

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 21: The Altar of Incense and Tabernacle Service -- Exodus 30:1–31:18

Picture the dim, gold-lit interior of the holy place just before dawn. The thick curtains hold the morning out, and the only light comes from the lampstand burning steadily in the corner. A priest moves quietly toward a small golden altar standing right in front of the veil, behind which sits the ark and the mercy seat. He takes coals from the great altar of sacrifice in the courtyard, lays them on this little altar, and sprinkles a fragrant blend of spices over them. And then, slowly, a column of sweet smoke begins to rise, curling upward toward the ceiling, drifting toward the very presence of God. He does this every morning. He does it again every evening. Day after day, year after year, a fragrant cloud rises before the LORD and never quite stops.

We are standing at the heart of how God taught a people to come near to Him. Everything in Exodus 30 and 31 is about access. How do you, a creature of dust, approach the holy God who fills heaven and earth? You do not simply stroll in. You come the way He says to come. There is an altar where prayer rises like perfume. There is a ransom price that every single person must pay, the same for the rich man and the poor man. There is a basin of water where the priests must wash their hands and their feet, on pain of death, before they dare to serve. There is oil that sets things apart as holy, and incense so sacred that to copy it for ordinary use is to be cut off from the people. Every detail whispers the same truth: God is holy, and coming to Him is the most serious business in the world.

But do not miss the tenderness folded into all this carefulness. God is not building a wall to keep His people out. He is building a way to bring them in. He wants their prayers to rise to Him. He wants them cleansed so they can serve in His presence. He even reaches down and fills two ordinary men, Bezalel and Oholiab, with His Spirit, with skill in their hands, so they can craft the place where heaven and earth meet. And then He gives the Sabbath, a weekly sign of the covenant, a rhythm of rest woven into their days as a reminder of who made them and who keeps them holy. This is a God who cares about the details because He cares about the people in the details.

And here is what should make your heart beat faster as you read. Every shadow in these chapters has a substance, and the substance is Christ. The incense that rises is your prayer, made acceptable because a great High Priest carries it to the Father. The ransom is paid, not with silver, but with the precious blood of the Lamb. The washing you need has been given to you in Him. The rest the Sabbath only pointed to is the rest you can have right now in Jesus. So read these old, careful instructions not as a museum of forgotten ritual, but as a map drawn long ago of the way home that God has now opened wide for you in His Son. Let us walk it together.

Group Discussion: As you read through Exodus 30 and 31, what strikes you most about how seriously God treats the question of how His people approach Him, and what does that carefulness reveal about His character?

Personal Reflection: When you bow your head to pray, do you truly believe your words rise to God like fragrant incense, or have your prayers grown hurried and dull? Name one habit in your prayer life that needs to change this week.

Read Exodus 30:1–31:18

Study Questions

1. Read 30:1–10. God commands a golden altar where incense is burned before Him morning and evening, perpetually. How does the rest of Scripture connect this rising incense with the prayers of God's people, and what does this teach us about how God regards prayer?
2. Read 30:7–8. The priest tended this incense every morning and every evening, day after day, so that it never ceased. What does this steady, unbroken rhythm say to you about the place prayer ought to hold in your own daily life?
3. Read 30:11–16. Every person counted in the census, rich and poor alike, had to pay the same half shekel as a ransom for his life. What does this identical ransom price teach us about the worth of a human soul and the nature of the redemption every person needs?
4. Read 30:15 again. The rich could not give more and the poor could not give less; before God's ransom they stood on perfectly level ground. Where are you tempted to think your status, wealth, or accomplishments give you a better standing before God than someone else has?

5. Read 30:17–21. The priests had to wash their hands and feet at the bronze basin before serving, or they would die. What does this requirement teach us about the necessity of being cleansed before we can approach and serve a holy God?
6. Read 30:19–21 again. The priests needed daily washing even after they had been consecrated for service. In what ongoing ways do you sense the Lord calling you to let Him cleanse you as you walk with Him day by day?
7. Read 30:22–38. The anointing oil and the incense were holy, set apart for God alone, and no one was to imitate them or use them for common purposes on pain of being cut off. What does this teach us about how God regards the things He has made holy, and about the danger of cheapening or counterfeiting them?
8. Read 30:37–38. God said the sacred incense must never be made to enjoy its fragrance for yourself. Where in your life are you tempted to take something meant to be wholly God's and bend it instead toward your own comfort, reputation, or pleasure?
9. Read 31:12–17 with Hebrews 4:1–11 and Colossians 2:16–17. God gave Israel the Sabbath as a sign of His covenant with them under the old law. Why is the Sabbath not bound on Christians today, on what day does the New Testament church gather to worship, and what is the true rest the Sabbath was always pointing toward?

10. Read 31:1–11 and 31:18. God filled Bezalel and Oholiab with His Spirit and skill to build His dwelling, and He wrote His law on tablets of stone. Looking back across this whole passage, name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you, whether in your praying, your cleansing, your service, or your rest in Him.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 141:2, David asks that his prayer be set before God as incense and the lifting of his hands as the evening sacrifice; Revelation 5:8, the golden bowls full of incense are the prayers of the saints; Revelation 8:3–4, the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rises before God; 1 Peter 1:18–19, we were ransomed not with silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ; Hebrews 4:9–11, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, entered through Christ

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