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An Altar to Burn Incense
Exodus 30:1-38, 37:24-29, 38:8
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I noted last week that it's a bit of a mystery why the chapters that give instructions for the priests' garments and then the ordination of the priests fall in the middle of the section giving instructions for the tabernacle and its furnishings. Well, not really in the middle. It comes towards the end of this section, but still, after the instructions for Aaron's ordination we have another whole chapter that tells us about the altar of incense, the laver or basin for washing, the oil to be used to anoint the tabernacle, the incense to be burned, and a section about a census and the collection of "atonement money" that will be used in the building the tabernacle. This chapter is our text this morning. I still don't think anyone can give a certain answer on why Exodus is put together this way—not that some don't try! But as I've been digging into this chapter over the last week, there are some ideas and patterns that have struck me. In light of that I have to take back something I said last week about the laver. We know it was used daily by the priests to wash their hands and feet before they entered the tabernacle. I said last Sunday, that it would have been used in the ordination when Aaron was washed before being vested in his priestly garments. The text doesn't say that specifically, but it seemed like a safe assumption. Maybe he was, but I'm beginning to think that he likely wasn't. And that's because everything in this section—except the laver if it was used in the ordination—sort of comes later. None of it was part of the ordination of the priests apart from the anointing oil. You see, the tabernacle and priesthood go together. Hand in glove. Inseparable. And so the

instructions we've seen so far for the tabernacle included the tabernacle itself and the furniture and paraphernalia that went with it *that would be needed for the ordination of the tabernacle's priests*. I know, this is probably a little esoteric, but I think it helps us understand why Exodus has been structured this way. It's not as haphazard as it first looks.

So Chapter 30 begins with instructions for the altar of incense. Now, this was a vital and important part of the tabernacle's furnishings, but not only was it not involved in the ordination, it could not be used until the priests themselves had been ordained and the altar of sacrifice had served its purifying purpose.

The instructions for this altar are found in 31:1-10. In 35:25-28 we read that the craftsmen constructed it just as they were instructed. Let's look at the instructions:

“You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. You shall not offer unauthorized

incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.”

This altar wasn't particularly large. It was about a metre high and half a metre square. Like the altar of burnt offering, it had horns at its corners and was made to match the other furnishings of the tabernacle. But unlike the altar of burnt offering, which was outside the tabernacle, in the courtyard, the altar of incense was made of gold. Remember what we've seen with the tabernacle: the materials become richer and more precious as we get close to the most holy place. The altar of incense, we're told here, was to be placed in the tabernacle itself, in front of the veil that covered the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat. Every morning and every evening, the high priest was to burn incense on it. We'll read about the incense later in the chapter.

When we read about the tabernacle itself and the veil above the ark and mercy seat, I said that the veil was probably more of a pavilion draped over the ark and its guardian cherubim as opposed to how it's often portrayed as an actual curtain that completely partitioned off the most holy place from the rest of the tabernacle. I'm more convinced of that as we read about the altar of incense here and as I've immersed myself this week in reading about incense in the Old Testament and as it was used by Israel's neighbours. I also think this clears up the difficulty posed by Hebrews 9:4, which says that the altar of incense was part of the furnishings of the most holy place. If the most holy place was partitioned off by the veil as is often depicted, the altar would have had to be on the outside of that sacred space. No one was allowed in there, except the high priest once a year. What I want to suggest is

that the altar of incense itself served as the partition—or better the demarcation—between the most holy place—the place of the Lord’s presence—and the rest of the tabernacle. More specifically, the cloud of incense—the priest would kindle a charcoal fire on the altar and then incense would be sprinkled over the hot coals—the cloud of incense itself separated the holy place from the holy of holies.

Aside from that’s the importance of the incense? Well, Exodus doesn’t tell us. We get some clues in Leviticus 16. There we read the instructions to the priest for the Day of Atonement. It says there that the cloud of incense covered the mercy seat so that the priest would not die. Again, this would indicate that the altar wasn’t outside the most holy place, on the other side of a partition curtain. It was in the presence of the ark and mercy seat, and the smoke itself obscured them from the sight of the priest, serving a protective role. The veil hung above and over the ark with its embroidered angels standing guard. It was the altar of incense and its cloud of smoke that separated the priest from the immediate presence of the Lord.

But, too, as St. John’s Revelation gives us a glimpse into the heavenly court of which the tabernacle is a model, we see bowls of incense and John writes that the smoke rising from them before the Lord symbolised the prayers of the people. And so, here in the tabernacle, the priest, acting as mediator between the people and their God, burns this precious and costly incense in the Lord’s presence, symbolically bringing the prayers of the people into his presence. I think we get sense of this at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel as we see Zechariah going into the temple to make the daily offering of incense. Luke tells us that at that hour the people were gathered outside the temple to pray. Zechariah’s offering of incense represented the prayers of the people

entering the presence of the Lord. And just so in Revelation. God’s people were suffering under persecution and John depicts their prayers rising to enter the Lord’s presence. Those prayers were an acceptable and fragrant offering to the Lord.

Now, let’s move on to verses 11 to 16:

The LORD said to Moses, “When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the LORD. Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD’S offering. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD’S offering to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to make atonement for your lives.”

The people were to offer up their riches freely for the construction of the tabernacle, but the Lord also commands Moses to take a census of the men over twenty—the men of military age—and that each in return is to contribute a half shekel as an atonement offering for his life. They didn’t have coins yet at that time, but a half-shekel of silver would be about the equivalent of a silver quarter-dollar. So it wasn’t a lot of money. Chapter 38 tells us that this silver was used to cast the sockets that held the walls of the tabernacle.

Now, this was a one-time thing, but in Israel in later years it was used to justify the temple tax—contributing a half shekel every year for the upkeep of the temple.

What we don’t know is why a census would bring a plague that required this redemption. What we do know is that a census usually meant that the king was tallying up the number of fighting men at his disposal to prepare for war. In Israel a census was only to be taken when the Lord said to and we have the example in 2 Samuel 24, where David took a census of the people on his own initiative. The result was a plague—just as described here. But why? The Bible doesn’t give us a straight answer, but reading between the lines, it seems to be because God’s people were expected to trust in him. If Israel was to go to war, the Lord would send the nation into battle, not the king, and the Lord would ensure the victory regardless of the nation’s military might. Just think of God winnowing down Gideon’s fighting men. When Israel went to war, they would always know that it was God who fought for them. Also, it wasn’t uncommon for a king to take a census to sort of count his wealth—to find something to take pride in. God’s people—and especially his king—weren’t to be like that either. The nation belonged to the Lord, he delivered her from Egypt, he cared for her, he brought her to the promised land, and he sustained, and he blessed. The Lord had made Israel what she was, not the king. So a census was a bad thing, albeit sometimes necessary. So the Lord gives the people a lesson here and, I think in the Hebrew it’s pretty clear, because the passage about the altar of incense and this passage both have a three-fold emphasis on the Hebrew root that lies behind purification, ransom, and expiation. I think Pete Enns hits pretty close to the mark here when he writes, “It seems that the human penchant for assessing self-worth is something God will ‘tax’ for the good of the tabernacle and as a

prodding reminder to the people of who really has worth.” Brothers and Sisters, we human beings have a horrible tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Everything about worship in Israel was aimed at reminding God’s people that they were sinners and that they were nothing without him. Old Testament worship gave them proper perspective. That may seem like a downer, but it’s not. It’s only when we understand who we are as sinners that we can appreciate and begin to plumb the depths of God’s loving grace. Think of John Newton. He was the captain of a slaveship who was one day confronted by the weight of his sin and moved to repentance. Only someone like him could write those words, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” And, Friends, only people who know how great their sin is and how great our Saviour is can really appreciate them.

Next comes the laver or basin in verses 17-21:

The LORD said to Moses, “You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.”

The instructions don’t tell us what this laver or basin looked like. The Mishnah says that it held enough

water for the washing of four priests.¹ The instructions for the laver probably stand here for three reasons. First, it wasn’t part of the actual worship of the tabernacle. It was where the priests washed to *prepare* for worship. You can imagine how messy the priests would be, covered in blood from the sacrifices. Before entering the tabernacle to perform their other duties they needed to wash the hands with which they served and the feet that would walk on holy ground. Second, it’s here because—contrary to what I said last week—it seems that it wasn’t necessary for the ordination of the priests. And, third, unlike everything else so far, the laver wasn’t made from the general donations of the people. Exodus 38:8 tells us that it was made from the bronze mirrors—remember that in the ancient world mirrors were made of polished metal, not glass—it was made from melting the bronze mirrors donated by the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle. Now, who these women were and how they served at the entrance to the tabernacle when it hadn’t been made yet is a good question and one I can’t answer. I’ve been through a stack of commentaries and there are lots of speculations, but no real answers.

All that aside, what’s probably most important for us is the sober warning in verse 21. The priests are to wash their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle lest they die. Once again, the Lord’s instruction for old covenant worship emphasis the sinfulness and impurity of human beings. We cannot enter the presence of the Lord and live without atonement and without purification. At the same time, these instructions also emphasis the graciousness of the Lord. He desires human beings to be in his presence and so he goes to great pains to make a way for them to do so. Brothers and Sisters, think of our own liturgy. “We do not presume to come to this your Table, O Lord, trusting in

our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your Table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to show mercy.” The Lord is good and proper worship will always remind us of our sin in order to give us a greater appreciation for the grace that God has shown us in Jesus.

Finally, the last two paragraphs give very specific instructions for the oil that was to be used to anoint the tabernacle and its furnishing as well as the priests and for the incense that was to be burned on the altar that we started with today. Since we’re running out of time, I won’t read the whole passage. Making the anointing oil involved the work of a perfumer, who would distil a fragrance from a mixture of myrrh, cinnamon, and fragrant cassia and add it to an olive oil base. The incense was made from a blend of a number of spices, some which we can no longer identify for certain. Frankincense ranks amongst them.

What stands out, however, are the warnings. Not only does oil and incense belong to the Lord, but so do the recipes. I remember a visitor to the church I attended down in Vancouver asking one of the priests what sort of incense was used in the service. She wanted to buy some to burn at home. And, of course, C. M. Almy is perfectly happy to sell incense to anyone who wants to buy it, not just churches. But this wasn’t the case in Israel. The Lord says in verses 31-33:

And you shall say to the people of Israel, “This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people.”

¹ *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 538-539.

² Zevahim 19b.

Similarly for the incense, we read in verse 37-38:

And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the LORD. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”

What does it mean to be cut off from God’s people? We might think it means something like banishment, but if we jump ahead to the middle of the next chapter we see that to be “cut off” means to be put to death. Interspersed throughout these chapters are these sobering reminders from the Lord that his people are to take his worship with the utmost seriousness. The Lord can only be approached on his own terms, not because he’s petty and grumpy and easily offended, but because *we* are sinners, because *we* are unholy, and what because what is unholy cannot enter the presence of the holy and live without atonement, without cleansing, without forgiveness.

Brothers and Sisters, as technical, dry, and uninteresting as some parts of the Old Testament sometimes seem to be, God’s given them to us for a reason. Israel’s story—everything about it right down to the technical instructions for her worship—Israel’s story leads us to Jesus. We will never grasp who Jesus is, what he’s done, why he’s done it, and what it all means if we don’t let the story of Israel in the Old Testament lead us to the manger and then to the cross. As Jesus said so stridently to the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is of the Jews”. She didn’t understand, because she didn’t know the story. Israel’s story reveals the sinfulness of humanity—even of those whom God had called and set apart for himself. Israel’s story highlights our separation from God—even the men he called to be his priests could not enter directly into his presence and even when they

came near to it, their sins had to be atoned for and they had to undergo rituals of cleansing and purification. Israel’s story highlights the seriousness of sin. Whether it’s Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire or Uzza reaching out to steady the ark so that it wouldn’t fall into the mud—disobedience, particularly when it came to these aspects of worship that were so close to the Lord himself, brought instant death. Israel’s story highlights our inability to get things right—it highlights the fickleness and unfaithfulness of God’s people and their need for something more than a law written on stone tablets and the presence of God in a tent they could not enter. But Israel’s story also highlights the grace and faithfulness of the Lord. Whether in blessing or cursing, we see the faithfulness of God and grace at work bringing his promises to his people to fulfillment. Only then can we really understand why God took on our flesh in Jesus and why Jesus died for the sake of his people. Only in light of what we’ve been reading here in Exodus and the rest of the Old Testament, can we understand how the cross can be “a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”. Then, Brothers and Sisters, we can see in Jesus the height of God’s love for us. In light of Jesus, these rules and regulations and warnings make sense, because in Jesus we see that God is not and has never been petty or finicky, temperamental or grumpy. A God like that would never give his own life for the sake of sinners. No, for Israel, the worship of the Old Testament created a hunger for something greater, a hungering and thirsty for true righteousness of the heart—a hungering and thirst for a day in which hearts of stone would become hearts of flesh. In light of Jesus we can look back and see that all along, what might have seemed extreme and excessive, was there because God loves sinners, because God desires life for us rather than death, and because it’s vital we know

just how sinful and alienated from him we are, so that we truly appreciate what Jesus has done for us. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Amen.