**The Altar of Incense**

In chapter 30 of Exodus, God gave Aaron instructions for the last furnishings to be installed in the tabernacle and He required atonement money to be paid by each Israelite aged 20 or older. As with all other furnishings, God was very specific on how they were to be built. The chapter is divided into the following sections:

**The Altar of Incense:** This was an altar for the burning of fragrant incense, separate and smaller than the altar for burnt offerings. It was to be 18 inches by 18 inches and 3 feet high made of acacia wood overlaid with gold with a horn at each corner. It was to be placed before the ark of testimony in the tabernacle but separated from the ark by the curtain. Aaron was to burn incense every evening when the lamps were lit and every morning when they were extinguished. In verses 34-38 God gives detailed instructions on the composition of the incense. It was to be comprised of equal amounts of 4 spices which were extracted from tree resins. God told Moses that this mixture was the only incense to be burned on the altar and that its recipe was to be used only for the holy purpose of burning incense before God. God also prescribed an annual day of atonement when Aaron would purify the altar of incense with the blood of an animal sacrificed on the altar of burnt offering.

**Atonement Money:** God instructed Moses that when a census of the Israelites was taken that each person 20 years of age or older would be required to pay a ransom for his life. It would appear that this only applied to males. This payment was most likely: 1. collected for emergencies or each time the census was taken (David required a census but apparently no atonement money was collected); 2. annually on the Day of Atonement. This probably became known as the temple tax which was paid by Peter on behalf of himself and Jesus (see Matt. 17:24-27). The atonement money was to be used for the upkeep and maintenance of the tabernacle. Note that the payment for not proportional, the same amount was to be paid by rich and poor alike. God is no respecter of persons, the soul of a poor man is worth the same as that of a rich man. The payment is symbolic of the payment Jesus made to ransom us (See Matt. 20:28).

**Basin for Washing:** A basin was to be placed between the Tent of Meeting and the altar to be used by Aaron and his sons to wash their hands and feet before the entered the tent and before they offered any sacrifices. Matthew Henry wrote *“This was designed, (1.) To teach them purity in all their ministrations, and to possess them with a reverence of God’s holiness and a dread of the pollutions of sin. They must not only wash and be made clean when they were first consecrated, but they must wash and be kept clean whenever they went in to minister.”*

**Anointing Oil:** A hin of olive oil (about 1 gallon) was to be mixed with 4 different spices then used to anoint the tent and all the furnishings as well as Aaron and his sons. As the incense, God provided a specific recipe for the oil and forbade it to be used for any purpose other than anointing the tabernacle and the priests.

As we previously discussed, there is no record of an altar for burnt offerings or basin for washing in the heavenly tabernacle but there is an altar of incense. In Revelation 8:3 an angel with a golden censer offered incense which was mingled with the prayers of God’s people. Since incense is so closely associated with prayer, we should take notice of God’s instructions for offering incense. Just as the incense was to be used solely for His holy purpose, prayers are only for the saved (see Prov. 15:29, 21:13, 28:9 and 1st Pet. 3:12). While prayers have multiple purposes such as praise, thanksgiving, asking for forgiveness and intercession for others (see Matt. 6:9-13), the most important prayer is for salvation. Paul wrote on several occasions that we are to pray without ceasing. The incense was offered daily in the morning and evening by a priest who had washed his hands and feet reminding us that we need to prepare our hearts before we approach God. As a final note on prayer, I encourage you to study the book of James as he had much to say about prayer.