



WORSHIP AS A FRAGRANT OFFERING

LISA STANCZAK

Sometimes in a service, I hear the prayer, “*Lord, let our worship be a fragrant offering to you.*” Prayers like this evoke imagery of pleasing aromas that filled the Temple in Jerusalem.

I understand this prayer. We want our worship to be pleasing to God. But what are we really asking for?

In Jerusalem, only Levitical priests (*cohanim*) were allowed to burn Temple incense. In doing so, they acted as intermediaries between God and the people. God required the *cohanim* to adhere to strict standards of holiness, including ritual and moral purity.

Under the New Covenant, all of us who follow Yeshua are *kohanim*, aren't we? In his first letter, Peter wrote to the communities of believers in modern-day Turkey who were facing

persecution, calling them both a royal priesthood and a holy nation. He reminded them that the nation that Hosea once called “*lo ammi*” (not a people) were now, by God's grace, a holy people. Adonai chose them to proclaim the praises of the One who called us out of darkness and into a marvelous light.

But let's back up. Not all *cohanim* were allowed to burn incense in the Temple. In Exodus 30:9, God instructed only Aaron and his house to burn the required incense. In Numbers 18:1, God told Aaron that his house's responsibilities would include bearing the guilt for the Sanctuary and for the priesthood. So along with experiencing the sweet aroma, *cohanim* also carried a burden.

For this Temple ritual, God separated the *cohanim* even from great kings and leaders. Uzziah, who was not a priest, reigned in Judah for 52 years in the days of Zechariah the prophet. Uzziah continually sought God and, like his father Amaziah, did what was right in Adonai's eyes. Uzziah's legacy includes strengthening Israel's military, economy and allegiance to the God of Israel.

But after Uzziah rose as a strong leader, he decided to burn incense on the altar in the Temple. The *cohanim* whom God had consecrated for this job confronted Uzziah about his behavior, but the angry king raged against them. While Uzziah was still holding the censor in his hand, God inflicted King Uzziah with *tza'arat*, a skin disease associated with sin. After that fateful day, the king lived in isolation until his death.

God's correction of Uzziah might leave us in fear and trembling. Yet the prophets expound on this theme, telling us that God can regard incense burning as an abomination. Isaiah recorded in Chapter 1 that Adonai no longer wanted worthless offerings from his sinful nation, Israel. Ezekiel also chimed in on this topic in chapter 8 after God showed Ezekiel Israel's detestable behavior which included the burning of incense in unholy situations.

Without a doubt, God expects certain preconditions for burning incense. If absent, offering up incense can bring judgment.





On the other hand, the historian Luke tells us about a tremendous blessing that emerged during the burning of incense. One day, the Temple lottery chose Zechariah, a descendant of Aaron, for this task. As Zechariah performed his priestly duties, an angel appeared and announced the unexpected birth of Zechariah's son, Yochanan the Immerser. A joyous Reveal Party took place – not with blue balloons, but while Zechariah was burning the Temple incense.

So when we pray that our worship would be like a fragrant offering, do we reflect on the holiness standards that God requires of his cohanim?

Holiness means being set apart. The truth is that God required not only Aaron's line but all of Bnei Yisrael (the House of Israel) to set themselves apart from other nations through their conduct and devotion to Him. In Leviticus Chapter 11, Adonai concluded his kashrut (kosher) instructions with a repeated command for his people to be kedoshim because he is kodesh. ("Be holy, for I am holy.")

What did God mean by that?

Adonai instructed his people to do something different from pagan people – live differently, behave differently – so that they would look more like Him than like other nations. The expectation to live differently undergirded the relationship between God and his people. Adonai embedded instructions for holiness in everyday activities – eating, and burning incense in the temple – as daily and frequent reminders for them to live His way. This call to holiness was "relationship preparation."

What does relationship preparation mean?

Let's say that I want to be a figure skater so I hire an Olympic gold medalist to be my coach. If I don't step onto the ice before my first lesson, and if I don't practice in between training sessions, I will not learn all that the coach could teach me. My coach's skill level and teaching ability would not be the limiting factors, nor would my own athletic potential. Rather, my willingness to prepare for the relationship would determine how much I would come to "look like" my coach. If, on the other hand, I train for years, spend countless hours on the ice, enter into various competitions during which I sometimes win and other times fail, and learn to rebound after recovering from injuries, the master skater could more fully develop my aptitude for skating. I would understand my coach's lingo and be quicker to augment my skill set through expert instruction.

Is a coach's interaction with his gold-medalist student different from his interaction with a beginner? Does a closer bond form when an athlete performs at a higher level, and coach and student walk together through the agony of setbacks and the glory of championship moments?

Holiness demands relationship preparation. Behind God's standard for holiness is his desire to deepen our relationship with him and bring us into our full potential. The call to holiness does not burden or restrict. It gives life!



In the end, God will showcase His redeemed people through holiness. Ezekiel writes in Chapter 20:41-42, *"As a pleasing aroma I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered. And I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations."*

**So when we pray
that our worship
would be like a
fragrant offering,
do we reflect on
the holiness
standards that God
requires of his
cohanim?**

LISA STANCZAK