

CHAPTER 1

Incense—Prayers

In this chapter, we are going to look at the incense altar and first place it in its prophetic context. Chapters 10 and 11 of the Book of Revelation are like a prophetic interlude. They reveal how John gets recommissioned into his prophetic ministry.

When Jesus called his disciples together and made them apostles, they ministered through different giftings and different anointings. You cannot describe an apostle outside of gifting, anointing, and ministry. The three disciples who were in the most intimate relationship with Jesus in his earthly ministry, the three that had access to secrets that others were excluded from, were Simon, James, and John. James and John were brothers, and, like Simon, they were fishermen. They had other things in common also: they were

from the same town, they worked in the same industry, and they were business partners.

Sons of Thunder

The other thing that these three men had in common is that they had their names changed. We know that Jesus called Simon "Peter," and in saying "upon this rock I will build my church," he gives us a little insight into the nature of all apostolic ministries and foundational gifts to his church. James and John also had their names changed; he called them "Boanerges," which literally means "sons of thunder." Some people say that they were called "sons of thunder" because they went around making a lot of noise, shouting and hollering, and that they were a bit wayward. Actually, it has nothing to do with how loud they were. Throughout Scripture, one of the images for the voice of God, and for prophetic declaration, is thunder. These two men were probably called "sons of thunder" because they were anointed with a prophetic gift.

We see the prophetic gift in both James and John. James was the first of the disciples to die for his faith, and he was killed, it tells us, by the sword, which is the classic way of prophets dying. Elijah, when he is complaining to God about the state of the nation, says, "*The Israelites have rejected Your covenant, broken down Your altars, and put Your prophets to death with the sword*" (1 Kings 19:10). To be put to death with the sword is a prophet's death. James was put to death by the sword and was therefore numbered among those whose voices were crying from under the altar. I wonder sometimes if John, as he heard those cries, recognized his brother's voice! He is

still speaking, though he is dead. John, of course, goes on to be the author of the only prophetic book that we have in the New Testament; he is clearly a prophet.

He is recommissioned here in this chapter to prophesy again: "*You must prophesy again*" (Rev. 10:11). Remember, we have considered that he is quite aged by now. He is probably quite elderly, but God recommissions him into a new task of prophetic ministry that is going to touch the ends of the earth and all the kingdoms of the world. As part of that ministry, John records,

I was given a reed like a measuring rod (Revelation 11:1a).

Now one of the tasks for prophets in the Old Testament was to measure or to align. They are often seen with either a measuring line or a plumb line because they determine whether something is straight and conformed to the will and purpose of God. That is one of the ministries of prophets. They see if things are lined up with God's purpose. They see if things are righteous and straight. They measure and make sure that what we are building conforms to the pattern that has been shown to them on the mountain. That is part of their job, part of the prophetic ministry. And so John, in the recommissioning of his prophetic gift, is given a measuring rod and is told, "*Go and measure the temple of God and the altar [of incense], and count the worshipers there*" (Rev. 11:1b). But he is also told, "*But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months*" (Rev. 11:2). John's prophetic word is going to bring a separation between the Holy Place (which is where the altar of incense is

and the true worshipers of God are) and the Outer Court, which is being given to the Gentiles.

The Outer Court

The interesting thing about this, of course, is that the Outer Court of the temple was known as the "Court of the Gentiles." That was the only place that Gentiles were allowed to come. Paul got into trouble because people said that he was taking Gentiles right into the temple. They were only allowed into the Outer Court, and, in fact, in every passageway that took you further toward the heart of the temple there were signs forbidding Gentiles to enter, and if they disobeyed, they would be put to death. So this temple area, this outer court, which was open to everybody, was known as the Court of the Gentiles. This is where the God-fearers could come. This is where the people who wanted to know something about God, to have some teaching and revelation, to see something of the glory of the temple, could come.

Of course, the tragedy of this Court of the Gentiles was that this was the very place that the Jews had turned into a market. This was the very place where the moneychangers sat. So the Gentiles coming to seek God would come into this Outer Court and find it not only like a marketplace but, as Jesus called it, like a den of robbers. This was not a good testimony, but this is what Israel had become. Rather than a provocation and an inspiration to the nations, they had become an offense to the nations. Paul actually writes in one of his letters that the name of God was blasphemed among the nations because of the behavior of those who should have been God's covenant people (see Rom. 2:24). It is Jesus who comes into this Court

of the Gentiles and is provoked to anger by all that is going on. He makes a whip, kicks over the tables, drives out the animals, makes a huge commotion, and insists, "*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*" (Mark 11:17). That is what it is supposed to be. But the place where all nations can come is no longer a house of prayer; it is house of merchandise. It is no longer a house where you receive from God; it is a house where you are fleeced by God's people.

God tells John that the Outer Court is going to be handed over to the Gentiles—there is some justice there—to be trampled underfoot. What he is saying is that the time has arrived in the unfolding of God's purpose where Israel, ethnic Israel, is going to meet its ultimate rejection by the trampling down of the physical temple. And when Israel was overcome by the Roman invasion in A.D. 70, not one stone of the temple was left standing. It was utterly destroyed. But God says to John that those who occupy the place of worship, those who are at the altar, are to be measured in an inclusive way. That is, they belong to God. They are not going to be harmed. It is only those who have not obeyed the Lord who will come to harm. Jesus went into the temple and said, "*My house will be a house of prayer*" (Luke 19:46), but when he finally rejects ethnic Israel he says, "*Your house is left to you desolate*" (Matt. 23:38). It is as if he is saying, "It was My house but now it is your house and, if you want it, you can have it; but I tell you, it is going to be desolate."

The Burning of Incense

All those who were reckoned to be true believers were preserved, kept for God, measured, and gathered for prayer around the altar. That altar is the altar of incense. It represents

prayer. One of the things that we desperately need to rediscover in the churches in our day is how to pray. Some of us have elders who gather together or leaders who gather together or prayer meetings that everyone is invited to, but nobody turns up to. We all have those kinds of prayer meetings, but God is looking for a church that knows how to pray. I am convinced, I am unshakably convinced, that the main function of the temple in the Old Testament was prayer. I will tell you why I believe that. Nowhere in the Scriptures can I find the temple called a house of sacrifice. Nowhere in the Scriptures can I find the temple called a house of ceremony. Nowhere in the Scriptures can I find the temple called a house of priestly function. But I do find it called this: a house of prayer. "*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*" (Isa. 56:7). That is what God speaks through Isaiah the prophet. All the furniture of the temple, like everything else in creation and in God's revelation, everything was arranged to show us something of God.

Here is an illustration: picture yourself in the days of Eli the priest. There are no visions. There are no prophecies. The Word of God has been hushed. It is neglected. It is rare. There is one little boy asleep in the temple. And then God breaks through, just before the lamp goes out. Before utter and total darkness comes, God raises up a young man to be a prophet in the nation. That lamp in the temple is a picture of God's prophetic word. We will pick that up later on. The bread that was laid out speaks to us of a God who meets all our needs. The Ark of the Covenant behind the curtain speaks of a God who is enthroned in the midst of his people. The altar of incense represents the prayers of God's people, and it represents most dramatically the corporate prayers of God's people.

Individual prayers are important, but there is power in corporate prayer that we are yet to rediscover. As I read the Scriptures, it seems to me that there was an understanding that the burning of incense in God's presence was the most important function performed by the priests.

Going back to that time when Samuel is in the temple, before he begins to function in his ministry, a prophet has come to the old priest, Eli, and spoken to him, rebuking him for his lax parenthood and for his undisciplined sons. God first reminds him of the great privilege he has of being the priest of God:

I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in My presence. I also gave your father's house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites (1 Samuel 2:28).

God reminds Eli of his high calling: "I chose your fathers. I chose the offspring of your fathers. Now you are in the line of Aaron, and what have I chosen you to do? To go up to my altar and burn incense." It seems as if that was what was recognized as the most important function of the activities in this tabernacle. He did not choose him to make sacrifice, although of course the priest made sacrifice. He did not choose him to go and teach, although teaching was part of the priestly function. He chose him to burn incense. Listen to what Solomon says as he writes to Hiram when he is ready to begin construction on the temple:

Now I am about to build a temple for the Name of the Lord my God and to dedicate it to Him for burning fragrant incense before Him (2 Chronicles 2:4).

Solomon seems to understand that the whole purpose of dedicating this temple is to burn incense to the Lord. It is not one of the most observable things, because it takes place in the holy place and the multitude does not see it happening. Sacrifice takes place in the courtyard. Blood runs deep in the courtyard. Animals are slaughtered in the courtyard. The drama of sacrifice is in the outer precincts. But in the secret place incense continually ascends to the Lord, and that is what he wants. That is what he most desires: a people who are a people of prayer. Hezekiah headed up a revival, and one of manifestations of the revival was the restoration of the house of God. The house of God had fallen into disrepair and disuse. Hezekiah reestablished its function and called again the priests to minister: *“My sons, do not be negligent now, for the Lord has chosen you to stand before Him and serve Him, to minister before Him and to burn incense”* (2 Chron. 29:11).

There seems to be a consensus that the prime ministry is to serve him—to minister before him—and the thing that is highlighted is the burning of incense. The burning of incense is what God was looking for. The burning of incense was what God most desired. God smelled it and was satisfied. God does not lack anything, but I have to speak anthropomorphically because there is no other way we can begin to understand a spiritual God. There is a sense in which we are here to bring satisfaction to the heart of God. Of course, it would be ridiculous and heretical and wrong to suggest that without us there would be dissatisfaction in the heart of God; God is totally self-sufficient, and yet God in his mercy allows us to bring pleasure to Him, allows us to bring satisfaction to His heart. This is epitomized in this whole exercise of burning incense in the presence of God.

The Most Holy Place

The temple was huge, but it was constructed around two rooms of special importance. There was one room, called “the most holy place” or sometimes, in older versions, “the holy of holies.” It was a cube. It was the same measurement in length and breadth and height. The only piece of furniture in there was the Ark of the Covenant with the mercy seat upon it, which was overshadowed by two cherubs. It was out of bounds to everybody. In fact, it was only entered once a year on the Day of Atonement by the High Priest. A huge curtain separated it, and on it were embroidered cherubim because the cherubim were the guardians of the presence of God. Just as God had placed cherubim and a flaming sword as guards to keep unregenerate man from going back into the garden and finding the tree of life, so now cherubim guarded the way into God’s earthly presence, saying, “You can’t come in here.” Behind the curtain was the mercy seat and the Ark, God’s throne. In fact, God was enthroned in a cloud above the cherubim (see Lev. 16:2; 1 Sam. 4:4). Before this curtain, on the right hand side, was a table with 12 loaves of bread on it; these were called the bread of the presence. This table spoke of a God who was ever present to meet His people’s needs. On the left hand side was a seven-pronged lamp. It was fed with oil and kept perpetually burning because it spoke not only of a God who meets His people’s needs but of a God who continually speaks to His people.

The Altar and the Ark

All the way back against the curtain was a golden altar of incense that again was tended to on a daily basis to keep it

burning. It was a burning altar. It had live coals and incense on it. It was on one side of the curtain, and on the other side of the curtain was the Ark. Let us listen first of all to what Solomon did as he built the sanctuary for God.

He partitioned off twenty cubits at the rear of the temple with cedar boards from floor to ceiling to form within the temple an inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place (1 Kings 6:16).

And it is this place he is talking about here:

So he overlaid the whole interior with gold. He also overlaid with gold the altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6:22).

Here is an interesting statement. It says the altar belonged to the inner sanctuary, but it was actually in the outer sanctuary. It belonged to the Ark, but it was separated from the Ark by a curtain, on which cherubim were embroidered. Why is that? You see, God's purpose was that God and man should be in perpetual intimacy. But sin had separated us from God, and the great curtain was a representation of the barrier that exists between fallen humanity and a holy God. Although this incense altar actually belonged in the inner sanctuary, it had to stay in the outer sanctuary because there was a curtain of separation. That is why when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. God was saying, "You can come in now!" The barrier has been removed. In fact, the barrier has not been removed, it has been replaced because we come through a new veil, which is His body. But even back here, they understood that the incense altar actually

belonged in the inner sanctuary although it was placed and ministered to in the outer sanctuary.

Now let me take you to Hebrews:

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant (Hebrews 9:1-4).

What a surprise! Have we found an error in the Scriptures? No. You see, although this is not a right description, it is a true description. The writer to the Hebrews is conveying to us how it was always intended to be, that the Ark and the altar actually belonged together. It was almost, and I can put it like this, still staying somewhat spiritual, although being very natural, it was like your favorite chair and your footstool. They belong together. You come home. You relax in your favorite chair, but there is something not quite right. Oh dear. The footstool is over the other side of the room, and you are not going to get into total comfort, you are not going to feel totally at peace, until that footstool is in right relationship with your chair, because the two are one in your appreciation. Now in a sense that is true with God. The Ark is His throne upon which He sits, but it is not complete until the footstool altar is in close proximity so that God can enjoy his rest. Now that is how it was supposed to be. When we go into Heaven with John and he gives us a tour of what is going on and he describes what is happening, the two pieces of furniture that are always there are the throne and

the altar. In fact, the altar is inevitably described as “the altar that is before the throne” because they are of a piece. They belong together. They are matching furniture, for this throne was overlaid with gold, and so was the altar. They match. They are suited. They belong together. It is the golden altar that is before the throne, and it is the intimacy of God and His people that makes things happen in the Book of Revelation. When we come here, we discover a divine catalyst. It is at this altar, by the way, that Isaiah finds his recommissioning in the purposes of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

I do not know if he was actually in the temple or if he was in vision, but he saw the Lord on His throne. He saw the Ark of the Covenant and the God who is enthroned in the cloud above it, and he saw those seraphim that guard it, crying, “Holy, holy, holy!” and as he saw it, he was overawed with his own sin. It was then that one of the angels came with a live coal from the altar; that is, from the incense altar. He touched his lips. You can escape from things that defile by giving yourself to praise and worship. You can be cleansed in an atmosphere of worship. God sends an angel and makes him whole.

The Significance of the Altar

Luke tells us that Zechariah, the old priest, had gone into the temple to burn incense. It was the time of prayer, and the congregation was outside praying. As he was in the midst of offering up the incense to God, an angel appeared and announced that his prayers had been answered and that God

was going to move in his world. He would give him a son who would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah and make ready a people for the coming of the Lord, and then Messiah would arrive. There is revelation at the incense altar. When Isaiah had been in the presence of the incense altar, his lips got cleaned up. Zechariah's mouth got closed. Through his unbelief he could not speak, but when he did speak, he did not just speak, he prophesied the word of the Lord. This altar is a place of divine encounter.

It is an important place. In fact, Korah's rebellion revolved around this issue. He said, in effect, "Who do you think you are, Moses? Who do you think you are, Aaron? We are all holy. We can all go and offer incense to God." And God said, "Oh no you can't. This is a very important issue. This is the very center of temple worship. You cannot come in when you think you will. You cannot come in because you think you are worthy. You cannot come in unless God draws you in, and in fact you are so badly wrong that the ground is going to open and swallow you up." Korah was sent living down into hell because he presumed that he could come and function in this most holy of ministries. This is also where Uzziah was struck with leprosy: although he was a king, and a good king, and although he had achieved much in the nation and caused it to prosper and brought in peace, he had an ambition to do more. He wanted to burn incense before God because somehow in his understanding that was the most important thing you could do, to come into the presence and burn incense. But the priests withstood him, and even as he stood there railing against the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead.

The Power of the Altar

The incense altar seems to be quite important! When we read about this, we see the creatures and the elders worshipping God:

And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8).

The incense is the prayers of the saints. The psalmist says, "*May my prayer be set before You like incense*" (Ps. 141:2). It has to do with prayer. It is not just to do with saying prayers. It is to do with praying in the Spirit. It is to do with praying in the will of God. It is the prayer that God desires for us to bring him. In Revelation we see how God's throne comes down to earth. One of the ways God's throne comes down into our world is that we pray it down. Jesus said, "*This, then, is how you should pray: ... Your Kingdom come*" (Matt. 6:9-10), and we pray down God's throne. Look at how it is described here:

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake (Revelation 8:3-5).

You see what is happening. When our prayers touch the throne, the throne touches our world. Our praying brings in the Kingdom. We had better learn how to pray! We had better learn to mean business in prayer. The Book of Revelation teaches us that a praying church brings in God's Kingdom; it shakes our world. Let me just give you a very simple example. They were preaching the name of Jesus. There were signs and wonders, gifts of the Holy Spirit operating, and remarkable miracles taking place. And the religious leaders were offended. The religious leaders were threatened. They took the apostles, and they said, "No more preaching in the name of Jesus. If you preach any more in the name of Jesus, you are in trouble." So they returned to their own people, and they prayed. They lifted up their voices with one accord, and they called on God, and they said, "God, You have seen their threats, you have heard what they have said. Now give us boldness. That is what we need. We need boldness" (see Acts 4:29). This is strange. What they wanted was more of what they already had. When Peter and John had been before the Jewish leaders, the leaders had noticed their boldness (see Acts 4:13). You know that you only get from God what you have already gotten. "*Whoever has will be given more*" (Matt. 13:12). They had *some* boldness, but they wanted *all* boldness. And when they had finished praying, the place where they were praying was shaken. What had happened was that their prayer had touched Heaven, and now Heaven had touched the earth, and it shook. It shook the place where they were. Do you want your town shaken? Get praying.

Paul and Silas were in prison. But instead of complaining, they were singing hymns and praying, and as they prayed

there was an earthquake. The place where they were was shaken, and all the doors flew open, and all the chains fell off, and the jailer himself was the first convert for the Kingdom, he and his house. If you want your circumstances to change, start praying. If you want where you are to be shaken, let us learn to pray the prayers that God would have us pray. We have all, I'm sure, been in those prayer meetings of the past, where it was around the world in 30 minutes but nothing really ever happened. It is time for us to learn how to pray. The high priest went into the Most Holy Place to the throne of God once a year, and on the Day of Atonement, it tells us, God said, "I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover," so that when the priest came in, he had to bring his bowl of incense so that the smoke from the incense would rise and conceal the atonement cover so that he would not die as a result of seeing God. I do not know—I am speculating here again, and it may be just mystical—but is it possible that as he went in with the smoke, the smoke of the prayers of the saints mingled with the cloud that was God's presence and there was an intimate merging between God and men that is almost impossible to imagine? He that is enthroned between the cherubim (see Ps. 80:1, etc.) is also enthroned on the praises of Israel (see Ps. 22:3).

How to Pray

Here is how to pray—one simple hint. The incense altar teaches us how to pray. It tells us first of all that there were live coals on the altar, so prayers must be *fervent*. We need prayers from people who have got fire in their bellies. Our prayers must be fervent. It is the fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much. If you are really requesting, do it with

passion. This altar was on fire all the time. Do not pray wet prayers. Do not pray wimpy prayers. Pray with fire. Prayer must be fervent.

Prayer must be *fragrant*, because it was the aroma that went up before God. What I mean by that is simply that our prayers should smell like Jesus. That is, we should pray prayers that Jesus wants us to pray. If you get your prayers from God, then you get them answered. We are an aroma to God. Did you know that? When we get out in the world, some people are attracted by it, and some people are nauseated by it. It is a bit like perfume. Some people think it smells good, and others gag on it! We are like that. To some we are the smell of life and to others the stench of death, but to God we always smell like Jesus, and our prayers should be like that. Pray prayers that God wants to answer. Get your prayers from God and then take them to God. Pray prayers that are full of desire to glorify Jesus.

Finally, our prayers should be *fluent*. I do not mean Shakespearean or in King James English or dramatic and rhetorical, but I mean that they should all flow the same way. In fact, when we find prayers in the New Testament, they all focused on one issue. It is not everything you can think of to fill up the hour of prayer. It is having one issue. For example, if Peter is in prison, what shall we do? We will pray for him to get out of prison. Can we just say a prayer for Auntie Mary because her bunions are acting up? No! We are here to pray for Peter to get out of prison. Prayers are to be disciplined and focused and fluent so that they flow together to achieve the purposes of God.