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Incense with the Prayers of the Saints

"And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand." — Revelation 8:3–4

Summary:

The angel at the golden altar represents Christ, the great High Priest, whose sacrifice and intercession render his people's prayers acceptable to God. The passage sets out four truths. Believers are saints, renewed and consecrated by the Spirit. All saints pray, for communion with God is essential to spiritual life. Yet their worship is imperfect, marked by wandering thoughts, cold affections, and remaining sin. Their hope rests not in the worthiness of their prayers but in Christ, whose blood pleads for pardon and whose intercession always prevails. This combines humility with confidence, enabling believers to approach God, and even death, relying on Christ's righteousness alone.

Outline:

1. **Christ is the great High Priest**
    - His sacrifice and intercession fulfil the incense offered at the altar.
2. **All believers are saints**
    - The Spirit renews and consecrates them to God.
3. **All saints are people of prayer**
    - Prayer is essential to spiritual life and is practised habitually.
4. **Their worship remains imperfect**
    - Sincere devotion is weakened by distraction, coldness, unbelief, and sin.
5. **Christ makes their prayers acceptable**
    - His blood pleads for pardon, and his righteousness gives confident access to God.

Text

The ablest expositors identify this angel as the Lord Jesus. The Jewish temple had two altars, but this passage refers not to the burnt-offering altar in the inner court, but to the golden altar in the holy of holies. After sacrificing the victim and sprinkling its blood, the high priest burned incense there while the people prayed outside. He cast rich perfume onto burning coals in a small censer, and its sweet fragrance rose to God, enthroned above the mercy-seat between the cherubim.

This foreshadowed Christ, our High Priest: having put away sin through his sacrifice, he entered the holy place with his own blood, not the blood of bulls and goats, to intercede for his people as they pray in this lower world. Four things are observable.

First, his people are saints—a name used throughout Scripture, not just for a few extraordinary figures. Though we call the Lord's immediate disciples Saint Matthew and Saint John, the Apostle addresses several Epistles "to the saints that are in Christ Jesus," meaning the whole Church. Thus, all true Christians are saints, called to holiness. Holiness is both the *purpose* and *natural outcome* of their principles and privileges when rightly understood. The Spirit of grace and truth makes them holy by renewing their nature and consecrating all they are and have to God's service and glory.

Secondly, all saints are people of prayer: "The prayers of all saints." They seek God, for every godly person calls upon him. The Spirit of grace inspires supplication; prayer is as essential to spiritual life as breathing is to natural life. Religion without devotion is empty. The wicked restrain prayer; hypocrites do not persist in calling on God; and formalists complain, "What a weariness it is to serve him!" How is it with us? Do we live without God, pray only from fear or affliction, or treat duty as drudgery rather than privilege? Saints pray—in the temple, with family, alone, and throughout life—and find joy in drawing near to God.

Thirdly, their services are imperfect. Hence we read of "much incense offered with the prayers of all saints." Though this book often mentions angels' worship, it never speaks of a mediator or incense for them. Nor was this true of Adam and Eve in Paradise. But we are fallen and vile: "We are vile; what shall we answer him?" We pollute all we touch. Our Sabbaths and weekdays would condemn us; our good works merit rejection, not reward. Our repentance needs repentance, and our tears need tears.

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Even after doing all, we remain unprofitable servants. The countless sins in our holy things compel us to pray, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord; for in thy sight shall no flesh living be justified."

Can this be prayer—worship of him who is Spirit, in spirit and truth? How wandering my thoughts, distracted my mind, cold my affections, and lacking in fervency and faith! How can I offer this to the only wise and holy God? If I see so much defect and defilement in my services and am dissatisfied with them, how must they appear to him who charges his angels with folly, sees the heavens as unclean, and finds more depravity in our duties than we see in our sins?

Fourthly, Israel has hope in this matter and relief through the Mediator between God and man. "And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand." We need not ask whether his intercession is vocal; Scripture does not say whether the high priest spoke at the golden altar. We know, however, that his intercession is real, grounded in his suffering and death—an offering and sacrifice to God, a sweet-smelling savour. Thus, his blood speaks better things than Abel's: not revenge, but pardon.

"Be merciful to their unrighteousness. I have borne their grief and carried their sorrow. I have magnified the law and redeemed them from the curse. Keep, through thine own Name, those whom thou hast given me. Sanctify them through thy truth. Let them be with me where I am, to behold my glory." These are the pleadings of one infinitely worthy. We are assured of the result: the Father always hears him.

This comforts us; he is Israel's consolation. If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins. Loving him, we cannot abuse this encouragement; instead, let it give us boldness and confident access through faith in him. Let us join hope with humility, rejoicing in Christ Jesus while placing no confidence in the flesh. As we approach death and the Eternal's presence, let us say, "I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of his righteousness only."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, Morning and Evening Exercises (January 28, Evening), first published in 1854.