

THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

“ they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” (Rev 5:8)

During the Age of the Patriarchs the oldest male member of the family was the priest of the family. That’s why Esau is described as “godless” because he sold this privilege of the priesthood for a mess of pottage (Heb. 12:16). During the Age of Moses the right to be a priest was transferred from the firstborn to sons in Aaron in the Tribe of Levi (Nu. 8:15 - 19).

As you know, under the Law the Hebrews were not permitted to make sacrifices to God anywhere they wanted to. They were required by God to bring their offerings to the priests. The blood of the animals was to be shed at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 17:6). In addition to individual offerings, there were regular offerings of a lamb each morning and each evening. These regular offerings were doubled on the Sabbath day. In addition to this there were a great number of animals sacrificed at the New Moons, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Suffice it to say a lot of blood was shed at the Tabernacle. The priests were also responsible for taking care of the hides, meat, and “inner parts” of the sacrificial victims.

At the risk of sounding indiscrete, there must have been a very strong smell at the Tabernacle. Remarkably, this odor is repeatedly described as an “aroma pleasing to the Lord” (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 2:9, 12; etc.) Yet, when the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies, he was required to take with him a censer full of burning coals sweetened by two handfuls of fragrant incense (Lev. 16:12 - 13). If he did not do this he would die!

There were two altars in the Tabernacle. The first was 5 cubits square and 3 cubits high and situated in the eastern part of the court. It was the first major feature visible to those approaching the Tabernacle. The second altar was smaller (1 x 1 x 2 cubits) and was placed before the curtain to the Holy of Holies. It was therefore associated with approaching the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Not only was Aaron commanded to take incense with him into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he was also commanded to place fragrant incense on that altar every morning and every night (Ex. 30:7 - 8).

This fragrant incense before God is said to be the “prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8; 8:3, 4; etc.). Please ponder the significance of this association!

Fragrant incense is used to cover over and hide a bad smell. It was used for this reason in Bible times, and it is still used for the same reason today. That’s why many people put sweet smelling air fresheners in their bath rooms. That’s why Nicodemus wrapped the Body of Jesus with linen and 75 lbs. of spices (John 19:39 - 40). John reminds us that this in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

But now, let us return to the beautiful symbolism of the Tabernacle and Temple. Just as the sweet smelling incense covered the stench of death in the days of animal sacrifices, the prayers of the saints also cover the stench of death in the church!

Peter reminds us that we are a Royal Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). It is certainly appropriate for our prayers to rise to God like sweet smelling incense. We cannot do this on our own, it is the Spirit of Jesus within us that enables us to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute us. When our enemy hungers, it is Jesus who empowers us to feed him. When our enemy is thirsty, it is Jesus who empowers us to give him something to eat. The devil is the accuser of the brethren, but we, like Christ, are advocates for their acquittal. Someone quipped that Noah could not have endured the stench within the ark, if it had not been for the storm outside of it. Yes! The ark was a type of the church. And yes, sometimes there is a terrible stench within the church. That’s why our prayers are so important! We do not pray prayers of condemnation, but join with Christ in His ministry of forgiveness and intercession. That’s why our prayers arise like a sweet smelling savor in the presence of God. James said it like this: **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16)** May our prayers be like sweet smelling incense!