

## The Culture of the Kingdom Prayer

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The culture of the early church included four elements. The Scriptures say in Acts 2 verse 42, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers." Now we have discussed the significance of all the other three, now we are the place of talking about the culture of prayers. What exactly is the significance of prayers? Why is this part of the culture of the church? As I have said to you before in this series and in other series, the things we do on the earth have a background in Scripture which in turn is the revealing of things in heaven. The kingdom comes, the will of God is done on the earth as it is in heaven. Now with that mind, prayers is connected to incense, the offering of incense, in the Scriptures. And before we are fully able to understand the significance of prayer, we must see the revealing of the function of the burning of incense in the Scriptures. Well first let's make the connection between prayers and incense. Let's look in the book of Revelation, we'll have a couple of readings. One is from Revelation chapter 5, the other is from Revelation chapter 8. Revelation 5:8 says, "And when He had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, 'You're worthy to take the scroll and to open it's seals because You were slain and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priest to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.'"

So there's a direct connection between prayers and incense. In Revelation chapter 8 verse 9 it says, "Another angel who had a golden censer," one had a golden bowl in chapter 5, now it's a censer which is something that is waved back and forth, "Another angel who had a golden censer came and stood at the altar, he was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne." Now here's what happened, "The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angels hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar and hurled it onto the earth and there came peels of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and earthquakes."

Fantastic. It appears that when the prayers of the saints on the earth are brought before God and they coincide with the will of God in heaven, then God releases power from heaven in fulfillment of the prayers of the saints on the earth and those prayers change the earth. Amazing, those prayers begin to change the earth. Now to understand this we must go back and take a look at the altar of incense in the Old Testament because here is the physical presentation - in type and shadow - of what we just read as the conclusion of the matter in the book of Revelation and from this we'll go to the understanding of how the saints ought to pray in order for heaven to agree with the prayers of the saints resulting in a release of heavenly grace into the earth to accomplish the purpose of God as spoken through the prayers of the saints.

In Exodus chapter 30 God says, "Make an altar of acacia wood for burning incense, it is to be..." so long and so high and have horns and the like and then it says... so there is the physical description of what the altar should be. Then there's the placement of the altar in verse 6, "Put the altar in front of the curtain that is before the ark of the testimony," in other words, if you understand this now as the Ark of the Covenant representing the presence of God, then you put the altar for incense - the altar upon which incense is to be burned - you put that in front of the curtain that separates heaven and earth because the analogy you see, is the Holy of Holies being the heavenlies and the Holy Place as the earth. So the altar is on the earth before the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The idea being that you may speak to God from the earth but it will affect the events that take place in heaven. It says, "Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight, so the incense will burn regularly before the Lord for the generations to come. Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offerings of grain and so on. Do not pour out a drink offering on it. And once a year Aaron must make atonement on it's horns, this annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sacrifice (or the atoning sin offering) for the generations to come."

In short, when you stand before God to pray – you're on the earth speaking to the heavenlies – when you do that, your prayer comes up like the smoke of the incense before God. The typology is to show you a picture of how when you come before God, you bow and you pray and what you say comes up before God. You remember in the book of Acts the tenth chapter - when the story is told about Cornelius and his household – the angel who appeared to Cornelius said to him, "Cornelius, your prayers and your alms have come up as a memorial before God," and the idea here is like the incense wafts upward, so prayers come into the presence of God. Fascinatingly, it was said that on this altar of incense, the only sacrifice that would be offered was the sacrifice of atonement, meaning that which analogizes to Christ. That's what Jesus was saying when He said, "No man comes to the Father but by Me." By contrast, you could not offer on this altar a sacrifice of a grain offering, meaning something you could produce with the works of your hands. Plainly spoken He says, "Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any

burnt offering or grain offering or do not pour a drink offering on it." All these were what man could offer to God for himself, as provided by the law. But the only offering that could be also offered on the altar of prayers of incense was quote, "This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering," a clear reference to Jesus. So when you pray, that is precisely why you pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's fascinating how often today we watch preachers pray in important, ecumenical gatherings and they will pray these lofty prayers but rarely will they ever pray in the name of Jesus. And yet the only opportunity for our prayers to be heard on high is when we come to offer prayers upon the same altar where the atoning sacrifice has been offered. Come to the Father through Jesus Christ.

So one of the elements of our prayers must be in the name, by the authority of, through the offering, of Jesus Christ. That in Scripture is directly connected to the fact that when Jesus was born, when He was a baby in the manger in Bethlehem, the wise men who came brought Him gifts. They brought Him gifts and they said, "We have come," not just to bring Him gifts but, "we've come to worship Him," because they understood that they were not just coming to see a king; they were coming to see The King who was also the Living God. And whether they understood it or they did not, they brought Him gold as befitting a king and then they brought Him incense. Symbolically they brought their prayers to The King. Today, in legal pleadings in Western courts, a pleading is also considered a prayer...the form of a pleading in Western courts is a prayer. Because the acknowledgment is that one is coming into the court of sovereignty, the one who has the authority to decide the matter is the ruler over the matter.

When the wise men came, they appropriately brought their pleadings. They brought their prayers as incense to The King. That certainly would qualify them as being wise. Why did the early church engage in prayer? It seems redundant to say that since prayers are the ways we talk to God, that the early church would not in fact continue steadfastly in prayer. Even in the Old Testament there was a morning sacrifice of incense and an evening sacrifice of incense, and the morning sacrifice was meant to run until the evening sacrifice. And the prayer was renewed, the sacrifice was renewed, at evening time. But Jesus said, "When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathens do but when you pray, pray in this manner," He did not then set out a prayer for us that would become itself a vain repetition but rather He was teaching us how to pray because that was the question of His disciples, "Lord, teach us how to pray." You see, they understood that in the Old Testament prayer was not actually a thing that was regularly offered up by the individual to God in a fashion that reflected the heart of the individual.

To this day, the Jews typically do not pray by opening the heart of the individual to ask God; they pray the standard prayers for the occasions at hand. And all religion has that.

The Anglicans or the Episcopalians have the book of common prayers and that in turn was derived from the Roman Catholic version, where there was a prayer for every occasion. So for example, when a person dies who is a Roman Catholic, the standard prayers are the same all over the world for that individual. These are the prayers that the Scriptures describe as vain repetitions, they have not in them the heart of the individual to speak to God because religion does not recognize that you have a freedom to come to God. But as a son you may ask of the Father and that's what Jesus said, "From now on, whatsoever you shall ask of the Father in My name shall be granted to you." Now He's speaking there both of our freedom to access God and our maturity in what we ask for. So sometimes if our prayers are childish when they should be mature, God does not encourage childishness, He will encourage maturity among the mature and the mature will ask for the will of God.

What I want to do now is to show you how the early church prayed. And for this I'd like to take a look at the book of Acts the fourth chapter, just two chapters over from where we were when we spoke of the four cultural elements of the kingdom. The context here of the prayers of the early saints is that context in which...Peter had healed a man at the beautiful gate and the disciples of Jesus became suddenly in controversy with the existing rulership of Israel at the time. The rulers of Israel at the time, had crucified Jesus and they wanted to stamp out the Christian faith. So when the man was healed at the beautiful gate, the controversy arose surrounding the early saints and Jesus because Peter and John had said plainly, "The man who is now healed is healed because of the name of the Lord Jesus," Peter and John were arrested, they were put in prison, they were threatened and then they were released.

They make their way back to where the believers were gathered in a home in Jerusalem. When they came to the home, this is where we pick up the reading, verse 23 of Acts 4, "On their release Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this they raised their voice together in prayer to God," and this is what they said, "Sovereign Lord, You who made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them, You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Your servant our father David," and then they quote the second Psalm. They apply the second Psalm to their present situation, the second Psalm had said, "Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain and the kings of the earth take their stand and their rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One." They made that application to say that the nations and their leaders who rage against the Anointed One, the nations were the Jews and the Gentiles and the leaders who did that were Herod and Pontius Pilate; Herod a Jew, Pontius Pilate a Roman. And the very city in which they did it is the city of Jerusalem, so that's the context. Verse 27 is where they begin to make the application of the Scriptures as they understood them, they said, "Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your Holy Servant Jesus whom You anointed." So the Anointed

One is Jesus, the rulers of the earth are Herod and Pontius Pilate and the people or the nations that rage are the Jews and the Gentiles. Now here is their understanding of the meaning of this Scripture in their day, they said, "They did what Your power and will had decided before hand should happen," in other words, "They were only fulfilling the Scriptures as You had previously written the Scriptures," so then they say, "Now Lord consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness."

Wait a minute, what are they saying? What are their prayers to God? What is it that comes up as incense upon the altar that will be mingled with fire from the altar in heaven and cast into the earth to bring change? The early church is showing us the model of how to pray, how to pray as Jesus had taught them to pray. They knew - from Acts chapter 2 – that Jesus was the Holy King. The message of Acts 2, four chapters before, was that Jesus is The King. The message of Peter and John in Acts chapter 3 is how the man was healed at the beautiful gate by the power and the authority of Jesus Christ.

So now the early church had a decision to make: would they join the apostles in believing that Jesus is The King and put themselves at risk in the same way that the apostles who believed that Jesus was The King had put themselves at risk. And this is their prayer that causes the gospel to move beyond the apostles doctrine to the belief and the foundations of faith of the people. And they join in by praying to God. And what they're saying to God is, "Now Lord, the apostles have told us the truth: Jesus is The King. These men – Herod and Pontius Pilate – have conspired against our King, Your Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Now they only did what You said would happen before hand. Now here is our prayer in light of these things being true, this is our prayer: We desire that You should put us in the fight. Stretch out Your hand and cause us to do great and mighty works in the name of Your Holy Servant Jesus," in other words, "Put us in the battle also. It is not just the apostles teaching, these are things that for us, are the very foundations of the truth; this is the essence of what is true. So do that with us, put us into the fight."

They're not asking to have great miraculous signs done so that they could look good, so that their ministries could be validated. No, they are aligning themselves with what heaven has now lately told them is the truth that is being revealed on the earth and they want to become the instrumentalities by which this truth is known and delivered into the earth. That's how they were praying. That is the practice of prayer in the New Testament. That's a far cry from the way we practice prayer today. Today we are encouraged to make up a list of everything you want, everything you can conjure up and present that list to God and moreover, get more and more people to do the same thing at the same time all over the world and God will do this. This silliness of prayer today is that it believes that the numbers of people praying makes a difference to God; how many people are saying the same thing, at the same time, is actually what moves God. You cannot imagine something more silly than that, it totally misses the point. If one Man – as in the

case of the Lord Jesus Christ or in the case of the apostle Paul or in the case of these early disciples – if a small group of people or a single individual will pray according to what God is doing in the earth that day, then their prayer like incense coming up through Jesus Christ, will be met in heaven and God will put fire from the altar in heaven and hurl it to the earth to accomplish what prayers the saints are praying. That is because there's a meeting of heaven and earth on the altar of prayer. In other words, God will show us, God will take the time and go through the effort of showing us what He is doing in the earth today.

When the church prays, the church should agree with heaven, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in the earth as it is in heaven," that's the essence of how Jesus taught us to pray, that the will of God will be done on the earth as it already is in heaven. And what is the will of God to be done in that moment in time? Well that's where the apostles doctrine comes in, the apostles bring to us the understanding of what God is doing in the earth today, they bring to us the revealing of the mysteries that we might align ourselves in the earth with heaven so that our prayers coming up through the atonement, through the sacrifice, might be mixed with the authority and power of heaven and hurled back into the earth to accomplish the will of God.

Now the question is: Can you pray for anything you want to? Sure you can, but that's not the practice of prayer that the New Testament speaks about. So in the final cut on this I will speak about the prayer of faith versus the freedom to pray. I'm Sam Soleyn, I hope that you will join me for the final statements on the early church's practice of prayer. I'll see you then, God bless you, bye bye.