



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Sacred Aroma

Reverend Scott Johnson | June 28, 2026 | Exodus 30:1-10, 34-38

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is from chapter 30, and the passages are two passages. First, verses one through 10, and then verses 34 through 38. So we'll read first verses one through 10, and then 34 and 38. And this is God's inspired and infallible and inerrant word.

So let's hear the word of God. Exodus 30 verses 1 through 10. You shall make an altar on which to burn incense. You shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it, you shall make them. And they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it every morning. When he dresses the lamps, he shall burn it. And when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it. A regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it or a burnt offering or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement, he shall make atonement for it once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord.

And then verse 34, to the end of the chapter, the Lord said to Moses, take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense. Of each shall there be an

equal part and make an incense blended as by the perfumer seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it very small and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you. And the incense that you shall make according to its composition you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.

New Testament Reading

And now let's turn to the New Testament for our New Testament reading. It's Revelation, chapter 8, verses 1 through 5. And this is part of what the Apostle John witnessed in his vision of the worship that was taking place in heaven. So Revelation, chapter 8, verses 1 through 5.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. You may turn back to Exodus chapter 30 for our sermon text this morning.

Introduction to the Altar of Incense

When I was in grade school, the house that we lived in, in the backyard, it had a couple of mint bushes. And from time to time when I was a kid, I would pluck off a leaf from the mint bush and I would hold it to my nose and I would breathe in the minty aroma. And to this day, anytime I smell fresh mint, it reminds me of that house in the backyard. And so it's one of my favorite smells. One of the pleasures that God has given us to enjoy in this world is the fragrance of pleasing aromas. Think of the smell of the air after a springtime shower. Think of the scent of your dad's face after he shaves, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, or how about the smell of barbecue on the grill? It's a gift of God that we can enjoy these pleasant aromas.

And God also created a holy aroma, a sacred fragrance, an aroma that was redolent of his own glory and greatness. And that is the incense that was burned in the tabernacle, in the holy tabernacle. And that is the subject of our passage this morning, the incense that was burned in the tabernacle and the altar that that incense was burned upon.

Just by way of reminder for us, we are considering the tabernacle, and we've gone over its basic structure, and if you remember, the tabernacle was divided into two rooms. There was the most holy place, that was the inner sanctum, and then adjacent to that was the holy place. And so in the most holy place, there was one piece of furniture or an item, and that was the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. And that was where the Lord dwelt. And so you could say his presence in the tabernacle was concentrated or focused there. He dwelt above the cherubim that were on the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. So that was the most holy place.

And then the room next to it was the holy place. And there were three items placed in that room. And we've already looked at two of those items. One was the table on which was placed the bread of the presence. And then opposite of that on the other side of the holy place was the golden lamp stand that contained or that had seven lamps attached to it. And then the third item that was placed in the holy place was the altar of incense. And that is what we are considering this morning on this altar. There was incense burned day and night. And like everything else in the tabernacle, the altar of incense communicated truths to the Israelites about God and about the salvation that he had worked for them and about the promises of God for his people.

And so today I want to consider the questions with you. What was the spiritual significance of the altar of incense and the incense that was burned on it? And what implications, what does this mean for us as believers today, as Christians? But before we consider those questions as we have been doing, as we've been going through the tabernacle, we'll consider the items themselves that are described for us in this passage. We'll take a closer look at the altar and the incense.

The Composition and Sacredness of the Incense

We'll begin with the incense. What was it exactly? God actually gives us a recipe for it at the end of the chapter, which we heard. It was made up of four spices, stacte, onycha, galbanum, and frankincense. As for the first three of these spices, biblical scholars aren't exactly sure what they were. Stacte and galbanum, they probably were resins derived from a certain kind of plant or

plants. Onycha may have been a powder that was made from the shells of mollusks that lived in the Red Sea. As for frankincense, we can be much more sure about that. We know more about frankincense. It is, it was, and is a spice derived from the resin of a tree called the Boswellia tree. And of course, we are all familiar with frankincense because that was one of the three gifts that the wise men, not the three wise men, but one of the three gifts that the three wise men brought to the baby Jesus.

And because we don't know for sure exactly what the spices were, we don't know what the incense smelled like, but since this was a recipe that God gave to the Israelites, it must have had a very pleasing aroma. For us in our day and age, we are familiar with incense, but most of us probably don't consider it something particularly desirable or valuable. If anything, incense may have a negative connotation for us. I have to be honest, when I smell incense, the first thing that comes to my mind is that somebody is burning it to mask the smell of something else that they are smoking, something that they are smoking, which is not tobacco. That's what I always think of when I smell incense. That's what I think that's going on. I know that's not always the case, but for some reason, that's what I think of.

But in the days of the Bible, incense was a highly prized commodity. It was often used in the worship of gods. And for that reason and for other reasons, it was considered very valuable, very desirable by people. For example, we know this is the case because the wise men from the East, they considered it worthy to be a gift to give to a king. And so frankincense was very prized, very valuable, and incense in general was.

But the most important characteristic of this incense was not how valuable it was, not what the ingredients were, not even how lovely a scent it may have given off, but the most important thing about this incense was that it was holy. It was sacred. And like everything else in the tabernacle, it was consecrated to the worship of God. And therefore, it was not to be used by the people for any common purpose. The Lord tells Moses in verse 37 and 38 that the Israelites were not to go home and make up this incense for themselves. If they did, they would be cut off from the people, which meant they would either be banished from the people or else they would be put to death. And so this was only to be used in the worship of the Lord. And so it was holy.

The Description and Placement of the Altar

And the altar on which it was burned was also holy. And so in verses one through five, Moses gives us a description of that altar. Like the other items in the tabernacle, it was made out of acacia wood. It was covered with pure gold. Picture it being about three feet tall, and it was a square about a foot and a half long, a foot and a half wide. And like the bronze altar that was out in the courtyard outside the tabernacle, this altar also had four horns that protruded from the top of it. And it also had rings for poles with which to carry it, because remember the tabernacle was portable, it was mobile. And so when the Lord led the people to a different place in the wilderness, the poles would be put into the altar and it would be moved along with all the other items in the tabernacle.

One of the most significant things about this altar of incense was where it was placed. And the wording in the text isn't super precise. However, the usual understanding was that this altar of incense was placed right up against the veil that separated the most holy place from the holy place. And so even though this altar of incense was in the holy place, nevertheless, it was very close to the most holy place. It was just across the veil from the Ark of the Covenant. And because it was so close to the most holy place, the smoke and the perfume of the incense it would permeate the entire tabernacle, the whole tabernacle, the most holy place, and the holy place would be filled with the smoke and the aroma of the incense that was burned there.

And keep that thought in your mind, because as we'll see, there is great theological significance to the fact of where the altar of incense was placed. And that aroma of God's holy incense would have filled the tabernacle at all times. The Lord in this passage, he commands Moses that the high priest was to burn the incense every morning when he went in to trim the lamps on the golden lamp stand, he was to burn it at night as well. And so the incense offering was offered twice daily. And so basically more or less the aroma of the incense would have permeated the tabernacle at all times, day and night. And so that's a little bit about the altar and the incense that is described for us.

The Spiritual Significance: Incense and Prayer

Now let's consider what is the meaning of the incense? Surely it served a greater purpose than simply to provide a pleasant aroma in the tabernacle, and indeed it did. However, if the Lord told Moses what the incense meant when the Lord gave Moses these words, he did not write them down for us. And so we can't tell from the passage itself what the significance of the incense was, and so many suggestions have been made.

One idea is that the smoke of the incense acted as a sort of protective cloud to shield the priest from the holiness of God, so that when he came close to the presence of God, when he approached the most holy place, the incense cloud would protect him from God's dangerous holiness. And that is true for at least one day of the year on the Day of Atonement. We learned from another place in the Bible, from Leviticus, that the cloud from the incense that was burned on the altar of incense, it would cover the mercy seat so that the priest would not be consumed by God or that he would not die in the presence of God when he went into the most holy place. So that was one purpose for the incense, at least on the Day of Atonement.

But there are many other passages in scripture that shed some light for us on what this incense was all about. For example, in Psalm 141, verse two, David says this. He says, let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. And so here you see the connection between incense and prayer.

And we see the same thing in the New Testament. In chapter one of Luke's gospel, we read about Zechariah, the priest of God, the man who would become the father of John the Baptist. When he went into the temple to burn incense, Luke tells us in chapter one, verse 10, the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And so here too, we see this connection between prayer and the incense that was burned in the tabernacle or the temple.

And this connection is made even clearer in Revelation. In chapter eight, the passage that we heard from our New Testament reading, the Apostle Paul, the Apostle John rather, he describes the scene that he sees when he is given a vision of heaven. Let me read to you again, verses three and four from Revelation eight. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

And so again, incense and prayer are joined together. And earlier in Revelation, in another passage in chapter 5, incense, this incense is actually equated with or identified with the prayers of God's people. Revelation 5, 8. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

And so the incense in the tabernacle, the incense later in the temple, it stood for, it represented the prayers of God's people as those prayers were lifted up on behalf of the people by their representative, who was the priest who would enter into the holy place to burn the incense, to pray to God, to worship God. The people's prayers were being lifted up by him on their behalf. And so the smoke of the incense it would drift into the most holy place. Remember that altar was right up against the veil, and so the smoke from the incense would permeate the holy place and the most holy place. And that incense smoke would go right up to the presence of the Lord. Literally, the smoke would come into the most holy place where the Lord was, and if we can speak of the Lord this way, He would smell the incense as a pleasing aroma.

But that was a picture of the prayers of the people of God. As they were being offered by the priest, they would be going up as the incense before the presence of the Lord and be received by him. And that is the meaning of the incense. In this very symbolic way, God was promising the people of Israel, your prayers, I will hear. Your prayers will go up to heaven. Just as the incense goes into the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle, so the Lord would hear the prayers of His people.

And there are two truths in particular that we can draw from this that apply to us as Christians today. First of all, God has given us the great privilege to pray to Him. And we'll consider what an amazing privilege this is that we can pray to God. And secondly, God has promised that he will hear our prayers.

The Privilege of Prayer: The Priesthood of All Believers

So first of all, God has given us the great privilege to pray to him. And so for the Israelites who had a true spiritual understanding of these things, he knew that through the ministry of the high priest, his prayers would go up to God. But that same Israelite would also always be conscious of the fact that he was never himself allowed to go into the presence of God. He was not, sure he could pray on his own, but it's not like he could enter into God's presence and lift up his prayers directly to the Lord in the way that the high priest could. The high priest went into the place where God dwelt. Once a year, he went even into the most holy place. Before the Ark of the Covenant, he was in the presence of God. But that was not true for the common Israelites. There was always a great distance between the common Israelites and the Lord. It was the priest who enjoyed this closeness with God. It was the priest who was given this incredible privilege to go into the presence of God and to pray to him on behalf of the people of God.

And that was true not only for the priest going into the tabernacle to pray, to worship, but the entire Old Testament system of the sacrifices of the priesthood. It was only the priests who were given the privilege to worship and to pray directly in the presence of God. As for the rest of the Israelites, they were kept apart from this intimate communion with the Lord. And so they depended upon the priest in order for their prayers to be brought up to the Lord through their priest.

Now this wasn't God's intention for his people for all times. In fact, even in Exodus, God gives us a hint that he is going to bring about something even greater than that, far greater than that. So back in Exodus chapter 19, verse six, the Lord promises to the people of Israel, you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And so it was God's intention, His design for His people, not that they would always be represented by this human priest who would pray for them and worship God for them in the presence of God, but that one day He would make the whole nation a nation of priests.

And of course, that came to fulfillment with the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, when He came into the world. He has brought this promise to fulfillment, and this is the glorious reality that is now true for you and me as those who belong to Jesus Christ. First Peter 2.9 says this, but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Peter says we are a royal priesthood. We are a royal priesthood. That status of being a priest before God, that is true for each and every one of us now, who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. And that is because of what Christ has done for you. Because of his saving work for you, you have been given all the honors, all the privileges that only the high priest enjoyed in the Old Testament. And so in Jesus Christ, you do not have a human priest upon whom you must depend to pray for you or to mediate that relationship that is yours with the Father in heaven. But you are united to Jesus Christ, and because you are united to Jesus Christ, you are a priest of God. You can go to your Father in heaven in Jesus' name and know that you come into his very presence, and you can pray to him directly through the name of Christ.

This is one of the great truths that were rediscovered and proclaimed by the reformers of the Protestant Reformation back in the 16th century. It is what they called the priesthood of all believers. Of course, they were coming out of a church context in which there were priests and

then there were the common people, and only the priest had special access to God. But the reformers said, no, as believers in Jesus Christ, every single Christian enjoys the very same access to God as even a priest does. And so we can go to the Father and pray to Him and worship Him in a way that the Israelites could not under the old covenant.

And this is because of what Jesus Christ has done for us when He came into the world. He came as our true priest, our great high priest. and He offered Himself upon the cross as a sacrifice that our sins might be forgiven, that that alienation between us and God was taken away so that we could be reconciled to God as our Father. And in doing so, Jesus abolished forever that old system of priests and sacrifices, and He has replaced it with His priestly ministry for us. And so because of this, because of Christ because you are in Christ united with him who is your priest, you have a kind of direct access through him in the presence of God that was unheard of in the days of the Old Testament.

And so Hebrews describes this privilege we have in this way, Hebrews 4.16, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. And so just as the high priest could draw near to God in the tabernacle, burn the incense, be in the presence of the Lord, so you and I can draw near to our Father in heaven with our prayers and worship. Ephesians 2.18, for through him, we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. We have access to the Father in Christ through the Spirit.

Overcoming Obstacles to a Faithful Prayer Life

Now, this is an amazing privilege that God has given to us. This is an amazing blessing that he has given to us in Christ. But the question I think we should ask ourselves is this, do we really take advantage of the privilege that we have to pray to God? Do we really make use of this blessing, this privilege that we have to come into the presence of God to unburden our hearts, to pray to Him, to praise Him? Think about it.

By faith in Jesus Christ, you can come into the presence of the Almighty God, who is the creator of heaven and earth, who rules in absolute sovereignty over all that he has made, who is the one who controls and reigns over all things, and you have the promise that when you come to him in Jesus Christ, that he receives you and that he hears your prayers. It's as though, it's not exactly like this, of course, but it's as though God just stops all of his activities as God, all of his sovereign work in upholding and sustaining and governing all of creation. It's as though he puts

it all to the side. It's as though he stops thinking all his infinite thoughts that are his as the one who is infinite in knowledge and wisdom, and he puts all that to the side, and he focuses his attention and his focus entirely on you. And he says, talk to me. I hear your prayers. He's not distracted. He's able to hear the prayers that you lift up to Him, even though He is God.

And so what an amazing privilege that God has given to us. But the real question, I think, is this. When we consider it that way, when we consider what we have in Christ and our access to God himself, to pray to him, why are we not more in prayer? Why are we not constantly in prayer? We have to be honest and say the reason we don't pray as much as we should is because there is still so much unbelief in our hearts. We don't truly, we believe it, but we don't truly act as though we believe it, that we can come to God at all times, at any time, and pray to Him and know that He hears us. We are far more secular-minded than we'd like to think.

And of course, we live in a day and age that makes the practice of prayer very challenging, very difficult. We are inundated with endless distractions. Of course, many of those distractions we bring upon ourselves. There are so many claims to our time. There are so many things that we have to do. There are so many things that we just want to do. And so as we allow ourselves to be immersed in all the activity, the noise, the busyness of our lives that fill up all of our time, we completely forget that the most profitable, the greatest, the most spiritually beneficial thing that we can do as Christians is to stop doing and to start praying.

But it's tragic that we don't. We have this infinite resource in God, and yet we so infrequently avail ourselves in prayer to Him. And what's just as tragic is that instead of using this, our privilege, to come to our Father in heaven, instead what do we do? When we are confronted with the challenges and difficulties of life, the uncertainties of life, we are overwhelmed with anxiety, we worry, we fret, we are nervous, we're fearful, But why should we be? Why should we be anxious and fearful when we can pray to the God who rules over all things? According to His infinite wisdom, according to His infinite love for us, who promises that He rules over all things for our good. So why should we worry?

And the Bible, in fact, tells us that the antidote to anxiety is prayer. Philippians 4, 6, and 7, do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And so one of the greatest gifts that God has

given to you in Christ is this blessing and privilege to pray. But how much does your own prayer life demonstrate that you truly treasure and value this privilege that God has given to you?

The Promise of Answered Prayer and the Sacrifice of Christ

God has given us also this, in addition to this privilege to pray to him, he has given us a wonderful promise, and that is that he hears our prayers. Notice that the altar, coming back now to Exodus 30, notice that the altar on which this incense was burned, it needed to be consecrated with the blood of a sacrifice. So let me read verse 10. This is Exodus 30, verse 10. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonement. He shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord.

So once a year on the day of atonement, the high priest, after sacrificing the sin offering, the goat, he would take some of the blood of that goat and he would put it on the horns of the altar of incense. And in that way, he would make atonement for it. That is, he would consecrate it so that it would be most holy to the Lord, so that it would be suitable for the worship of God. And so if the incense then that was burned on the altar, if it was consecrated by the blood of a sacrifice, and if the smoke of the incense stands for the prayers of the people of God, then there is a very important biblical truth illustrated for us here, and that is this, that our prayers must be consecrated or sanctified by a blood sacrifice.

Just as we cannot go to God in ourselves without a sacrifice to atone for our sins, without blood in order to atone for our sins, namely the blood of Jesus, so our prayers cannot go up to God apart from a sacrifice of atonement. In other words, our prayers must be sanctified in order to be received by God. And this is what Jesus does for us as our great high priest. He not only sanctifies you so that you may come into the presence of God, a holy God, but through His mediatorial work, He sanctifies your prayers so that your prayers are heard by your Father in heaven when you pray to Him in the name of Jesus.

And this is a truth that should be a great encouragement to each one of us. Because what it means is that God hears the prayers equally of every single one of his people, every single one of us who come to God in the name of Jesus Christ and pray to him. Those prayers are heard. It

doesn't matter how unskilled our prayers may be, how simple our prayers may be. It doesn't matter that our prayers are imperfect because they are coming from our hearts, which have imperfect desires and mixed motives. As a Christian, you can know that God hears you. He hears you for the sake of Jesus.

I'm sure you've had the experience when you've been with a mature Christian saint, a man or woman who has a great gift in praying, like in a prayer meeting, and their prayers are very reverent, devotional. They pray with great eloquence with scriptural language. There's hardly anything more edifying than hearing someone pray like that. It's almost as if you're being brought up into the presence of God through their prayers.

But at the same time, that can make us feel very inadequate when we think about our own prayers. Because in comparison, my prayers sound so basic, so simple, so ineloquent, unpolished, unskilled, but the encouragement that this passage gives us is that it doesn't matter how simple or how unpolished your prayers may be, God hears them. He hears them because of the sacrifice of Christ. God doesn't only hear the prayers that are eloquent and saturated with scripture language, but he hears the prayers of each one of his people who ask him for their desires in the name of Christ. And so you can know that God hears your prayers when you lift them up in the name of your Savior, even if they are stammering prayers, halting prayers, even if it's just the groaning of your spirits when there are times when you don't even know how to formulate your prayers into words.

The Prayer for Mercy and Eternal Salvation

Think of the tax collector in the parable that Jesus taught. This tax collector, perhaps he never prayed. He didn't know how to pray. But as he stood in the temple, he was struck, his conscience was struck that he was a great sinner, that he needed God's grace and mercy. And so the words just came out from his heart through his mouth. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. What a simple prayer that was. And yet that was a prayer that brought that tax collector eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and it was all because of the grace and the mercy of Christ, because he lifted that prayer up to the Father, and the Father heard him for the sake of Christ.

And one question I want to ask you this morning is have you prayed that same prayer of the tax collector? Have you called out to God for his mercy that your sins may be forgiven, that you may receive the gift of eternal life. Have you made that prayer? God, be merciful to me, a sinner. If

not, then this is the first prayer that you must pray. And God promises that he will answer that prayer, no matter who prays it, no matter how bad their sins may have been, no matter how far from God they may have been, When anyone comes to the Lord and prays by faith in Jesus Christ, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, God hears that prayer and answers with life, salvation, forgiveness.

Romans 10, 13, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And if you have received that gift of salvation, know that with that gift, God has given you another gift, the gift of prayer. And he promises that for the sake of his son, Jesus Christ, he will hear your prayers. And he will answer your prayers. He will answer your prayers, perhaps not in exact conformity to what you want, but he will answer your prayers according to that which will be for your eternal good, your eternal blessedness. And he will answer your prayers for that which will bring him the greatest glory. And so God has given us this amazing privilege that we can pray to him and he promises in Jesus Christ to hear us.

Let's go to the Lord now in prayer.