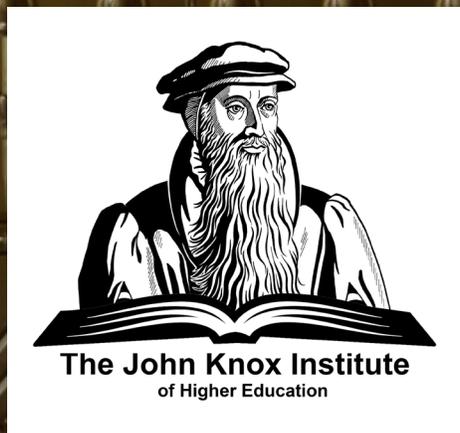


The Tabernacle of Moses

Video Lecture Series
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 12 ~
THE ALTAR OF INCENSE



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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The Tabernacle of Moses

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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Lecture 12 ~

THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

Dear friends, welcome to our next session on the Tabernacle. The portion of Scripture connected to this is from Exodus 30, verses 1 to 10, and Exodus 30, verses 34 to 38. But I suggest that you also take the time to read through Leviticus 16. And as you read these verses, you will be reminded of the entire purpose of the Tabernacle. Twice the Lord has mentioned, “This is where I will meet with you.” But in order to meet with them, he has thought out and provided for us the only way possible in which this holy God can meet with us, as lowly and guilty sinners.



And this way is set out before us in the Tabernacle—the gospel of the Old Testament. How richly has God provided everything that we need in his magnificent Son, Jesus Christ. We saw before, the door provided—wide enough for all the world, for the greatest sinner. We saw the blood sacrificed, as a ransom for guilty sinners, on the Brazen Altar. We’ve seen the Holy Spirit poured out to purify the most filthy sinners, through the Laver. And in him, we’ve seen the light risen through enlightened sinners in total spiritual darkness, in the Lampstand. And him, we saw food is given—spiritual food for our hungry souls.



But in him, also is given what we will now consider together in the Altar of Incense. Shema, our Jewish boy, he observed that twice a day, at least, the priest would enter into the Tabernacle Building. Shema saw that they carried with them a bowl with burning coals that they had taken from the Brazen Altar. But they also carried another bowl within the building. He wondered what that was, and what they were doing. This is what the priest told him, when he asked:

“My friend, Shema, twice a day, I am privileged to enter into the Holy Place. First, I need to trim the wicks of the Lamps so that the light remains clear and pure. But I also have the great honor to perform the work at the Golden Altar. This Altar is placed right before the veil leading into the Holy of Holies. And to do this, I needed to take some of the burning coals from the Altar of Burnt

Offering, as you see me take in a little bowl. If I didn't do that, my boy, the same thing would happen to me that God did to Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu. I would be consumed by the glory of God for my irreverence shown to him."

"What does that Altar look like? Is it as big as the one on the outside?" Shema asked. "No, I have to disappoint you, Shema, but the Altar of Incense is actually the smallest piece of furniture within the entire Tabernacle. It is a mere half a meter square, while it is a meter high. But this altar is also made just like the other ones, from shittim wood, like the one outside, except this one is covered with pure gold. The top rim is like the Table of Shewbread. It has a golden rim that looks again like a crown. And like the outside Altar, there is also a horn on each of the corners of this altar. Since this Altar needs to be carried as we travel, it also has these rings on the sides, in which there are two gold-covered poles, so that we can rest it and put it on our shoulders.



“But, Shema, remember, although this altar is small, it is no less important. The work that I may do each day at around 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. is very rich in meaning. First, I place that bowl with the hot coals upon the Altar, then I sprinkle upon it the incense.

And do you know that the incense is made exactly according to God's own recipe? Do you know that no one is allowed to use this incense in their homes, or as a perfume on their bodies? The Lord has said very clearly to us, "Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people." It is reserved just for this Altar.

"Now, after I put the incense on the coals, immediately, the whole Tabernacle Building is filled with the most sweet, wonderfully sweet smell. All that strong smell that we smell here outside, disappears there. It is truly heavenly within the Holy Place. And not only does it fill the Holy Place, no, the aroma enters also into the Holy of Holies, through the veil, the curtain.

"And then, while that sweet incense rises up, I have another privilege. I have the privilege and sacred duty to pray, as the interceding priest. And I plead with the Lord on behalf of our nation, on behalf of our people, on behalf of you, Shema, and of myself. And my prayer rises up with the incense, before the throne of God. Shema, words fail to describe the sense of God we may at times experience when we work within those sacred walls. And besides these two times in the morning and evening, we also have to place incense on the Altar each time when we change the Bread, or when we do some work on the Lampstand. God commanded that we are always, as it were, to surround ourselves with the smell of incense when we labor within the Tabernacle Building.



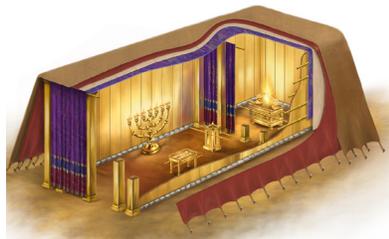
"Then, when I'm finished with the morning and the evening sacrifice, I have one more im-

portant task to do. You must have seen it. We priests, we come out of the Tabernacle, and we walk towards the Gate, and there, in the name of Jehovah, I may proclaim the priestly blessing.” As found in Numbers 6, verses 24 to 26: “Jehovah bless you and keep you: Jehovah make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. Jehovah lifts up his countenance upon you, and gives you peace.”

So the priest informed Shema of the work with the Altar of Incense. Now, let’s draw out some of the rich, spiritual, gospel teaching that God pictures in this Altar, and the priestly services at the Altar. Friends, God doesn’t tire in drawing our attention in every detail, to the glory of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. As we’ve seen before, the meaning of the wood covered with gold, the crown around the top of the Altar, the horns as we saw on the other Altar, also on this one on each of the corners—they all picture the various aspects of Jesus’ glory. But the Altar of Incense has a unique function, and has a significance that extols a part of Jesus’ very important ministry. So let us consider the Altar in three ways. First, why was it placed there, right before the inner veil? Secondly, what is the connection between the Brazen Altar outside and the Golden Altar inside? And third, what is symbolically pictured in the Altar, and how it is used?

So first then, the placement of the Altar. It stood right before the veil leading into the Holy of Holies. There, behind that veil, there is, as it were, God’s throne room. This room was not accessible to the ordinary priest, except once a year, on the Day of Atonement, for the high priest. So the closest that any priest could come to God, as they daily served him, was the Altar of Incense. And it is noteworthy that God ended the description of the Altar with these words, in Exodus 30, verse 10: “It is most holy unto the LORD.” Next to the Ark of the Covenant, this Altar was the most sacred piece of furniture in the Tabernacle. Firstly, because it brought the priest the nearest to the throne of God, but also to illustrate that the function of the spiritual significance of this Altar is so vital to our spiritual lives. Our further study will make this clear.

Now secondly, let’s think through the connection between the outside and the inside altars. It could be asked, why was a second altar necessary? Was the first one outside not sufficient? Obviously, there is nothing meaningless or unnecessary in God’s design of the Tabernacle. So it is therefore for us to discover what is the connection and the necessity of the two altars. Now the Brazen Altar and the sacrifices, as we have learned, picture the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the Brazen Altar sets out Christ in his humiliation, his suffering, and his death. Therefore, that Altar had no crown; and therefore, it stood outside the Tabernacle Building. It pictured how Jesus was made sin for us, and how he laid down his life for his church. The alter inside the building was decorated with a crown at the rim, and it was also never seen by the people. It points, therefore, to Jesus, in his exaltation, in the glory of God’s presence after he ascended. It is his work, as the exalted Priest there, based on the work that he did as a Priest here. In other works, the foundation of the Altar of Incense was the Altar of Burnt Offering, and this is pictured by the requirement that incense was always offered on top of the burning coals of the Brazen Altar. And this also makes clear why Aaron’s sons were killed by God, when they tried to draw near with strange fire. “Strange fire” must have meant fire that did not come from the Brazen Altar. And the lesson for us is timeless. Anyone who seeks to come to God on the basis of his or her own works, or their own feelings, or their own spiritual experiences, or their own doings, will experience God’s displeasure and rejection. It is only Christ, his righteousness, that has opened the way to the Father’s heart.



Third then, what is pictured with the Altar of Incense? This altar and the incense portrayed the intercessory work of the praying High Priest, Jesus Christ. The sweet-smelling incense represents the perfection and the accomplishments, and the merits, and the grace, and the purity of all of what Jesus Christ has done to make reconciliation. His entire life, his soul, his body, was a sweet savor before God. And mostly, this altar then portrays Christ's intercessory prayer that he offers up to God. And this is very much supported by how David prays in Psalm 141, verse 2, when he says, "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." The second support for that thought is found in Revelation, chapter 8, verse 3—we read: "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand."

In Hebrews, sometimes called "The Divine Commentary on the Book of Leviticus," frequent mention is made of Jesus' high priestly intercession. For example, in Hebrews 7, verses 24 and 25, we read: "But this man, . . . is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." Hebrews 9:24 adds: "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

Friends, the Lord Jesus, in his stated exaltation is day and night doing the heavenly part of his salvation work. What would any of his people be without the prayers recorded in John 17. As all day long, the sweet smell of incense lingered in the Holy and the Holy of Holies, so the sweet incense of Jesus' intercession for sinners is before the throne of God. And these truths make it even more clear why the priest was never allowed to enter the Tabernacle to trim the lamps or to change the bread, without offering incense on the burning coals of the Altar of Incense. All that we do is to be, as it were, bathed in the sweet smell of prayer offered up in the name of Jesus Christ. Our prayers are not acceptable or sweet, unless they are based on the finished work of Christ, as well as carried upward in the sweet incense of that great High Priest. For haven't you, to your own dismay, discovered that even our best prayers are not as pure incense? Don't we smell and sense how selfish, sometimes how irreverent, how formal our love is, how distracted our thoughts, how scattered our affections, and even what unbelief clings to our prayers? Therefore only through the incense of the intercessory prayers of Jesus can our prayers be acceptable to God.

I find such encouragement in that precious truth of Hebrews 7, where we are continually pointed back to that Savior, able to save to the uttermost all that come to God through him. And why? For we have an high priest, who is holy, who is harmless, who is undefiled, who is separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens. He doesn't need to offer up sacrifice for his own sins, because he had none. But he sacrificed himself for the sins of his people, once and for all. And though the Old Testament priests could not draw near to God then before the veil, all New Testament believers have this privilege granted to them—they may go beyond the veil, because of the new and the living way, in the exalted Savior. Hear Hebrews 10:19 to 22, set out this glory: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest"—an interceding High Priest—"over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

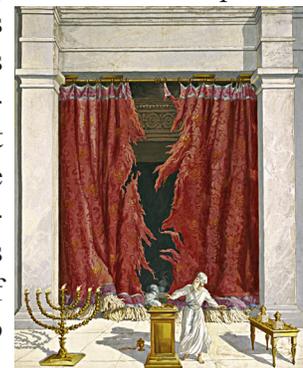
Do you see how rich the Tabernacle symbolism shines through that Scripture? According to

Exodus 30, verse 20, the priest did not only need to take coals and the incense with him to enter into the sanctuary—he also needed to wash himself at the Laver: “When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the LORD.” So likewise, when we pray, we must repent of our sins, we must confess them, and we must seek the washing in Jesus’ blood and ministry. For to pray with unconfessed sins laying upon us is like a priest walking with unwashed hands and feet into the presence of this holy majesty, Jehovah.

So lastly, friends, how remarkable is the timing of the morning and the evening sacrifice. Each morning at 9 a.m. and at 3 p.m., the officiating priest would bring the sacrifice. Now these times coincided exactly with the timing of Jesus’ crucifixion. At that moment, at nine o’clock in the morning, he uttered his first intercessory prayer on the cross: “Father, forgiven them, for they know not what they do.” And then, as the afternoon sacrifice concluded, it coincided with the death of Jesus at 3 p.m. And upon his cry, “finished!” he committed his soul to his Father’s hand, and he died. And his Father’s answer was the rending of the inner veil from the top to the bottom, as Matthew recorded. The work was truly done.

The way to reconciliation was opened on a just and a holy ground. And now we may draw near to God with liberty beyond the veil. And why beyond the veil? It’s because our intercessor has gone beyond the veil himself to open the way for us, and this was beautifully pictured on the Day of Atonement, as you could read in Leviticus 16. On that day, the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies. And this foreshadowed Jesus’ ascension into heaven, with his own blood, and with the sweet-smelling savor of his own obedience.

Now to picture this gospel truth, only on the yearly Day of Atonement, the incense was placed within the Holy of Holies, as recorded in Leviticus 16, verse 12. This pictured Christ entering into the heavenly glory upon completion of his sacrifice on the cross. And that also explains the often misquoted or confusing Scripture of Hebrews 9, verses 3 to 4, where at first it appears that the Apostle had made an error when he described the Holy of Holies. He wrote: “And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all; which had the golden censer, and the ark.” Brethren, that truth is for our comfort. We have our Mediator within the veil, and on the basis of him, we may have liberty to draw near to God. Let none of us neglect so great salvation.



And then, in conclusion, ponder the glorious composition of the incense. The exact details you can read in Exodus 30, verse 34. Four ingredients were used, all of the exact equal proportion. Each pictured, again, the work of the Savior, both in his state of humiliation, and exaltation. No part of each was more important or less important in the work of the Savior. Now the four parts in Jesus’ life were, first, his miraculous, holy conception; and secondly, his suffering and death; and thirdly, his resurrection; and fourthly, his ascension into heaven to be at the right hand of his Father, which he will complete with his return, to judge the living and the dead. And all these aspects of our Lord’s person and ministry are invaluable and indispensable for the salvation of any soul. As God warned that no other ingredients were ever to be mixed in this incense, so we are to be cautioned, never to come before God with anything added to his Son and him crucified. God’s recipe for salvation is Christ alone—his perfect holiness in his birth; his perfect obedience in this life; his perfect obedience in his death; and his perfect labor at the right hand of his Father. May God so bless these instructions with his Spirit writing his truths on our heart. Thank you.