

The Incense of Prayer

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Date: 29 September 2022

Preacher: Malcolm Macdonald

[0 : 00] We shall sing on in Psalm 140, Psalm 140, the remainder of the Psalm from 7, verse 7 to 13.

O God the Lord, who art the strength of my salvation, a covering in the day of war my head thou hast put on, and to the wicked man, O Lord, his wishes do not grant, nor further thou his ill device, lest they themselves should want.

As for the head and chief of those about that compass me, even by the mischief of their lips, let thou them covered be. Let burning coals upon them fall, them throw in fiery flame, and in deep pits.

that they no more may rise out of the same. Let not an evil speaker be on earth established. Mischief shall hunt the violent man till he be ruined.

I know God will the afflicted's cause, maintain and prove men's right. Surely the just shall praise thy name, the upright dwell in thy sight.

[1 : 24] These verses, Psalm 140, from verse 7 to the end. O God the Lord, who art the strength of my salvation. O God the Lord, who art the strength of my salvation.

■■ whose spirit of my salvation. O God the desire. O God the Lord, who art the strength of my salvation. A kind of misery is the right, O Lord.

My head has a capacidad drawn. Unto the wicked man, O Lord, his way to shoot or drown, Nor part the golden shall he rise, Let him have sheltered on.

As for the heavenly, O Lord, the heart of the cross, The heavenly, O Lord, the rich and the land of the sea, Let our miracles upon them all, And throw in mighty flame, And then in which the devil, They rise upon the shame.

Let not the evil see earthy, On earth his own shame, Make sure your hands of iron come, Tell me, be who may.

[4 : 17] I know God will die, O Lord, the rich and the rich, May the love of the sky, To bring the just child beside him, In our heart, O earth with thy sight.

I'd like us to turn to the book of Psalms, Psalm 141, Reading at the beginning of the psalm, Lord, I cried unto thee, Make haste unto me, Give ear unto my voice, When I cry unto thee, Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense, And the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

Particularly the words of verse 2, Particularly the words of verse 2, Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense.

We can see, well, maybe your Bibles don't have this, But most of our Bibles, I think, Recognise or acknowledge that David is the author of this psalm.

Most commentators would agree with that. And the two psalms, the psalm that we were singing, And the psalm that we're looking at, Or the part that we're looking at, the whole psalm, They are companion psalms.

[6 : 21] While David may be the author, We're not given any insight into the point at which the psalm was composed.

As is often the case sometimes, You can read the psalm, or sing the psalm, And you can fairly safely say, At what point in his life, These words came to fruition.

But it is not at all clear. It seems that it was at a point in his life, A life where he was prey to his enemies.

Now some would say that it was at the time when King Saul was pursuing him, Out of jealousy.

Others say that it was the point at which Absalom, his son, Had risen up against him in rebellion.

[7 : 25] But it's not either opinion is equally valid. What seems certain from both psalms is that, He feels himself to be under threat, And he is obliged to turn to God, In order to be his support and defence at such time.

It's a prayer for protection. But I think also, not just protection from wicked men, But also protection from his own sinful heart.

And that is something that we may neglect. We may be aware of the external threat, That there is to us in the world.

But there is an equally powerful and potent threat, That comes from within. Most of us are familiar with the name Robert Murray MacJane.

And a quote from him is often heard by us, Where he prays to God, Lord, Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.

[9 : 01] We know that MacJane was recognised in his own generation, As somebody who was, Who was a man of God.

Somebody who had an exalted view of God. And he lived his life accordingly. But the same MacJane, Who offered such words in prayer, Also made the confession, That the seeds of all sin, Is to be found within his heart.

Now these two thoughts might appear to be polar opposites. But in actual fact, These two thoughts are thoughts that come together in the heart and mind, Of somebody who desires holiness.

The awareness of the lack of holiness comes almost with the desire for holiness. But this psalm which we're looking at is a psalm which is more prayer-like.

And the psalmist comes with several petitions to his God. Some of them we would say, We would think that they are inappropriate.

[10 : 32] The desire that he has to bring down the fires of judgment on the heads of his enemies. These words which are shunned by many today.

That we would wish peace for all men. And that we desire to express love towards all men. And these desires that the psalmist has seem so inappropriate in the mouth of a child of God.

And yet, these are the things that he seeks. And these are the things that he solicits God to provide for.

Let burning coals fall upon them. Let them be cast into the fire. Into deep pits that they rise not up again. Well, whether we believe them to be appropriate or not.

They are the prayers or petitions of somebody who finds himself pursued by enemies. And who sees the future very dark without God's help.

[11 : 48] Now, we want to look, not at the whole psalm, but at this passage in particular. We want to look at it because David, the servant of God, considers his prayer to be like the offering of incense.

And the lifting up of holy hands at the time of evening sacrifice. Jewish commentators suggest that that desire is in the heart of David because of the very fact that he is pursued by his enemies.

And because he is pursued by his enemies, he is driven from the worship that he would desire to offer to God publicly and in company with his people.

But because he is the prey of his enemies, he is no longer able to gather to worship God at the tabernacle.

And because that is the case, the prayer that he offers seems to arise out of his awareness of the beauty of that prayer or that experience of worship.

[13 : 17] When he thinks of God's people, worshiping God as God ordained the worship to be offered. He cannot but mentally go towards the place of God's appointment.

He cannot but mentally go towards the worship to be offered. And you can imagine, there are occasions, just think for example of the Lord's Day when the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is offered.

There are sensual experiences, experiences of the senses. The eye and the nose come into play.

You smell the pouring of the wine. You smell the pouring of the wine. You have this taste of these things indelibly imprinted into your mind.

And you associate it with the feast. You associate it with the sacrament. And you can imagine that David, who would have been present on many occasions at the tabernacle, where the smoke came up from the altar.

[14 : 33] And not just the smoke from the offering of burnt sacrifices, but as he alludes to here, the incense that is burnt alongside with it.

And what it suggests to him, or what it reminds him of, is something that comes out in his prayer.

Or the prayers that he offers for this one prayer or several. I want us to begin with that comparison. The comparison that he makes to incense.

He says, let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense. And to us that just may be just something to do with the senses.

Just simply the smell comes into play. And he remembers what it was like. And the experience is rekindled in his mind.

[15 : 45] But there is also a theology behind what David is thinking of when he comes to God with prayer. Because the burning of incense is something that was a priestly act.

It was something that was synonymous with the worship of God as God ordained it. And it was the role of the priests to burn the incense.

Not just occasionally, but in the morning and in the evening. The regularity of it is the regularity with which David would associate prayer.

And the altar upon which it is offered, the incense that is burnt. It is offered, we are told, on an altar composed of shittim wood and overlaid with pure gold.

Now you find that in various places in the Decalogue, in Exodus and in Leviticus, it gives you the description.

[17 : 05] And although the description calls it an altar, in strict terms it is not an altar. But some suggest that the reason it is called an altar is because of its shape.

But more than likely, it is an association with the altar upon which the burnt offerings are presented.

Because the incense that is burnt upon this altar is dependent upon the flame being taken from the altar of burnt offering.

Without it, it is not permissible to burn that incense. And while sacrifice is not offered on it, it is, as you would understand, dependent upon sacrifice.

In Leviticus 16, where you find much of the detail for the offerings that we find, that the major part of the offerings of the sacrificial dispensation, there is a description given to us of what takes place.

[18 : 31] Aaron shall bring the bullock of the sin offering which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself and for his house, and shall kill the bullock of the sin offering which is for himself.

He shall take a censer full of burning coals or fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil.

He shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony that he dino'd.

And he shall take the blood of the bullock and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward. And before the mercy seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.

Now when I was looking at this and trying to look at it in a way where it all makes sense and there's an orderliness about it, you notice that here what we're looking at, what we've just read, has to do with what takes place in the Holy of Holies.

[19 : 46] Now only the High Priest could go within the veil, and only once per year on the Great Day of Atonement was it possible for him to do that.

So the description that we have there is something that the High Priest does on the Great Day of Atonement. And it is different to what happens that is described for us further on in this chapter, because the description then takes us outside in front of the veil where it is presumed the order of incense is placed.

There shall be no man in the tabernacle of the congregation when he goes in to make an atonement in the holy place, until he come out and have made an atonement for himself and for his household and for all the congregation of Israel.

And he shall go out unto the altar that is before the Lord, and make an atonement for it, and shall take of the blood of the bullock and of the blood of the goat, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about.

He shall sprinkle of the blood upon it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it, and hallowed from the uncleanness of the children of Israel. And when he hath made an end of reconciling the holy place, and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar, he shall bring the live goat, and so on.

[21 : 21] Now, it's not easy to work your way through there, but these two things might appear to be the one thing, but clearly they are not meant to be understood like that.

Because you can't have it both ways. You can't have the high priest going inside the veil once a year. And the offerings that come from the altar of incense, which is offered in the morning and in the evening of every day.

Because while they are connected, they are separate. While one depends on the other, they are not the same.

Now that's important. Because I think when you think about the fact that the altar of incense is not an altar, as we would understand it, where sacrifice is offered.

It is dependent upon the sacrifice, as we said, the flame from of the altar is necessary to burn the incense.

[22 : 36] I think John L. Mackay maintains that there isn't a flame placed on the altar, but rather a bowl of incense, and it is put into the incense so that the incense is burnt.

But it's not very easy to pick that out from the various places in which we find it. That's in Exodus chapter 30. But the connection is there, and I think also the fact that the altar is made of wood, covered in gold, makes the connection between what happens before the veil and what happens inside the veil in the Holy of Holies.

It points to what is taking place by the hand of God and beyond this world, as we will come to see when we look at it further.

Now, continuing with this, if you think again of what David is seeing there, and it depends on how spiritually inclined he was to, and I believe he was at that moment when he was in the spirit, when he was thinking of, with longing, of the worship of the worship of God's house, it was inevitable that his thoughts would be focused very sharply on what was taking place.

It wasn't a mundane, haphazard process of thinking that he had, but something that was latching on to the true significance of what he was seeing.

[24 : 27] Another thing that we need to remind ourselves of is that when you go back to Leviticus and go back to Exodus, one stipulation that is made concerning the incense is that it is mixed by the high priest or the priesthood.

It is not of any person's choice in how they would mix this offering. And I suppose most of the commentators would say that this has to do with the fact that there are other idolatrous practices that involve the burning of incense, and that there has to be a guard placed against the abuse of this offering.

That it is to be offered in a way that God prescribes, and that I think is at the heart of what is said. God determines every facet of our worship.

God, and even when we think of our prayer, if what we see here, if the reminder to David of his own prayers being akin to the offering of incense and the holding up of holy hands, he cannot but remind himself of the fact that when he comes to God with prayer, that he comes to pray for what God who wishes him to pray.

Not something of his own choosing. So that's why we have to be so careful. If we are critical of the prayers of David, if we are critical of him pronouncing implications on the heads of his enemies, that we realise that we realise that David is altogether aware of the fact that his prayers are according to God's own instruction.

[26 : 36] What he prays for and what we pray for should be like that. God has given a specific instruction as to how to pray and when to pray and where to pray and what to pray for.

And David knew that to be the case. And when he offers his prayer, he offers it as God commands it, with the specific understanding that only what God has ordained will be acceptable to us.

Again, referring to John L. Mackay's comments, he says it is a representation of what happens when that smoke reaches the throne room of God.

If you can think of it, on the great day of atonement, the amount of sacrifices that were offered. On any occasion, the sacrifices that were offered.

The shedding of the blood of countless numbers of beasts. There wouldn't have been a pleasant aroma. And I suppose, speaking as simply as possible, you can understand that the stench of death would permeate the atmosphere.

[27 : 56] So it was a natural thing to have a more pleasant aroma to take away from that pungent stink.

But that's not what God means to convey by it. That's not the only thing, if at all, if that is in his mind at all. Interesting, the scholar Henry Saltow sees the dual function of the great high priest before his mind here.

He goes to the epistle to the Hebrews and he sees there how the great high priest goes to heaven and sits down at the right hand of God.

He sits at the right hand of the majesty on high. But he says that's only a part of his duty. That is a part of his role. The very other part, which is a separate but linked part, is the part where he continues his mediatorial activity.

He continues to offer not sacrifices. The sacrifice has been offered and there is no more requirement for it.

[29 : 15] But his intercession continues. And he ever lives to make intercession for his people. Even Paul, when he writes to his epistle to the Romans in chapter 8, he reminds us of that fact.

Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns?

It is Christ that died. Yea, rather that is risen again. Who is even at the right hand of God? Who also makes intercession for us?

We know that. And that is part of what we have here. If the altar of incense in his gold covering requires us to think of the divine involvement in this, we cannot escape from the thought that Christ has brought to our attention.

If that were not so, the words of our text would, however meaningful they are to David, they cannot but conjure in our minds thoughts that direct us to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose role as mediator for us is all important.

[30 : 39] Our advocate with the Father. He is our great intercessor. And that is important. His prayers, his petitions, based upon his own sacrifice.

Do you think your prayers are effective simply because there are many prayers? or that your ability as a wordsmith is sufficient to bring the attention of God to bear upon your desires?

You are far mistaken. Your prayers are heard because of the mediator who is between God and man, Jesus Christ, the righteous. Let me quote Salto again to you.

The intercession of Christ also covers over all the defects of our worship and prayers. Like the incense which was added to the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke mingling with the prayers of the saints ascended up before God, so the full value of Christ, the propitiation for our sins, and the sweet odour of his obedience in death, rendered our worship acceptable to God.

Our worship is acceptable to God because of what he has done, and not what we will ever be able to do.

[32 : 14] So we must, when we look at this and apply it to our own prayer life, we must come with our heart right with God. We come as God requires us to come, and we seek his provision for us, that we come seeking what he alone expects from us.

Not what we expect to give him, not what we stintingly come with if at all, but what he has commanded us to do, what is acceptable to his will.

You remember the words of Malachi in chapter 1, this accusation levied against the people of God of his own generation.

He comes and he condemns them. A son honoured his father, and a servant his master.

If I then be a father, where is mine honour? If I be a master, where is my fear? Sait the Lord of hosts unto you, O priests that despise my name, and you say, wherein have we despised thy name?

[33 : 28] You offer polluted bread upon mine altar, and you say, where have we polluted thee? In that you see the table of the Lord is contemptible. If you offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil?

If you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it now unto thy governor. Will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy passion? Sait the Lord of hosts.

Carry on reading, and he says, from the rising of the sun, even to going down at the same, my name shall be great among the Gentiles, in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering.

For my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts. Does this look forward to a day when we will revert to sacrifices, and the sacrificial system, not at all.

It looks to a far greater day than that. It's a fragrance and a perfume of the offerings of the people of God who come in Christ's name, praying for the things that are in accordance with his will.

[34 : 40] Warren Wiersbe speaks of the compound product that the incense is. You know, different fragrances taken from different parts of the world, but he speaks of the things that our prayers are made up of.

Humility, faith, worship, adoration, confession, holy boldness, pleading the promises of God. How fragrant to God, how pleasant an order to God are these prayers which waft into his presence, which he seeks from us, which he requests, requires, insists upon.

And those who are engaged in that offering of prayers and lifting up of holy hands, does God not take these with delight, with pleasure?

I probably told you before about a visit that I had many years ago to the Boots Chemical Factory down in Nottingham.

And how one feature of that has never been forgotten, and that is, if you were in a place where they produced perfumes, that when you were in that atmosphere for a while, that smell clung to your clothing.

[36 : 18] I suppose there's one that some of you here would remember from the time the factory down there was producing fish oils. It was a different smell.

Those who worked there, they took that smell out of the building with them. But the point that David is aware of, and you should be aware of, is when you are much in the presence of God, through prayer, that is something that not only permeates the atmosphere that you breathe, but it clings to you.

I was trying to remember, I knew the saying, and I couldn't, thought I'd written it down somewhere, but it was, I'm not sure who said it, but it was simply this, thinking of it in Gaelic, but it went, like there's somebody who was either speaking or praying in a church many years ago.

And the comment was made regarding that person was, the smell of the secret prayer is of the clothing of our friend.

It was something that was discernible from what he said and how he said it.

[37 : 55] Now is that true of us? Can somebody discern that from us? David longed to be with God's people, engaged in the worship of God in the way God wanted him to pray.

Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense and the lifting up of my hands as evening sacrifice, regularly, repeatedly, and with God's grace, governing how he came and what he came with.

Is that true? Would that not be true of each of us then? Let us join in prayer. Gracious God, as we come before you at this evening hour of prayer, we give thanks that we can join with others and that it is the design of our heart that our prayers would be acceptable to our God and that there is a fragrance of the prayer of your people that is offered by faith, looking into Jesus, the one who is the great intercessor of his people.

We bless you and thank you for his intercession and the efficacy of it. and the permanent reality of it in the lives of your people. We pray for your people.

We pray that you adapt to their number and that you create a longing in others to be numbered amongst them. Here is our blessings in Jesus' name. Amen.

[39 : 28] We can sing these verses in Greek. In conclusion, Psalm 141 at the beginning of the psalm.

Psalm 141 DO nose■au Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[42 : 16] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.