God's saving grace was to build an altar. The Hebrew word refers to "a high place" and may have been a mound of earth or rocks on which a sacrifice was offered. Israel was instructed to make altars of soil or stone (Exodus 20:24-26). Those simple altars were made from God's provided materials for His wandering worshipers. With the Tabernacle, more permanent altars were required for people living under the Law of Moses. The Tabernacle had two altars, one of bronze and one of gold. One to receive offerings of animals and grain given to God. The other received the sacrifices of incense raised before God.

God commanded Moses, "You shall make an altar to burn incense on; you shall make it of acacia wood" (Exodus 30:1). This altar was unique in several ways. It was small, only 18 inches square, and standing 36 inches high. Made of acacia wood and covered in pure gold, it was adorned with a raised molding around the top with horns on its four corners. It was also tied directly to the Ark of the Covenant and was in the category of "most holy" things (Exodus 30:10). The Hebrew writer includes the Ark and Golden Altar together in the *"part of the Tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All"* (Hebrews 9:3). *"...having a golden altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant covered around on all sides with gold, in which was the golden pot having the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant"* (Hebrews 9:4 LITV). This places them in a different association with God from the furniture of the Sanctuary, *"The lampstand, the table, and the showbread"* (Hebrews 9:2). Later, we will discuss the exact placement of the furniture in the Tabernacle and outer court when all items have been discussed.

The amount of gold on the small altar causes many to fixate on its intrinsic value rather than its purpose. God told Moses that it was a place to burn incense. The formula to compound the incense is as critical as the instructions for the Altar itself. *"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. 'With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy'"* (Exodus 30:34-35). The stored incense was prepared for the altar just before being offered. *"You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you"* (Exodus 30:36). Zacharias was performing this task when the angel of the Lord appeared to him announcing that John the Baptist would be born (Luke 1:5-9).

The "Most Holy" nature of the incense is highlighted by the warning given along with the instructions for making it. *"The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the LORD. 'Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people'"* (Exodus 30:37-38). This warning is so like that given to Peter as he watched the vision in Joppa. *"A voice came to him a second time, What things God made clean, you do not make common"* (Acts 10:15). The warning will be repeated throughout the instructions for worshiping God in the Tabernacle, Temple, and in His Son's church.

The instructions to burn incense on the altar were given to Aaron. As the High Priest, he was responsible for all acts of worship within the Tabernacle. *"Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. 'When Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense"* (Exodus 30:7-8). We can guess why the incense is burned twice daily, just as the morning and evening sacrifices are offered each day. We read that prayers were sent up to God as

His faithful servants labored before him. David's prayers are available to us in the Psalms. The prayers of Joshua, Nehemiah, and the prophets are scattered throughout scripture. The smoke of the incense rose continually as prayer, keeping God's children always before Him. Today, we are reminded to pray always and with everything we do (Ephesians 6:18), (Philippians 1:4, 4:6), and (Colossians 4:2).

In the Book of Revelation, we read, "Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand (Revelation 8:3-4). At a time when David was driven far from the Tabernacle of the Lord, he prayed, *"May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering"* (Psalm 141:2). Can we doubt that the incense burning on the Golden Alter was a type of our prayers, continually rising before our God?