

THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

Let's play a word association game. I will say a word and you say the first thing that pops into your head when you hear that word. Apple – Car – Husband – Donut – God ... What came into your mind when you heard the word GOD? AW Tozer once wrote that "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." We were created by God to worship him.

What is worship? The word comes from the original English word "worth-ship". It is placing worth or value on someone or something. A good way to define worship is "recognizing and ascribing to God His worth".

The fifth piece of furniture in the Tabernacle was the Altar of Incense. It was located just in front of the curtain which lead into the Holy of Holies. Incense was continually burned on the altar so that the tent was always filled with its fragrance.

Ex 30:1 "Make an altar of acacia wood for burning incense. 2 It is to be square, a cubit long and a cubit wide, and two cubits high--its horns of one piece with it.

In the church today the fragrance that we offer to the Lord is our prayers and worship.

John 12:1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

What Mary did here was an act of worship. She took what she had and in an act of unselfish love poured it out as an expression of thanks to Jesus. The result was that the house was filled with the fragrance (or evidence) of the act. Like Mary we bring our sacrifices of praise and worship out of thankful hearts to God and seek to bless Him and lift Him up.

We see in Revelations that incense is referred to as the prayers of the saints. The context in which the incense was offered was worship.

Rev 5:6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 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. 9 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

The heart of worship is that we offer ourselves to the Lord; heart, soul, mind and strength. We exist because, out of the overflow of love in the heart of God, we were created as objects of His love. Our primary purpose as created beings is to learn to love God back. This is what worship is. Worship is knowing God and learning to love God back. It is offering ourselves to Him. What happens when we worship?

Worship is a stairway on which there is movement in two directions: God comes to man, and man goes to God. -- Daniel Baumann

1. We are TRANSPORTED into God's Presence –

Psa 22:3 But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel

What does it mean that God inhabits the praises of His people? It means that when we worship it draws us into God's presence in a real and tangible way. In every picture of heaven we are given in the Bible we see worship taking place. Heaven is a place of worship. When we worship the Lord the separation between heaven and earth is parted and we get a taste or peek at what heaven is like.

The first 2 articles of furniture (the Brazen Altar and Wash Basin) were for our cleansing. The second 2 articles of furniture (the Table of Shewbread and Candlestick) were for our empowerment. The last 2 represent our intimacy and fellowship with God. The Altar of Incense and the Ark go together:

Heb 9:2 A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lamp stand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, 4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. 5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

Worship wets our appetite for the time when we will be with Jesus forever. Have you ever gone to an ice cream store where they offer you a free taste before you decide what you want to get? We did that often at Baskin Robbins in Kuwait. They give you a little taste so you will buy a lot. Have you ever seen a trailer to a movie that you were excited to see. The trailer is not the movie, just a sneak peek of what you can expect. As we worship the heavens open and we find ourselves in the presence of God.

I've experienced God's presence most powerfully in worship, often during the singing, I suppose because when we sing to him, we are looking hard in his direction. -- J.I. Packer

2. We are TRANSFORMED by God's Power –

As we come into God's presence in worship and line up with Him then He is able to shape and mould us. It was at the Altar of Incense beside the curtain leading into the Holy of Holies that the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah and told him that he would have a son. Likewise God speaks to His children in worship today. When Moses was in the presence of God his face was changed. He had to wear a veil to keep from scaring the people. God wants us to reflect His glory.

2 Corinthians 3:13 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. 14 But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. 15 Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. 16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

William Temple defines worship in this way: “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

I can think of many times in my own life when this was true. When I have gone through tough times I have found myself singing old songs I learned when I was just a kid. In the singing of those songs I felt the Lord’s presence and then found that my heart was comforted and my spirits were lifted.

Music is powerful. Have you ever caught yourself singing a TV commercial? The tune just gets in your head – and with it the product it is selling! That is one reason why I do not listen to secular music. It can be amazing music with a catchy beat. If you disagree with the message you should not listen to the music that conveys that message because the two cannot be separated.

A song can often touch people in a way that a sermon can't. Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart. - Rick Warren

In worship God not only talks to us but His power is stirred up within us causing change. When King Saul met the prophets he was changed so that others asked “Who is this?” When Moses met with God his face was changed. When Jesus went to the Mount of Transfiguration His whole nature was transformed. He came down from the mountain ready to move in power.

e.g. Student Missions advance.

3. We are TRANSFIXED by God’s Glory –

When we worship our attention shifts from our own personal issues and problems and we become engrossed with God. Worship is not about us. It is outward directed. It is something that is reserved completely for God because only He is worthy of receiving it. We do not worship for our benefit. The focus is not what we get out of it but what we might give.

Ex 30:37 Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD.
38 Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people."

Worship is reserved for God only. He must be first in every area of our lives. When we misplace that adoration and give it to other things in our lives than we will suffer.

Gordon Dahl wrote “Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair, and their life-styles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot.”

What is it that you worship? We read in the Bible that we are not to bow down to idols, but that doesn’t just mean the ones we have made out of wood. For some of us our idol may be a person or relationship which we have placed before God. I have met Christians who are dating a non-Christian because they “love” them. They know it is destroying their faith and they should end it but they place their relationship with that person before their relationship with Christ. That is idolatry.

For some people their idol may be a possession or thing. Do you have anything in your life which, if God asked you for it, you would not give? If so then you have placed that object before God and it has become an idol in your life. E.g. giving the kids to God before going into missions.

God is so much greater than any man made substitute. There is nothing like the experience of true worship. It is life giving and life changing. It fuels our hunger and passion for God.

Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God; it whets our appetite. -- Eugene H. Peterson

One of the great things about worship is that you don't have to be a great singer or play an instrument to do it. There was a specific formula for making the incense that was used in the tabernacle. There is really no specific formula for worship. It is as individual as the person who offers it. Worship is not so much about what you offer as the heart in which you offer it. Attitude is everything.

Maybe you have heard the story of the little boy who was playing baseball by himself in the back yard. Of course this amounted to tossing a ball into the air and attempting to hit it with his bat. As he did so he proclaimed to no one in particular, "I'm the greatest hitter in the world!" Unfortunately, he missed the ball and, since he was the umpire too, regretfully announced, "Strike one." Undaunted the little fellow picked up the ball, threw it back into the air and said, "I'm the greatest baseball hitter ever!" With even greater intensity he swung the bat but all he caught was air for his efforts. "Strike two," he said. The boy paused a moment, examined the bat and ball carefully, and then for a third time threw the ball into the air. "I'm the greatest hitter in the history of baseball," he said. This time he swung for all he was worth, but just like the other two attempts, he missed. "Strike three," he mumbled. Then the boy sat for a moment considering what had just happened. After a minute or so, he turned to his parents and much to their surprise said, "Wow, I just struck out the greatest hitter in the world! I must be the greatest pitcher of all time."

Attitude really matters, doesn't it? It can make the difference between a good day and a bad day, a good marriage and a bad marriage, perhaps even a good life and a bad life. Chuck Swindoll says, "Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it."

The legend is told of a desert wanderer who found a crystal spring of unsurpassed freshness. The water was so pure he decided to bring some to his king. Barely satisfying his own thirst, he filled a leather bottle with the clear liquid and carried it many days beneath the desert sun before he reached the palace. When he finally laid his offering at the feet of his sovereign, the water had become stale and rank due to the old container in which it had been stored. But the king would not let his faithful subject even imagine that it was unfit for use. He tasted it with expressions of gratitude and delight, and sent away the loyal heart filled with gladness. After he had gone, others sampled it and expressed their surprise that the king had even pretended to enjoy it. "Ah!" said he, "it was not the water he tasted, but the love that prompted the offering."

So what have you brought to the King of Kings this morning? What have you offered up to him?