

## PRAYERS LIKE INCENSE

The Rev. Donald Rose

*Lesson: Leviticus 10:1-3*

When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, He also gave instructions for building the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a tent made of beautiful materials. The Ten Commandments were kept inside. It had just two rooms. One—the “holy of holies”—had the Ten Commandments in it inside a golden ark. The other—“the holy place”—had three pieces of furniture, one of which was the altar of incense. When incense was burned on this altar a sweet smell went upward toward heaven.

Only certain people were allowed to enter the holy place. The High Priest and his sons were allowed to enter into this holy place. One of their jobs was to offer incense on the altar.

Once, two of Aaron’s sons, instead of doing exactly what they should have done, burned the incense with “strange fire.” This means that instead of lighting the incense with the fire that was kept burning on a larger altar outside the temple, they used other fire.

Why was what Nadab and Abihu did so wrong? They were the only ones out of thousands of people who were allowed to do something so important. They had a sacred responsibility. And they knew exactly how they were supposed to light the incense. They knew that if they brought in strange fire, they would be going directly against the Lord’s command. Sometimes when people do something wrong, it might have happened by accident. We cannot tell how much wrong was in their hearts. But in this case what Aaron’s sons did was wrong both in action and in the intention of their hearts.

In a spiritual sense, each of us has a tabernacle inside us with a holy place in it and an altar on which to burn incense. This is a special part of the mind where we keep our thoughts about the Lord. The prayers of each person are like the sweet smell of incense going up toward heaven.

Prayer is speech with God. When we pray, the Lord can see exactly what we are thinking and feeling. He looks upon the heart of a person who is praying (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10143:4). One of the Psalms says this about prayer: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Psalm 66:18). And in the Sermon on the Mount, we are told to pray in the privacy of our room to our heavenly Father “who sees in secret” (Matthew 6:6).

Suppose someone were to pray to the Lord in a completely selfish way, even praying that bad things would happen to other people. We could compare this to bringing “strange fire” or “bad loves” into the place of prayer.

There are people who have tried this. Swedenborg met some spirits in the other world who complained that “the Lord did not hear their prayers,” and who said that the Lord doesn’t help people. But they were told that their purpose in praying had come from hatred. They had been against the human race. They were told that “when they pray in this manner, heaven is closed, for those in heaven pay attention only to the purpose of those who are praying” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4227:4). Although the spirits had not admitted their bad purposes, this was absolutely true, and so they said no more.

How might this apply to us? The Lord once said that if you come to the altar and there remember that someone has something against you, you must go and first be reconciled with that person and then come back to the altar to offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24). We can live up to this without a literal “altar”. We live up to this when we say our prayers in a way that puts away feelings of hatred and selfishness.

The fires of selfishness are not the feelings that we should bring into our prayers. Indeed, part of the Lord’s Prayer is the wish that He may deliver us from evil. We cannot go to the Lord pretending that we don’t have any evil or selfishness, because we all do. But we can go to Him with the sincere wish that we will be delivered from our selfishness. A sincere intention is what the Lord looks for, because “it is the intention that is regarded by the Lord” (*Conjugal Love* 71). He keeps on making love ever-more pure in those who sincerely desire it.

The Lord is present with everyone, and He wishes to be received. Our prayers to Him may be compared to the altar of incense in the Holy Place. We can say, as the Psalmist sang,

*Let my prayer be set before You as incense,  
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.  
Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;  
Keep watch over the door of my lips (Psalm 141:2-3).*

Amen.