***Prayer

RV137-02***

We are studying Revelation 8:1-5. Our subject is the seven trumpeters. This is segment number two.

Following the parentheses of Revelation chapter 7, which dealt with revealing the work of evangelism on earth during the tribulation, Revelation chapter 8 returns to the seven-sealed scroll held by Jesus Christ. The scroll contains the information about God's final dealings with the human race during the tribulation period. The seventh seal is broken by the Lord Jesus Christ, and all sound suddenly ceases in the heavenly throne room for about 30 minutes. Up to this time, there has been a great deal of activity; a great deal of commotion; and, a great deal of sound of one kind and another. Now, all of that ceases. This, of course, is an ominous sign that something frightful is about to happen on earth. It is a dramatic pause awaiting the release of a new round of divine judgments in the last half of the tribulation period.

Seven angels suddenly appear before God. John observes that to each of them is given a trumpet. These angels stand as a special company before God's throne, awaiting His instructions. These trumpets that they are given will be used upon command to announce specific divine judgments, and, in fact, to release those judgments upon Satan's tribulation world.

**Incense**

Then John observes that another angel, in addition to these seven, has appeared. He has in his hand a golden censer or fire pan – a sort of shovel-like instrument. It contains hot coals with which to burn incense at the golden altar of incense in the Holy Place. In order to get our picture again of what we are dealing with, we must go back to the tabernacle (and later the temple) arrangements which was here on earth, provided to the Jewish people by God. One part was called the Holy Place, and another part here was called the Holy of Holies. In the Holy Place, there stood various items of furniture. On one wall was a table upon which was located 12 loaves of bread, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. It was called a table of shewbread, representing Jesus Christ is the bread of life. Then there was a seven-branched lamp stand which represented Jesus Christ as the light of the world. The object that we are interested is this three-foot high, one-and-a-half foot square altar of incense.

This is what John sees – the original of this in heaven. The angel steps up in order to burn incense with the coals which he has on his golden shovel. The smoke of the burning incense, we are told, was mingled with the prayers of believers ascending to God from the earth. This ritual was, of course, reminiscent of the ceremony in the Old Testament temple at the altar of incense. Now John sees it taking place in heaven at the original altar of incense, and he fully understands what is taking place.

The temple arrangement on earth was a copy of what exists in God's heavenly throne room. So, we begin at Revelation 8:4. We read, "And the smoke of the incense." The word "smoke" looks like this in the Greek Bible: It's the Greek word "kamnos." "Kamnos" is the fragrant cloud for burning, and the incense that was burned was perfumed. It did have a fragrance to it, and you could smell it, as well as see this cloud that was ascending. The cloud itself ascending toward God was a symbol. It symbolizes that what was being dealt with there was accepted by God. The smoke was not pouring down the sides of the altar. It was actually going from the altar, and ascending heavenward toward God, indicating that what was being done there (whatever it symbolized) was being accepted by God.

What this smoke was coming from was "incense." The Greek word is "thumiama." "Thumiama" refers to a special aromatic spice which is being burned on the altar. In the Old Testament ritual, there were four specific spices which were put together in a certain combination to make the incense which was burned by the priests upon the altar of incense, and it had to be done in that very precise way. And people were forbidden to privately mix these spices in this way, and to use them. They were exclusively reserved for God's use here in the temple in this particular ritual.

The incense itself, because it was one of these four pure substances, represented something about the character of Christ, as all of these rituals and these structures of the temple indicated. They all spoke something about the character of Jesus Christ and about His ministry. The purity of the incense indicated the purity of the person of Jesus Christ, which was the basis upon which one could approach God through this altar of incense. It was the basis of presentation.

**Prayers**

What was being presented, in effect, by this incense smoke was "prayers." It is the Greek word "proseuche." "Proseuche" is the general word in the New Testament for prayer. However, it is used in the New Testament only of petitions to God – never of petitions to men. Does that strike a point of significance to you? Here, the apostle John, as the Lord guides him through the Holy Spirit to write this, says "And the smoke of the incense." And your King James translation says, "Which came with the prayer." Just scratch out, "Which came." That's not in the Greek. It just says, "And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints." There was a connection between the prayers of the saints and this incense, and it was arising to God. He's talking about prayers going up to God.

**Prayers only to God**

You notice that the word for prayers, which is associated with this altar of incense, is a word that means "prayers only to God." So, what happens to all of our friends in the Roman Catholic Church who are praying to Mary, and to Joseph, and to Saint Bernard, and all those other dudes of one kind and another? They are approaching human beings through prayer as if prayer could be addressed to them. You've learned something very significant to know that the word for "prayer" here is a word that the Greek Bible only uses of prayers (petitions) addressed to God, and men are never approached from this temple ceremony.

What these prayers refer to, of course, are all the requests which believers send up to God, and which believers have a right (I'm happy to say) to send up to God, on the basis of the instruction (the doctrinal explanation) of Jesus Christ Himself.

**Pray to God the Father in Jesus' Name**

For example, it would be well for you to remember John 16:23-24, which say, "And in that day you shall ask Me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatever you shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have asked nothing in My name," Jesus says. "Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full." That is a very precious promise. There are many things that you and I can think of right now that would make us very happy, and that we would like to see come about in our lives. I could spend the rest of this service telling you what I would like to see, and which would make me very happy to see come about, within just Berean ministries alone, let alone that enormous list of ambitions and desires I have myself.

Here is a promise that says, "You can ask. You can go up to this altar of incense, and you may put a prayer upon it, and it will go up to God.

**God Will Answer Prayers**

John 14:13-14 expand this point, for there we read, "And Jesus said, 'And whatever you shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.'"

Now, the name of a person represents what this person is in His character. It stands for everything that that person is. And when you pray in the name of Jesus, you pray on the basis of what is absolute righteousness; perfect justice; and, all of the essence of God. You pray in accordance with that which, in fact, is the will of God. If there's anything that Jesus Christ could say, it is that He always did those things that pleased His father in heaven. That is the core significance of His name.

So, this is not just some magical potion that you may mix with your prayers – say whatever you want, and then tack on, "In Jesus name," and you've got it. What it is telling us is that you may indeed approach God directly. You don't need a priest anymore. The old temple veil has been ripped away, which divided the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, wherein God Himself dwelt on the Ark of the Covenant, above the Mercy seat. Now you can go directly to it. And the Bible tells us that this veil that was torn was a symbol of the body of Jesus Christ. And when that body was bruised and bloodied in payment for our sins, and then when He finally died – at the point of His death, that temple veil was ripped, so that now the access into the very presence of God was wide open.

So, when Jesus Christ says, "You can come now to God directly, because there's a basis. You won't have to be asking Me anymore. You can ask the Father directly. You can go to Him, and you must do it, indeed, on the basis of My authority which is represented by My name and everything that I am."

We may add to that further expansion in John 15:7: "If you abide in Me." What do you think that means? The word "abide" means to be in temporal fellowship. "Abide" means to be in compatibility with Jesus Christ: "If you abide in Me (you are fully confessed of all known sins), and My words abide in you (you've learned Bible doctrine so that you understand the principles upon which I work), ask what you will, and it will be done unto you," because then you won't be asking as a fool. You will not be asking amiss, so you will not be asking for that which is injurious. You will be asking, indeed, for that which God can enthusiastically say, "Yes, I'll come through for you on that."

Notice John 15:16: "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained that you should go out and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain. And whatever you shall ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you." So, the most important thing in our lives as Christians (for all Christians who are thoughtful and perceptive, and who understand what it's all about) is our fruit-bearing – our productivity of divine good that God the Holy Spirit produces through us. Jesus tells us that He chooses us to be fruitful, and to be productive of that fruit. But notice that He says, "Connect it with prayer, and what you produce will be the kind of stuff that remains forever." It won't be that kind of attractive thing that so many Christians put on, and so many churches put on, which is nothing with God, and looks very impressive here on earth, but is absolutely nothing with God, The fruit that you secure will remain on the basis of: "whatever you ask of the Father in My name, I will give it to you."

So, when John observes this angel standing before this altar of incense, and he see smoke of this incense rising toward heaven with these prayers, they are the right of believers to approach God with petitions, and to ask Him for that which the Spirit of God guides them to ask of Him. The practice of prayer, therefore, is a major responsibility of the Christian life, and it is a tough thing to do. It is one of the tough things not to neglect. Therefore, Ephesians 6:18 says, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints." What a problem? Do you want to be a good Christian? Do you want to be a Christian who walks in fellowship with God? Do you want to be a Christian that stays on top of things? Then you should be in constant prayer, all day long, in and out. Every time the need arises, and every time the opportunity comes to you, you should be praying, with all prayer and supplication, but in the Holy Spirit, not in the flesh – in the spirit. And you watch that you do this – with all perseverance, and with supplication for all the saints.

We are also dependent upon you coming through for us in prayer. We are well aware of the fact, when other believers are not coming through for us, and when the burdens are greatly increased, and the battle is intensified beyond what Satan would be permitted to intensify it if God's people were there standing in the breach, praying – not only in our prayer meeting time, but even more importantly, perhaps, in your personal, private time.

In James 4:2-3, we therefore have this observation to Christians: "You lust, and you have not. You kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain. You fight and you war, yet you have not because you don't ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts."

Here are several problems. You have desires, and those desires may be legitimate or they may not be legitimate. But how you go about getting them does not secure them for you, because you do it by muscle; you do it by power plays; you do it through maneuverings of one kind or another; you do it through sly conniving; you do it through bringing financial pressures; or, you do it in a way that God does not respect, and in a way that He does not work, and therefore, you don't get what you're after, so you lose out. On the other hand, he said, "Some of you do ask, but you don't receive it because you're asking amiss." You're asking in the wrong way. You're out of temporal fellowship. You're asking for that which God could not possibly honor; which God could not possibly bless; and, which you have no peace in your heart that this is what you are being led to pursue. As a matter of fact, you're asking a lot of things just so you may consume it upon your own desires. That's all. It's not God's desires. It's just your desires.

**Lust**

The word "lust" here is not necessarily something bad. It's just your desires, and not God's desires. It is so hard for us, as Christians, to think in terms of what God wants. We don't have any trouble thinking in terms of what we want; what we would like to see; and (how we like to put it), "our desperate needs that we have that are not being fulfilled." Well, God says, "I've got a lot of needs that you haven't even thought of that I'll fulfill, and that's where the real thing is, but you haven't come up with it. It hasn't occurred to you, because you're not walking in the Word, and in the fellowship of the Spirit of God. Consequently, all of your praying, that you may be very proud of, is praying to no avail.

The practice of prayer, and its responsibility in the Christian life, is further indicated in 1 John 3:22: "Whatever we ask, we receive of Him because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." There's the key to it all. Whatever we ask, we receive of Him because we have the guidance of Scripture. We have the guidance of the Word of God to enable us to know what to ask, and how to pray, so that we are pleasing in His sight.

One more: 1 John 5:14-15: "And this is the confidence that we have in Him: that if we ask anything according to His will (His name), he hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." Approach Him in the right way. Do approach Him. Ask Him on the right basis. Ask Him in the freedom of the guidance for the Spirit of God and the compatibility with the Word of God, and God says, "I'll come through for you, because then you and I will be in agreement."

So, John sees prayers going up from this altar of incense – the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints. The word "saints" is the Greek word "hagios," which is actually the word for "holy." It's used here as a noun for born-again people. And I remind you that this is not a company of super godly Christians. Don't ever let anyone discourage you from the fact that you are a saint of God. That's a very comforting thought. You're not always a good saint. There are good saints, and there are bad saints. There are spiritual saints, and there are occasional saints. It's a big difference, but you are all saints because you are all in the family of God. You are all born-again people. This refers to all believers who, by virtue of their grace salvation, based on faith in Jesus Christ alone as Savior, have the right to be called "holy," because in position, where are you? By the baptism of the Holy Spirit, you have been positionally placed into Christ. Being in Christ, you are absolutely as holy as He is. That's why God says, "You are holy ones. You are people who are saints." ...

So, sainthood means separation from an eternal destiny in hell to a destiny in heaven. That's a great relief to know that you're a saint no matter what. The unbeliever can't understand that. The legalistic Christian, as in most church denominations, will throw his hands up in holy horror, and say, "Oh, you can't say that. I can't believe that you're saying that – that a saint is a person who can be that in spite of no matter how grossly he may sin. That's because they don't understand the difference between positional truth and our actual spiritual condition, our actual sanctification. Ultimately, we will be real saints, and all of our conduct will be exactly what it should be; that is, perfect reflections of the image of Christ. But that is going to take being in His presence when we finally have flushed out of us the old sin nature.

A saint of God, indeed, can fall into carnality, but he still retains his position as a saint with God. And how long are you a no good saint? Just as long as it takes you to confess it. Remember that confession means forgetting. Do not go series-sinning by confessing and then remembering, and eating your heart out over what took place in the past when you violated what you should have been, indeed, as a saint of God. Confess it, and forget it. And remember only what God says you are: you're one of His saints.

Therefore, you're entitled to pray. You are entitled to come up, and ask God for those things that the peace of God legitimately places upon your heart.

What John observes is that this incense, representing the prayers of the saints, is ascending upward. The word "ascend" is the Greek word "anabaino." "Anabaino" means "to rise up." It's in the aorist tense which means that the point when your prayer is expressed under the guidance of the Spirit of God, these prayers actually do go to heaven – every one of them. That's the significance of the altar of incense. The rising of the smoke from the incense, which represented the prayers, was a constant reminder to the Jews that they were not just blowing bubbles in the air when they were praying, such that they were just going to burst into nothing. They really were talking to a God who is out there; who hears; and who pays attention; and, who, in His sovereignty, and as per His character, will respond. You may count on it. He will respond.

So, the prayers are going up specifically, it says, "Before (that is, in the presence) of God. They are going specifically before the presence of God. What do you have again here? I call to your attention again that prayers go to God. It is a gross blasphemy what the Roman Catholic Church does, and it is one of the primary evidences that the organization is not of God. It has nothing to do with God. It is a religious counterfeit, because it prays to human beings. It prays to saints as if those who have died, no matter how godly they were, could even hear their prayers, let alone to answer them. The prayers that John sees ascending go to the only place that legitimate prayers can go, and that is to God, out of the hand of this angel standing there before this golden altar of incense performing this ceremony.

So, believers' prayers go up to God by way of the altar of incense. No matter how spiritually immature a Christian may be then, his prayers are going to be heard by God. They are going to be carried up there. The believer's approach to God's throne of grace is, of course, always based upon the death of Christ for that believer's personal sins. This is indicated to us, for example, in Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace;" that is, this throne of God that we are seeing in the Holy of Holies, in heaven itself: "That we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." This is help that comes because you ask for it – the help of praying.

Then Hebrews 10:19-23: "Having, therefore brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." What's he talking about? Boldness to come right into the Holy of Holies, in the very presence of God: "By a new and living way which He has consecrated for us through the veil (that is to say, His flesh, the body of Jesus Christ), and having a high priest over the house of God (Jesus), let us draw near with true heart, and full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, that our bodies washed with pure sin;" that is, with personal, moral purity when you come to God. If you're living in immorality, then don't be coming to God, because He's not going to listen to you, and He's not interested in your prayers at that point of time. He's interested in your correction of your fellowship with Him: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for He is faithful that promised."

God is faithful. You can count on it. It doesn't always work out as you would wish, but you can count on it. So, don't waver in the confidence of what you've been called to: "So, let us draw near with a true heart full of the assurance of faith."

All of this, I stress again, that John is seen taking place in heaven was the reality of what was reflected in the earthly tabernacle. The special angel is officiating at what was this altar of incense here on earth. There is, in other words, a temple in heaven.

Revelation 11:19, for example, points that out to us: "And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in His temple, the ark of His covenant, and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderclaps, and an earthquake, and great hail."

Revelation 15:5 says, "And after that, I looked and behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was open." So, it is clear from the book of the Revelation that the original temple of God is actually in heaven, and that there is some kind of an arrangement in heaven that all of these things that were here in the earthly temple are in some way represented. So, John could actually see this angel step up to an altar that was like the altar of incense back down on earth.

Hebrews 9:23-24 indicates that the earthly replica of the temple in heaven was purified with animal blood sacrifices, while the actual temple in heaven also had to have a purification, but with a better sacrifice; namely, the blood of Jesus Christ.

There is in some quarters a certain contempt for the blood of Jesus Christ. That is obvious among non-Christians. But I'm sorry to say that even among some Christians, there is a diminishing of the value of the blood of Christ, and you do not want to be trapped into that mistake, as sincere as it is when it is presented. The blood of Jesus Christ is very important in the whole picture of the fulfillment of what was taking place here in heaven.

So, in Hebrews 9:23, we read, "It was therefore necessary that the pattern of things in the heavens (the real temple in heaven) should be purified with these. But the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these (these animal sacrifices). For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands (He's not entering into an earthly temple), which are the figures of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

So, there is a temple in heaven. It was purified ceremonially, as was the temple on earth, which was purified by animal blood. In heaven, it was purified by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Moses was told, therefore, by God to build the earthly tabernacle in precisely the way God had told him to do it. It had to reflect exactly the real temple in heaven.

Hebrews 8:5 indicates this: "Who serve unto the example in the shadow of heavenly things (these priests), and Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle. He said, 'See that you make all things according to the pattern shown to you in the mount.'"

So, there is a temple in heaven. It is a functioning place. What the Jews were given in the tabernacle, and later in Solomon's temple, was an exact replica of what is in heaven, in the compartments of a Holy Place; the Holy of Holies; the whole arrangement; and, the whole layout. Therefore, they had to build it precisely in that way.

**The Temple Layout**

Again, let's look at the arrangement of the temple as you approached it,

**A Courtyard**

There was, of course, a courtyard around this whole temple area.

**The Brazen Altar**

When you approach it, the first thing you came to was an altar made of brass. It was called the brazen altar. It was the place of sacrifice. Here is where animals were sacrificed, and here is where they were burned.

**The Holy Place**

Then the priest comes to minister within the holy place.

**The Laver**

The first thing in the Holy Place was the laver of water. He had to wash his hands and his feet before entering the Holy Place to minister in this particular room. This symbolized that, even though when he came into the priesthood, he had a complete bath given to him, signifying being washed completely from his sins, he was nevertheless contaminated because of his sin nature. So, 1 John 1:9 was symbolized by the washing at the laver.

**The Lamp Stand; the Table of Shewbread; and, the Altar of Incense**

As we've said, the Holy Place included this seven-branched lamp stand; the table of shewbread; and, the golden altar of incense.

**The Veil**

The veil separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

**The Holy of Holies**

In the Holy of Holies, God's presence was seen during the day in the cloud, and at night in the pillar of fire.

**The Ark of the Covenant**

The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant,

**The Mercy Seat**

The mercy seat was covered once a year with the shedding of blood from an animal by the high priest on the great Day of Atonement. God Himself dwelt in the Holy of Holies, and His presence, as we said, was made known by the pillar of fire and the cloud.

All of the ministrations of the Old Testament priests were performed in these temple surroundings, which symbolized the person of Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice in redemption of mankind. For this reason, we do not have temples today. All of this represented something that was coming that we all needed. But once it was fulfilled, that was the end of it.

This gives you an indication, if you understand this up, why the Mormons give themselves away, again, as a system which is not of God. They're running around all over the world building enormous temples at enormous cost. But of course, what they are using their temples for was nothing of this sort. It is not constructed like the temple. They try to connect it to these Old Testament temples, but it was not connected with anything in the form; in the arrangement; or, even what was done in those temples. Their temples are purely for the performing of Masonic Lodge of rituals, which were incorporated into the denomination by their founder, Joseph Smith.

**Memorials**

However, now that Jesus Christ has come, and the sacrifice has been made, then the temple is no more. Some of you, of course, are aware of the fact that the Old Testament indicates to us that, in the tribulation, there will be a temple; and, that, as a matter of fact, the ceremonies will be resumed. It's true, but it will then, under God's direction, be a memorial. The Lord's Supper is a memorial to us of a sacrifice that is already past. The rituals of the temple will no longer be symbolic of what is coming in the future. It will be like the Lord suffers to us – looking back at what has already taken place.

So, every detail of this earthly tabernacle (this earthly temple) was a copy of the one in heaven, and God's heavenly throne room was the Holy of Holies in His heavenly temple. Psalm 11:4 makes that connection for us: "The Lord is in His holy temple. The Lord's throne is in heaven. His eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men." So, the psalmist again makes it clear that God has a holy temple, and He has a throne in it. John is in that throne, and he's observing it.

**The Golden Altar of Incense**

Now this golden altar of incense is important to us, as we say, because it symbolized the prayers of believers going up to God. Again, John understood that because the Old Testament had explained that. In Psalm 141:2, for example, we read, "Let my prayer be set forth before You as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." He says, "See my prayers as incense going up to God." Prayers are represented by this incense, and the purity of the incense represents Jesus Christ in His perfection.

**Lifting Hands in Prayer**

Also, it speaks about lifting hands up in the evening sacrifice. This is where some people get the idea that when they pray, they must lift their hands overhead. Well, if that were a requirement among the Jews, rather than an optional way of praying, it certainly has no connection with Christians, whatever. It is simply another attachment to a legalism that should be placed out of operation. That is because it says "Lifting up the hands as the evening sacrifice." This is what the priest did. He lifted up the sacrifice. His hands, when he was praying, he was approaching God, and he was holding his hands up because he was lifting the sacrifice as a basis for God to accept him. The only reason that the Lord listens to us is when we come on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

As we shall see in a moment, they had to have hot coals to burn this incense here on the altar of incense. Where did they get it? It came from the brazen altar outside. That is very significant symbolically. You could not offer up your prayers, in the form of burning this incense, until you had taken coals that had been covered by the sacrifice of the blood of a lamb. You approach God in prayer on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

So, holding your hands up when you pray is sort of insult to God now, because it is suggesting that there's another sacrifice that we are going to make, and we're holding our hands up to give him a sacrifice, when he says, "Forget it, I've done the sacrifice once and for all. We're not going to talk about sacrifices anymore. We're not going to have altars anymore, and we're not going to go through any more of those rituals that indicate that sort of thing."

So, Psalm 141:2 connects the incense as the expression of prayers of the saints.

We've already had this pointed out to us in Revelation 5:8: "And when he had taken the scroll (that is, Jesus Christ), the four living creatures (the honor guard angels) and the 24 elders (representing the church) fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." This is saying exactly what the psalmist has just said.

So, when this incense was burned, it was symbolic of sending prayers up to God. No blood sacrifice, however, as we have pointed out, was burned on the golden altar of incense. The flame had to come from this brazen altar of sacrifice where the blood of the lamb had been shed. Leviticus 16:12-13 gave directions for this.

The original fire for this brazen altar came from God Himself. Leviticus 9:24 indicates to us that God ignited this with a holy fire the first time, and then they kept it going.

**Nadab and Abihu**

You perhaps remember Nadab and Abihu who got themselves in an awful lot of trouble, because they proceeded to perform a legitimate service of offering incense on the altar of incense – presenting prayers to God, in effect, symbolically. But they did it by coming up with their own fire. Leviticus 10:1-2: "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron." These were no dummies. They were instructed. They were related directly to the high priest himself: "Took either of them his censer (his fire shovel), and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He did not command them. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." Poor boys! Maybe they were so eager now to proceed to minister in the way that they were legitimately entitled to minister as the tribe of Levi, and as the sons of the high priest. But they didn't pay attention to doctrine, which said that the fire had to come from that which has been already covered with the blood of an animal, symbolizing the blood of Jesus Christ. You take the coals from that altar, and then you send up your prayers.

So, until you're a Christian, I can assure you that God does not listen to you. God does not listen to the prayers of unbelievers. And those who reject Jesus Christ, be they Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or whatnot, can pray to their heart's content, and there is nobody in heaven who is listening at all. God does not listen to those who do not approach Him on the basis of the blood of Christ. The incense of prayer has to go up from fire that has come from that brazen alter.

**Intercessory Prayer**

The golden altar of incense then represents one other thing. It actually represents the intercessory prayers of Jesus Christ for all of us as believers. In Hebrews 9:24-25, we read, "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are figures of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor yet that He should offer Himself often, as the priests enter into the holy places every year with the blood of others." So, it goes on, indicating that He has offered the sacrifice that needs to be made once and for all. And He, as our high priest, enters into the Holy Place, and He appears there in the presence of God. Why? For us? What – to get you saved? No. Now that you are in His family, to keep you saved? No. Now that you are in His family, to pray for you. This is part of the intercessory work of Jesus Christ.

The Lord told His disciples that He was going to do that for all of us who are Christians. John 17:9: "I pray for them (believers). I do not pray for the world." Do you see what I said? Jesus Christ does not pray for the world. There's no incense going up that God accepts from the world: "But for them whom You have given Me, for they are Yours." But the Lord Jesus Christ indeed does pray for those of us who are His family.

The altar of incense testified to the fact that believers, though they are saved and secure, still possess a sin nature, and they need the prayers of Jesus Christ as well as other Christians. Furthermore, God finds great pleasure in the intercessory prayers of believers for one another then. Jesus Christ can do no more relative to our redemption. But He can do an awful lot relative to our daily godly walk, and our stability, and our protection from Satan. Until you trust in Jesus Christ as personal Savior, he cannot stand between you, as a guilty center, and a Holy God. God does not listen to your prayers as an unbeliever, and Jesus Christ does not intercede for you. So, I don't care how many movies you see, or how many television programs where all of these unbelievers are out in some dire situation. Their plane has been shot down, and they are afloat in some rubber rafts, and somebody says, "Let's pray to God." And somebody starts off: "Our father who art in heaven." Hollywood loves that stuff. So, they all go through their monkeyshine prayer as if God is going to be moved by that, when all of them are unbelievers.

Face up to the fact that when this angel, that John saw, sprinkled this incense, and burnt it from coals that have come off that brazen altar, covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, those prayers went up to God, and they were legitimate prayers because they came from believers. But what comes from unbelievers goes exactly nowhere. And Jesus Christ does not pray for them. Prayer at the golden altar of incense must come to God by way of the brazen altar of sacrifice.

**The Criminals who were Crucified with Jesus Christ**

Let's make an interesting observation as we conclude tonight. As you know, when Jesus was crucified, there were two criminals crucified with Him – one on each side. And they deserved, indeed, what they were getting. Both of them called upon Jesus Christ to provide eternal life for them – not just one, but both of them. Both of them called upon Jesus Christ to make a provision for their well-being. Luke 23:39 has the record of this: "And one of the malefactors who were hanged railed at Him (mocked Him), saying, 'If You be the Christ, save Yourself, and us.'" What was he asking Jesus Christ to do? "I want you to save me." How does he want Jesus to do this? By coming down off the cross.

He was saying, "Save yourself from the death that these people are trying to impose upon you. If you are the Christ, I want you to save me. Come down off this cross and save Yourself." So, one said, "I want you to save me by remaining alive." He was doomed. There was no way that Jesus Christ could save him if Jesus remained alive. There would be no basis for that salvation. There would be no basis by which Jesus Christ could then come between a sinful creature and the Holy God. And there was no way by which Jesus Christ could intercede in his behalf if he did not come by way of the brazen altar first.

In verse 42, you have the other thief's request: "And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." What did he mean? He said, "Remember me. After You have died, and You come into your kingdom, I'm looking to you to take me in with You. I'm going to trust you to take me along, because that's what you've been telling people, and I believe it." And what he was saying was, "Lord, go ahead and die. Fulfill the commitment of the brazen altar so that then You can take me in behind the veil into the presence of God, and so that You can then stand at that altar of incense in heaven, and You can intercede in my behalf." That was the great promise. That was the difference between the two things. As you know, Jesus said to that man, "You have the right formula. You have the solution. And this very day, I'm happy to tell you that you will be with Me in paradise."

The apostle John was very sensitive to the fact that Jesus Christ stands at the altar of incense in our behalf. In 1 John 2:1, he points this out when he says, "My little children (that is, my Christian offspring), these things I write onto that you do not sin." He said, I've given you instructions so that you can avoid doing that which is evil. But I know you have a sin nature, and I know that you will do evil: "If any man does sin, we Christians," John says, "have an advocate (an intercessor) with the Father: Jesus Christ, the righteous." That's it.

That's what he is saying is that we've got someone who's standing at the altar of incense all the time, sending up prayers in our behalf to God the Father, who then answers every one of those prayers. You and I will never know, this side of eternity, what Jesus Christ preserved us from: the heartache; the tragedy; the agonies; and, the sorrows – all that he preserved us from, because He prayed, and the Father answered. So, when you think you have it hard, you think things are really not the way you'd like to have them to make you fully happy, just take the Word of God for it – that you don't know how well off you are. You don't know how well off you are, because if it was not for the intersession of Jesus Christ, we would all have misery beyond anything that we could comprehend. He has preserved us again and again from being victimized by the devil.

So, this is a very fascinating thing that John observes here in heaven. And with his background of the Old Testament temple, he knows the full significance of what this angel is doing when he is standing here offering the incense of the prayers of believers up to God Himself. Whenever we pray, in the right condition, we're always heard. And there is always the legitimate response of God to that prayer. It is your place of honor, and it is your place of duty to capitalize on prayer. All of us need to do that a lot more than we do. Things would be better around here if we did. Things would be better for us personally as well.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1984

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