

The Sweet Incense

by John Hames

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer as the highest thing in the Christian experience, outranking preaching and other forms of ministry.

Scripture: Revelation 8:3

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Hames preaches on the significance of the altar of incense in the tabernacle, symbolizing prayer as a sweet fragrance rising to God, representing Christ's intercession for us and our intercession with Him. He emphasizes the importance of prayer being led by the Holy Ghost, fervent, and prevailing in the spiritual realm, connecting us deeply with Heaven. Hames stresses the costly nature of true intercession, requiring a Gethsemane experience of dying to self, and highlights the Holy Ghost's desire for vessels of prayer to ignite revivals and bring back the power to the Church.

Transcript

One of the sweetest things connected with the tabernacle was the altar of incense. This little altar was three feet in height and eighteen inches in breadth. It was of acacia wood, and covered with a crown of pure gold. On the altar was burned the sweet spices of incense. When set on fire, they would rise in a cloud of aromatic fragrance and perfume, filling both the holy place and the holy of holies.

Prayer is a sweet fragrance going up to God and filling both earth and Heaven with a delightful odor. First, this is a type of Christ's intercession for us. Second, it represents our intercession with Him. Real praying is more than words; it is more than calling on God. In order for our prayers to have power with God, they must first be indicted by the Holy Ghost, fanned into a state of Divine fervency, then caught up into all the all-prevailing intercessory current of the Spirit until they reach the very heart of God. There are what may be termed ordinary and extraordinary promptings of the spirit of prayer. There are times when the Spirit catches the believer up into the all-prevailing current of intercession, where the prayer seems to be drawn from him. Everything depends on times like this when these heavenly gales began to fan the soul. If the believer remains in this current of power, soon prayer is answered and a mighty victory is won which makes an epoch in his life.

These spices were fragrant and highly perfumed. The Holy Ghost brings to us the very fragrance of Heaven. As the smell is the keenest and most refined sense of the body, prayer is the deepest spirit of worship. It is while in prayer that our spirit touches the heavenly world and we breathe the very

atmosphere of Heaven, the odors of Paradise.

Prayer so quickens and illuminates the spiritual senses that the heavenly world becomes as real to the spirit as the physical world does to the outward bodily senses. Like the ascending incense, it is borne up to God on the breezes of Heaven as a sweet savor to Him.

These spices were very costly. It cost Christ the bloody sweat of Gethsemane. If we would enter the life of intercession with Him, we, too, must have our Gethsemane, follow Him to Calvary and die the self-life. Just as the veil that hid the holy of holies was never rent until Christ's flesh was rent; so there is a veil, which is the flesh, that keeps the believer out of the holy of holies and the life of deep intercession. As long as we pamper the flesh-life and yield to its soft pleadings, we will live on this side of the veil. Self-indulgence and a life of prayer never go together.

The Holy Ghost is seeking for vessels of prayer to pour His life current through and kindle revivals that will astonish hell and bring back the old-time power to the Church. The history of nations would read differently if some one had wept between the porch and the altar.

These spices had to be set on fire before they could rise in this cloud of sweet perfume. Thus it is that our prayers must be set on fire by the Holy Ghost if they are to prevail with God. Cold praying gets nowhere. Dead praying is just a little better than no praying at all. St. James tells us that the fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. This means burning, glowing, boiling hot. The word fervent is the same word which Peter uses when he speaks of the heavens melting away with fervent heat. A prayer like this, we are told by the Apostle, availeth much. How much? Anything contained in the promises of God, and anything that the child of God believes for. The world is yet to see what God can do through a man who fully believes Him.

This incense was not to be counterfeited. There are no substitutes for the Holy Ghost or for prayer life. The penalty of death was declared on the one who tried to counterfeit this holy incense.

Are we using the holy ministry as a mere profession and for commercial gain? Or, do we preach the truth and our God-given convictions regardless of high officials or men or devils? Whenever the Church loses the supernatural and the old-time power, it always tries to substitute something for that loss of power. What is culture and human learning without the Holy Ghost?

Popular evangelism, with its great union meetings, a mammoth choir, a handshake and a card-signing is being substituted for the mourner's bench and the cry and sob of a broken-hearted penitent. Thus it is that our churches are loaded down with dead, unsaved material.

Dr. A. B. Simpson, in his book, *Holy Spirit, or Power from on High*, says, "The sublime oratorio may lift your soul to raptures of delight, the perfect harmonies of the classic hymn may charm your cultivated taste, but this is not religious feeling. Nay, you may even bow beneath the magnificent arch of yonder cathedral, and in its religious light you may feel a kind of awe that you think is worship, but it is pure sentiment, and you can go down from all this to live for self and sin. It is mere psychology. It is only the kindling of the human mind. Thus, heathen idolatry rouses its votaries to interest, feeling and overpowering enthusiasm. Thus, poetry, art, music and eloquence in every age have charmed and filled the human mind. But it is but human feeling after all, and has nothing to do with the work of the Holy Ghost."

"There are counterfeits less glaring and daring: intellectual brilliancy, eloquence, pathos, often presume to imitate the operations of the Spirit, and produce the impressions which only He can bring."

Some try to make up for the loss of power with noise and demonstration. The ruin of deep spirituality is putting the fussy things ahead of the deep things of the Spirit. Others try to imitate the unction of the Holy Ghost by substituting their own selfish emotions. That peculiar "something" called unction can no more be imitated than a cold stone in the winter can throw off heat-rays. It must be kindled like the hot, boiling springs which throw out their water the year round. The ice and snow on the outside does not affect them, because they come from an internal fountain in the bowels of the earth. If we would speak loaded words, they must come from the Holy Ghost element in us, and not from the mere human.

Finally, the altar of incense was the highest object in the tabernacle, showing us that prayer is the highest thing in the Christian experience. It outranks preaching big sermons or cutting a figure in the ecclesiastical world. Prayer makes the preacher and puts life into his message. Prayer is the most powerful factor in the universe of God. It is more powerful than all the forces of nature, such as wind, lightning, storms, earthquakes, electricity, or the law of gravitation. We hear a great deal said about natural laws. Infidels and destructive higher critics tell us that natural laws govern this world, therefore there is nothing in prayer. But God is above all natural laws, and if we move the Arm that moves the world, He will suspend the laws of nature to answer prayer. Joshua prayed and arrested the sun in its course. The three Hebrew children prayed, and fire would not burn them. God will reverse every natural law in the universe, if necessary, in order to answer prayer.

If prayer will move God to do things, if He would not have done had we not prayed, then prayer is the most powerful thing in the world. It makes a holy character. It changes things. Jeremy Taylor graphically says, "Prayer can obtain everything; it can open Heaven and shut the gates of hell; it can put a holy constraint upon God, detain an angel until he leaves a blessing; it can open the treasures of rain and soften the iron-ribbed rocks until they melt into tears and a flowing river. These strange things and secret decrees and unrevealed transactions, which are above the clouds and far beyond the region of the stars, shall combine the ministry and advantages for the praying man."

Real prayer is immortal; it never dies. The Holy Ghost never inspires a prayer that He does not mean to answer. Prayer lives on after the lips which offered it are sealed in death.

A final picture of the altar of incense is found in Revelation 8:3-5: "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 the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne." This takes place after the saints are caught up in the rapture and God is pouring out His judgments on the wicked nations of earth.

Notice, the revelator says that in that censer were contained the "prayers of all the saints." Think of the prayers of the martyrs, the lonely missionaries, and the persecuted saints, whose cries went up to God! Where they were not answered in mercy, they are now being poured out in judgment.

O child of God, tested and tried, hold on; thy answer may be on the way!

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