

# Sermon 101, The Incense Altar, Exodus 30:1-10

**Proposition:** The incense altar is the counterpart to the altar of burnt offering, teaching us that sacrifice has both physical and spiritual sides and that we must serve God with both sides of ourselves.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we turn our attention tonight to an easier topic, one whose symbolic relevance will, I trust, become immediately apparent. Tonight we are going to look at the golden altar of incense, and what we will see is that incense symbolizes prayer and thus the inner, spiritual side of religious worship. The incense altar is the counterpart to the bronze altar, which symbolizes physical gifts and thus the outer, costly side of religious worship. Both altars are necessary; true religion is both internal and external. You may think of Paul's dictum that "He is a Jew who is one inwardly." True enough. But the inward must and will make its way outward. What you do is inseparable from who you are internally. We must serve God with both our hearts and our bodies. That is the truth of the golden altar, and that is the truth we are going to look at this evening.

## **I. The Contrasts Between the Two Altars**

Our method this evening is not one that we have used hitherto in our tour of the tabernacle. We have looked at each item of furniture in its own right and tried to discern the obvious about it. Tonight, though, we are going to view the incense altar by way of contrast with its counterpart, the bronze altar. After all, they are the only paired items in the tabernacle, unless you want to count the ark and the mercy seat. Even there, though, we have two different objects that together form a single object. The two altars are two different objects of the same kind; hence our decision to study them together. We will first contrast, looking at the differences; then compare, looking at the similarities; and then see what we can discern about the point of the two altars.

### **A. Materials: Bronze Altar with Gold Altar**

The first thing to note is that this altar is gold-plated. Both altars are wood-framed, structurally speaking. But this one is covered with gold on its top and sides all around. The altar of burnt offering, by contrast, was covered with bronze plating. Remember, the closer to the presence of God you come in the tabernacle, the more valuable the metal used. The very throne room of God is all gold, while the building structure is made with silver. Only in the courtyard and on the tent's outer cover is bronze to be found. As you'll note, these are still the three metals we use, for instance in sports championships, to indicate the level of each competitor's achievement. Anyway, the fact that this altar is golden means that it is closer to the immediate presence of God.

### **B. Location: Outdoor Altar with Indoor Altar**

We also note that the altar of burnt offering is outdoors, set somewhere on the path between the courtyard gate and the tabernacle door. Meanwhile, the incense altar is indoors, set immediately in front of the curtain that sections off the most holy place. The incense altar will only have tiny fires prepared on it, much like burning a candle indoors, while the altar of burnt offering has huge bonfires prepared that will burn long and hot enough to consume a 1500-lb bull. That, of course, is why it needs to be outdoors. Putting a fire that large inside a tent would mean that you would no longer have a tent.

### **C. Size: Large Altar with Small Altar**

Finally, the altar of burnt offering is pretty large — 7.5 x 7.5 ft. But the altar of incense is pretty small — only 1.5 x 1.5 ft., or 18 in. square. In other words, the altar of burnt offering has 25 times as much burning space available, 25 sq. cubits to 1 sq. cubit. That is a big difference in size, commensurate with the difference in purpose, location, and material.

## **II. The Comparisons Between the Two Altars**

Despite the differences, they have something in common.

### **A. Name: Both Are Altars**

That, of course, is that they are altars. An altar is simply an elevated platform on which sacrifice is offered. It is most similar to a table among the furniture items you're familiar with, but it is a "fire table," as it were. You've heard of the "water tables" on which children play. The altar is a table on which fire burns to consume sacrifices. The bronze altar hosted animal and cereal sacrifices; the golden altar hosted the sacrifice only of incense.

### **B. Function: Both Make Atonement, 30:10, 29:36-37**

In addition to both being altars, both altars make atonement, or are used in the atonement process. The golden altar has the blood of the sin offering applied to it annually on the Day of Atonement, thus making atonement — that is, covering the sin of God's people. Meanwhile, at least in the ordination ceremony, the altar of burnt offering was used in making atonement, as the previous chapter clearly states. We know further, of course, that the blood used on the Day of Atonement for the golden altar was taken from sacrifices offered at the bronze altar.

### **C. Timing: Both Are Used Morning and Evening, 30:7-8, 29:39**

Finally, both altars are used for morning and evening sacrifices on a daily basis. Though this chapter of Exodus makes it sound like Aaron is supposed to use the golden altar and the junior priests are supposed to use the bronze altar, it is likely that the junior priests were allowed to use the golden altar as well. Anyway, the point is that the altars were used in tandem. As one priest sacrificed a burnt offering outside, another would be burning incense inside. Both worked together to maintain the presence of God among His people.

## **III. The Point**

What is the point of the two altars?

### **A. Sacrifice Pleases the LORD**

The first point we have to make is once again the obvious one: Sacrifice pleases the Lord! He loves it when we give our best to Him.

#### **1. Two Sources of Pleasing Aromas**

The smell of a burning animal is not one that you or I would call a pleasing aroma. But it is one that God calls a pleasing aroma — see Exodus 29:41, and many other passages of Scripture from Genesis 9 onwards that call the odor of a burning sacrifice a pleasing aroma to the LORD. Meanwhile, the incense that was actually formulated to smell good is not called a pleasing aroma in our text this morning. Yet it was obviously such — pleasing not just to God, but to man. The churches and other religious institutions that continue to burn incense do it precisely because it smells good. I have not been in the home of anyone who burns incense sticks these days, but I have seen the incense for sale. People still use it.

#### **2. One Well-Pleased God**

Well, both kinds of sacrifice, the bronze kind and the golden kind (if you will) pleased the LORD. The two altars worked in tandem to do one thing: to make atonement for the sins of Israel, dedicate the people to God, and maintain His residence among them. With such sacrifices God is well pleased. Did you hear that? His face is smoothed. He no longer has the angry lines and distorted features of a wrathful God. He is well-pleased, above all with His beloved Son and His perfect offering.

### **B. Sacrifice Has Two Dimensions**

Well, the altar of burnt offering is about atonement and dedication to God.

#### **1. Physical: An Expensive Animal**

It reflects, or even sums up, the physical side of religious service to God. To offer a bull is to make a large financial commitment to your relationship with God. Zooming out, we can affirm

that sacrifice represents or is the most prominent part of the biblical call to serve God with our bodies. To give a cup of cold water to a little child in Jesus' name is a kind of sacrifice because it is a kind of physical service to God. You do it because you are dedicated to serving Christ.

## **2. Spiritual: A Prayerful Heart, Rev. 5:8**

But what is the particular significance of the incense altar? Let's ask King David that question.

LORD, I cry unto thee: make haste unto me; give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto thee. Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. (Psa 141:1-2 KJV)

Did you get that? David compares prayer to both kinds of sacrifice. The actual act of prayer he puts in parallel with the burning of incense. The lifting up of the hands — that is, assuming a posture of reverent worship — he puts in parallel with the evening sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering.

So prayer as an internal act of obeisance and worship, the inner, hidden core of the spiritual life, is what the incense altar represented. It stands for the internal side of religion, the heart-felt aspect of it. The bronze altar stands for the external service of worship. Put both together, and you have genuine faith working by love.

Why did God have the altar of burnt offering blazing away in the courtyard, while the altar of incense blazed away in the holy place? Because neither one was sufficient in itself to stand for all of true religion. Giving one's body to be burned, or at least the body of one's beast to be burned, is good. But if not motivated by love, it is nothing.

## **C. Christ's Sacrifice**

In the same way, we can see these two altars fulfilled in Christ, whose offering was everything that the burnt offering was supposed to be and also everything the incense offering was supposed to be.

### **1. Physically Perfect**

Our Lord was physically perfect. By this I don't refer directly to His physique, though I'm sure it's chiseled and desirable: "His eyes are darker than wine, and His teeth whiter than milk." Rather, I refer to His external moral purity. He always did and said the right thing. His members were used and are used strictly for the service of His Father. He has never obeyed sin, not one time. He has never done anything polluting or disgusting, though He walked among sinners. Jesus is externally perfect.

### **2. Spiritually Perfect**

But He was and is also spiritually perfect, internally perfect. Not only did His hands never sin; His heart never sinned. There was no guile in His mouth — or in His mind.

## **D. Our Sacrifices**

When we see the two altars, and add them together, we see what Christ was, and we see what we ought to be. For this section of the sermon, turn with me to Hebrews 13. This chapter makes several concluding comments on sacrifice. It is rather like Turretin's "Sources of Explanation" at

the end of a question, where he outlines several considerations and theological distinctions that help make sense of his previous argument. I want us to look at two of those considerations in Hebrews 13, for they are the exact points I've been trying to make about this piece of tabernacle furniture — the golden altar — and its brazen counterpart.

### **1. Serve God with Your Body and Worldly Goods, Hebrews 13:16**

In the Hebrews order, this point actually comes second, but we will treat it first because it pertains to the symbolism of the bronze altar and we want to end with the symbolism of our main subject, the golden altar.

The point is this: Serve God with your body and worldly goods, described here as “doing good and sharing.” Shovel a disabled brother’s driveway; help a little old lady get to her doctor’s appointment. With these sacrifices, God is well pleased.

Now, if you had said to Aaron “I’m going to give my neighbor an extra loaf of bread, just to love on him,” would he have said “Ah, that kind of sacrifice is very pleasing to God?”

I honestly don’t know. But it certainly doesn’t look exactly like bringing a bull into the tabernacle courtyard, laying your hand on its head, and then slitting its throat. Nonetheless, Hebrews tells us that yes, this is definitely a sacrifice. And it is the kind of sacrifice best represented by the bronze altar, the exterior altar that costs serious money.

### **2. Pray without Ceasing, Hebrews 13:15**

But the second kind of sacrifice that you and I also ought to be offering is not just physical good deeds, but the sacrifice of prayer. Here in Heb. this is particularly the prayer that praises God, and the prayer that openly professes Him. To “profess His name” is to say “I believe in One God, the Father Almighty.” It is the same as confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.

This kind of sacrifice also pleases God, and it is best compared to the incense altar. It is not as large, not as stinky, not as expensive — but it is closer to the heart of God, closer to the holy of holies.

Let us serve God inside and out, rejecting hypocrisy and embracing a holistic Christian life. Don’t let the incense altar get ahead of the altar of burnt offering, nor vice versa. Serve God with your body. Serve Him with your spirit too. Offer yourself, inside and out, as a living sacrifice. That will indeed be a pleasing aroma to Him, because it will show that you are like the one who sacrificed Himself for us men and our salvation. Amen.