

Chosen To Pray

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Preacher: Rev David Andrew

[0 : 00] There are free copies of Sword Magazine at the very front.

Hold on, I'm being signalled to. I've got my microphone on. Okay. Great, thank you. There are copies of Sword Magazine at the front.

They're free. You would normally pay about £30 a year for this, but we provide them free because this is my home church. So we're glad for folks to enjoy the writing that's in here.

I've got an amazing team of writers, and its sole purpose really is just to build up the confidence of God's people that they can actually trust His Word because it's reliable.

On every page, it's reliable. And that's what the magazine exists to do, just to help us all be completely and utterly assured that we can lift the Bible with confidence.

[1 : 07] Okay. We're still in Exodus, and if you thought the furnishing of the tabernacle was over, you were mistaken, because there's a new piece of furniture popping up today where we least expect it.

This is Exodus chapter 30. We're reading only the first ten verses today, so no marathon like our pastor had last week.

But I'm going to start just a wee bit further back. The Lord was giving instructions to Moses about the lambs that were to be offered in sacrifice in the morning and evening of every day.

And at verse 41 of chapter 29, we read this. The other lamb you shall offer at twilight and shall offer it with a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord.

It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you to speak to you there.

[2 : 25] There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar.

Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them.

I am the Lord their God. 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, you shall make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it.

[3 : 36] 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 in the year throughout your generations.

It is most holy to the Lord. Well, folks, I wonder if you noticed a recurring word, a recurring piece of vocabulary.

[4 : 45] Anybody any idea where it would be? Just shout it out if you know. It's the word meeting. It's the word meeting. You'll read that word several times in the short passage that we read.

God is preoccupied in this passage with the prospect of meeting with his people. Bear in mind that the tabernacle's other name that God gave it is the tent of meeting.

So, what are we looking at here? We're talking about a God who has no intentions whatsoever of being remote from his people. This is a God who wants to meet with those who trust him.

He says he wants to dwell among them. And in the midst of all that, he says, you shall make an altar on which to burn incense.

You shall make it of acacia wood. Acacia wood is super hard. It's very, very close-grained, and insects don't like the time they waste trying to burrow into it.

[5 : 53] So, it's a very secure wood, a very long-lasting hard wood. And here we have all these things are little shadows of something that we enjoy because of Jesus.

this is an altar for prayer. Now, it doesn't say so here. So, am I taking liberties with the text? No, not really.

Because if you put this into the context of the whole of Scripture, you find constantly that wherever incense is mentioned, prayer is mentioned in the same breath. Okay?

So, we'll come back to that in a moment. But here, God is making an altar for the burning of incense, and it's quite a small thing, really.

It was only about three feet high and about a foot and a half square. But there are fascinating things about it because this altar was to be made completely.

[6 : 55] It was to be overlaid with solid, pure gold. Everything in this sanctuary, in this holy place, was to be overlaid with gold.

And why would that? Because it signaled to anyone who went in that this was the chambers of the king. Royalty expected gold to be everywhere.

It was a sign of their greatness. So, people expected gold wherever they were going to meet with a king. And this altar is to be covered in pure gold from top to bottom.

It has to be a gold molding round about the top square of it. It has horns. The horns signify strength in Hebrew culture. In the ancient East, the horns were symbols of strength.

And this is God giving them an altar. And you wonder, you think to yourself, wait a minute, hold on. He specifically says here that they are not to offer a burnt offering on it.

[8 : 01] They're not to offer a grain offering, which would be burned up. And they're not to pour a drink offering on it. So, why call it an altar? Does it not seem strange to call it an altar?

But if you think about it, when you read the description a few weeks ago about the brazen altar upon which all the sacrifices are made out in the courtyard, this is almost like it's in the same pattern, only in miniature.

And the horns around the big brazen altar are there on the little altar, on this. Right? Now, think about this.

The synchronization here is astonishing because they're to burn the incense when the lamps are being lit, when the lamps are being dressed, as it were, morning and evening.

So, that's twice a day they reset the lamps to give illumination into the tabernacle. And when those lamps are being lit, the sacrifices are being offered outside on the brazen altar at that very time.

[9 : 14] And at that very moment, the priest is to come in and he's to burn incense on this little altar that we read about today. So, the offering of incense synchronizes perfectly with the worship by sacrifice outside.

But I think maybe we'll get a better idea of just how this altar was understood by people in those days. If we look at a story from Dr. Luke in chapter 1 of Acts.

I'm trying to watch the time here. We have a lot to cover. But in chapter 1 of Acts, we read this.

Right. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the doctors of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth and they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. Now, while he was serving as a priest before God, when his division was in duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

[10 : 42] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.

[11 : 50] And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. And I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place because you did not believe my words which won't be fulfilled in their time.

And sure enough, on the eighth day when they wanted to circumcise the child and give him his name, Zechariah was suddenly able to speak because he agreed with the angel that his son's name was to be John.

So he had to learn a lesson the hard way. But the fact of the matter is we need to try and get inside what was going on in Zechariah when he went up to the temple.

There were about 8,000 priests at work scattered through Israel in those days all performing various duties in the community. And occasionally it would fall to their division to actually go up to Jerusalem and minister in the temple.

[13 : 00] And when their division ministered in the temple they would have to cast lots to see who the priest would be who would burn incense at the correct hour. Now that doesn't sound really very religious or pious, does it?

Casting lots is like throwing dice and turning the service of God into a game of chance. So it's just anybody's guess who's going to be there. But you know Solomon actually says to us in the Proverbs that it's not actually a game of chance when they did that.

They weren't being irreverent. They weren't being casual. He said the lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord.

Now that's an important principle for us to get a hold of because before the Holy Spirit came that was the primary means of finding the mind and the will of God.

If you have a completely secure understanding of the sovereignty of God who rules in all the affairs of men if you're secure in that understanding that God is sovereign then when you cast those lots you're not leaving everything to chance.

[14 : 18] You're basically saying Lord the outcome of this is going to be your will. The apostles even believed that before the Holy Spirit came. They had to choose a successor for Judas and what did they do?

They cast lots. So Zechariah knows this as he's going up to the temple to burn the incense he knows that he has been chosen not by lot but by the living God.

God has signaled to this old man he said to this man I want you not some other priest today you're the man who's going to burn the incense you're the man who's going to stand in solidarity with the worshipers outside and the sacrifices outside I want you in this position today I have chosen you to pray.

Zechariah knew that he was very clear the lots were cast for two other priests as well because there were always three priests who had to do this particular duty the first one had to take away the ashes from the previous service the second priest had to bring in hot coals from the brazen altar in the courtyard and put them into the altar of incense and when they had done their duties the altar was then ready for Zechariah to come along and take a handful of incense and cast it on the fire so that this fragrant unique aroma because the incense was unique they were not allowed to put any old incense on it God gave them a specific recipe for this incense and it was an unforgivable offence to use any other incense on this altar sadly the whole priesthood had got off to a really bad start in the time of

Moses because in the time of Moses two priests who were the first born sons the oldest sons of Aaron the high priest they got a bit frivolous about the whole thing there's even a hint in the text in Exodus earlier on that they actually got drunk but for whatever reason they were frivolous and they offered unauthorized incense and they thought they could be a lot more casual a lot more easy going about approaching Yahweh and they were struck dead they were struck dead on the spot and that might be troubling to us but you need to bear in mind that God had prescribed precisely how he could be approached and when God prescribes we are fools if we ignore his prescription because his prescription is never for his own sake it's always for our sake he prescribes because he's a God of love and he knows that left to ourselves we'll never approach him the right way we'll never have the respect he knows we'll be frivolous he knows we'll be familiar and cozy and all the things we shouldn't be in the presence of a holy

[17:37] God so these two men they were struck down they didn't follow God's prescription and that's how the priesthood in Israel started that's a folk event that basically was carried in the understanding and the awareness of the priesthood right down through the generations so by the time Zechariah is going up to offer incense on the altar and go into the holy place he must have been on a cliff edge he must have been exhilarated to the point where he was saying oh I can't wait to tell Elizabeth about all this because this was a huge honor to be the one to burn the incense on the table this was a huge honor most priests in their entire lifetime never got the opportunity most of them never got the opportunity so Zechariah had been singled out by the living God to go and offer incense in this altar and he got the chance when nobody else did but in the midst of his exhilaration there's this background sense of awe and high drama

I mean he's kind of caught somewhere between I can't wait to tell Elizabeth and will I live to tell her that's where he's stuck and so here he is he's going up to the temple with this strange mixture of exhilaration and dread upon him and he goes in to offer the incense and the last thing you need when you're hanging between exhilaration and dread is an appearance of an archangel okay not that it's ever happened to me but I am presuming that would be the case but here's Gabriel and Gabriel is God's messenger this is the same Gabriel who had visited Daniel 500 years previously this is the same Gabriel who in six months time would go to a virgin in the town of Nazareth and tell her that she was going to have a baby by God himself so Gabriel turns up and there's there's

Zechariah and he must have been ready to collapse with a heart attack or a stroke or something and the angel's first word to him is don't be afraid Zechariah your prayer has been heard your wife is going to have a son what does that mean does that mean that Zechariah was using this precious time in the temple with all these worshippers outside was he using it to pray for a baby it's highly improbable highly improbable because he was so incredulous when the angel said to him you're going to have a son he was so incredulous he clearly wasn't expecting that they were going to have a baby anymore they were long past that stage in their lives so what did the angel mean your prayer has been heard well I don't know how many of you are familiar with the writings of Alexander McLaren he's a wonderful wonderful

Bible teacher of former generations 19th century and this is what he said if I can just find this I knew I should have marked this part right here we are Alexander McLaren said this about this passage he said it has often been thought that Zechariah had been praying for offspring while he was burning incense but the narrative does not say so and besides the fact that he had ceased to hope for children as is shown by his incredulity surely it casts a slur on his religious character to suppose that his personal wishes were uppermost at such a holy moment prayers that he had long ago put aside as finally refused by God now suddenly sprang to life again

God delays often but he never forgets blessings may come today as the result of old prayers which have almost passed from our memory and from our hope old prayers and this is an old prayer that is being suddenly answered by the living God interestingly too Zechariah's name means the Lord has remembered there's nothing left to chance in scripture everything joins up the Lord the Lord has remembered and you know there's an old prayer that the Lord has left with us I mean there are times we may think that many of our prayers over the years have just been forgotten by the Lord that he's just said no and we have to find the grace to live with that but there are old prayers that God himself has laid upon us that he wants us to pray and one of them is very very important through

[23 : 26] King David he said pray for the peace of Jerusalem pray for the peace of Jerusalem you know what that actually means it means pray for world peace you see there's never going to be peace without the prince of peace human nature is such and sin is such that as our pastor said today it doesn't matter how many times we cease our wars somebody starting another war somewhere else that's the nature of human sinfulness we're at war constantly with God so how can we be at peace with each other pray for the peace of Jerusalem is a prayer we can pray with confidence I wonder how many of us specialize in prayers that end with if it be thy will have you prayed any of those prayers

I'm not saying it's wrong it's not wrong to pray if it be thy will of course we want to think that we're praying prayers that we know are the will of God there are specific things all over scripture that God has said are clearly his will and this is one of them pray for the peace of Jerusalem because Jesus our Savior is coming back to Jerusalem the Bible is clear about that 300 prophecies of the Bible were fulfilled during his lifetime when he was here on earth many prophecies still remained to be fulfilled one of the prophecies that was fulfilled was that he would be crucified and he would die and he would rise from the grave that was fulfilled now I have a question for all of us if the Bible promised that a man would come here and live and die and be crucified as a criminal and be a man of sorrows and rise from the dead if it said that if it promised that and it happened where is the basis for us questioning anything else that's said in the Bible why would we question anything that's in the pages of God's book if the resurrection was prophesied and promised and actually happened and you know there is far more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus than there is for what Caesar did in his campaign in France far more evidence we have tens of thousands of manuscript evidence for the veracity of the

Bible everything that Caesar said about his Gallic Wars and his diary is accepted by historians is absolutely accurate and true nobody thinks to question it everybody questions the Bible and there's nothing about Caesar's wars that's younger than 250 years after the event so my brothers and sisters here we are at the altar of incense and what is it that God has actually done here he has given us a blood bought space for prayer our pastor spoke about a blood bought space for peace this is a blood bought space for prayer David said let my prayer to you be as incense John when he looked into heaven he saw the angels with bowls full of incense which he said were the prayers of the saints

God chose Zechariah to pray on that particular day I want to say to you brothers and sisters if you're a Christian today there isn't a single Christian here today who hasn't been chosen by God personally to pray now I'm going to suggest that this is a blood bought opportunity if you want to know the ticket price for getting into the prayer room it's the blood of Jesus that's what it cost that's what it took that you and I could pray now I don't want to send all of us off on a guilt trip because we're all in different places before God and we're all answerable to God not to each other for our prayer lives but I've never met a

Christian yet who said that they prayed enough is there a Christian here who prays enough put your hand up is there a Christian here who doesn't pray enough do we miss opportunities right left and center to pray you see an ambulance going down the street do you think to pray for the people who need that at that time you see a mother exasperated with her children in the supermarket and she can't smack them because that's abuse nowadays she would have given them a clip around the ear a few years ago do you ever think to pray for that exasperated parent or do you say look at the state of those children I blame the parents come on folks I mean are we using the opportunities that our blood bought for us we can go in the presence of God any time we have direct access to him you know

[29 : 34] Zechariah offered the incense in front of the curtain that veiled him and kept him separate from the presence of the living God at the ark of the covenant on the other side of that curtain that's all that was between him and the living God just this curtain it was a big thick curtain by the way in Zechariah's time it was about that thick and it was about 60 feet high and nobody could have torn it except except God himself and when Jesus died on the cross the curtain in the temple was ripped in two from top to bottom so it clearly wasn't ripped by human hands but when Zechariah offered the incense that curtain remained intact he didn't have direct access into the presence of God but brothers and sisters you do

I do direct access God says I will meet with you there you know folks sometimes I think all we have in our churches are prayers meetings not prayer meetings but prayers meetings we come to God with our little shopping lists of all the things that we know about that need God to please help us but I don't think we realize that God has decreed that prayer should be an opportunity to meet with the king I will meet with you there he says and he says it many times in that short passage that we read I will meet with you there I will dwell with my people brothers and sisters do you get the feeling that we're missing out when we think about prayer I do I think we're missing out I think there are absolutely infinite limitless resources available to us straight from the throne room of

God you know when Zechariah was praying that altar had been carefully positioned by God just on the other side of the curtain it was literally next door to heaven as far as Zechariah was concerned the high priest only went through that curtain once a year and he went there trembling you know they even have a legend in Judaism they have a legend that when Aaron went in to the holy of holies the holiest place behind the curtain that he went in with a rope tied around him in case he got struck down and they would have to drag his body out because nobody was brave enough to go in and get him that's the legend I don't know if there's any truth in that but that's the legend that's how the Jews saw that's the kind of mindset they had about the awesomeness of the God of Israel in this tabernacle and there he is this man offering incense and the curtain is still intact but when the Son of God offers himself the curtain is ripped in two and we have direct access to the living

God we don't need incense our prayers to him are as incense brothers and sisters let's not sell short the opportunities that God has given us and it's all blood bought the reason the altar is in chapter 30 and not back in chapter 25 25 is because that altar was waiting for a priesthood that was blood bought and blood consecrated and blood atoned for and so it's not out of place it shouldn't have been in chapter 25 it's in chapter 30 because it was waiting for a priesthood that was ready to represent the people before the throne of God that's our calling brothers and sisters let's make an agreement together today that we will not let a day pass but we pray for the peace of Jerusalem it's an old prayer and it's still awaiting fulfillment but the living God has given us this prayer and we don't have to say if it be thy will we say thy will be done amen let's pray living God our Father we bless you for this astonishing privilege that you've given us that in

Jesus name and it's because of you oh Lord that we are in Christ Jesus because of you in his name we can come to you in his name we can call on you in his name we are confident that you dwell not just among us but in us by the Holy Spirit help us enjoy that privilege Father and let us be a house of prayer for all nations peace be upon Jerusalem peace be upon Israel peace be upon all who know their need of a Savior in Jesus name amen him may about hy evaluated but in the thing