

The Altar of Incense

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When we consider **the Day of Atonement ritual**, we usually we focus on the two goats. One goat is killed as a sin offering, representing the sacrifice of Christ. The other is banished to the wilderness, representing Satan. But there is another part of the ritual which is also important. **The Altar of Incense** plays a critical role in the Day of Atonement ritual. **The incense on the altar represents the prayers of God's people**, and the incense plays a critical role in Aaron's going into the Most Holy Place to be in the presence of God.

The Presence of God: Picture in your mind the Tabernacle Tent: two rooms, first **the Holy Place**, at the back **the Most Holy Place**. The Most Holy Place contains only the **Ark of the Covenant**, with the "mercy seat" on top of it, the כַּפֹּרֶת - kapporeth. From above the kapporeth, the glory of God emanates. The Most Holy Place and the Holy Place are separated by a very beautiful curtain or veil. The Holy Place has several items in it, most importantly the **Altar of Incense** – right in the middle just before the veil in line with the Ark and the kapporeth. The priests went into the Holy Place several times a day, but only the High Priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. **The veil represented restricted access to God**. The Altar of Incense was as close as any human being could get to God – except for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (Ex30:1a,3a,6-10, Lv16:3,5,15-19)

The symbolism: burnt offering: total commitment to serve God; sin offering: atonement for sinning nature. The offerings **allow God to account a person "holy" so that the person can be in God's presence** – a burnt offering must be preceded by a sin offering. Under the Old Covenant, animal blood provided "atonement" (Lv17:11, Hb9:22). Under the New Covenant, **the blood of Christ provides atonement** (Hb9:11-15). The blood of the "sin" offering (Lv16:15) for the people is symbolic of Christ's blood for all people – the "blood" is presented before the "mercy seat" for acceptance by God. **Atonement is made for the "Holy Place"** (but NOT the Most Holy Place), the **"tent of meeting"**, and **"all the assembly of Israel"** – "because of the uncleanness of the people" and the Tabernacle is "in the midst of their uncleanness", so it is rendered "unclean": human nature is inherently sinful, to come into the presence of God we must repent and have blood applied to render "atonement" (Lv16:16-17). Then finally, **atonement is made for the Altar of Incense** (Lv16:18-19) – why is it singled out?

The Role of Incense: The **incense for the Altar of Incense was very special** (Ex30:34-38) – it played a critical role in the Day of Atonement ritual (Lv16:11-13). **The proper application of the incense was required to prevent Aaron's death** – Aaron had just learned a bitter lesson about doing things right with the death of his two sons (see Leviticus chapter 10). **Incense represents prayer** (Ps141:1-3). **Prayer is the basis of our relationship with God**. It requires prayer to repent. It requires prayer to be in contact with God. It requires prayer to understand the Bible by which God communicates with us through the Holy Spirit. **This is why we "fast" on the Day of Atonement – to get closer to God, to improve our relationship with God**. Jesus' death obviated the whole sacrificial system, but he himself made an offering of prayer (Hb5:7) – several of Jesus' prayers are recorded by the gospel authors. At Jesus' death, the veil of the Temple was torn in half (Mk15:38, Mt27:51, Lk23:45), which symbolized the fact that **any person who has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can now go past the Altar of Incense directly to the Throne of God in prayer** (Hb4:14,16, 10:12-14).

The Importance of Prayer: The Book of Revelation gives us a clear picture of where this world is soon headed, and it gives a clear perspective of our end-time role: **our prayers are critical**. There is an actual Altar of Incense, "the golden altar", in the Throne Room of God in eternity (Rv4:2, 9:13, 14:17-18a). The action of the Book of Revelation centers around the Throne Room where **the "prayers of the saints" come before God** (Rv5:1,6,8, 8:1-5). The seventh seal commences the seven trumpets, so we are getting very close to the end, and **God prophesizes the need for prayers from the saints**.

The Altar of Incense plays a critical role in the Day of Atonement ritual. Burning the incense from the altar in the Most Holy Place was critical to Aaron's life. Similarly, **our prayers are critical to our lives as Christians** – human beings are inherently sinful. The Tabernacle and its accoutrements were rendered unclean by human contact. The Day of Atonement ritual allowed God to account the Tabernacle and the people "holy". **Christ's sacrifice**, foreshadowed by the Day of Atonement ritual, obviates all sacrifices and **allows God to account Christians "holy"**. Our prayers are the basis of our being in God's presence, our relationship with God. **God prophesizes the need for the prayers of the saints to be on that altar at the end-time**. **We must fulfill this prophecy**.