

APPENDIX A

PATH 2 STRENGTH

THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE (*What & When to Pray*)

This golden altar inside the Temple was much smaller than the bronze one outside. It was used for burning incense and *only for burning incense*.

There is absolutely no doubt about the symbolic meaning of incense. We know from Scripture that the earthly Temple was simply a replica of a greater Temple that actually exists in Heaven. Revelation 8:3-4 makes it very clear what the incense on the golden altar represents:

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 God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. (Revelation 8:3-4, NIV)

Just as the Golden Altar of Incense stood before the Ark of the Covenant in Solomon's Temple, so does the heavenly Golden Altar stand before God's throne in Heaven. Apparently, your prayers and mine are offered before God in Heaven as if it were incense on the altar.

Again, we see the same comparison in Revelation 5:8:

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 God's people. (NIV)

God is telling us that prayer is one of the three ways we are to seek Him.

So, a logical follow-up question you may have is *how* then should we pray? Meaning what words should we use?

We all know we should pray.

The Bible says we should pray.

It's nice to know that God is focusing us on prayer as one of the three main spiritual habits we should pursue, but *what* does he want the nature of our prayers to be?

I believe God has given us that answer as well.

He's given us the answer *symbolically* in the description of the incense that He commanded to be offered, and He gave it to us again in the New Testament when the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, how should we pray?"

The Temple Incense

Why should you care about something as obscure as the Temple Incense?

Because God does.

See what He said to Moses about it:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the Lord. Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people." (Exodus 30:34-38)

In other words, God gave Moses a very specific formula to make this incense and He told him that if anyone tried to make the same formula for their own home *that they were to be killed*.

The death penalty for re-creating an incense formula.

That should tell us that there is something important to understand about this formula. If God considered it that important, then we should also consider it important and ask ourselves *why* it's important. We should seek to understand it.

Since incense is a confirmed symbol for prayer, God is giving us a very large hint that He is laying out His preferred formula for prayer — a *holy* formula for prayer.

Of course, any spiritual truth about prayer we might glean would have to be interpreted symbolically from the various elements.

Scholars, Rabbis, and Christian theologians are all in universal agreement that the most important elements of the incense are the four ingredients God gives us by name.

They are: *stacte, onycha, galbanum, and frankincense.*

Most reputable scholars have identified the first two as Styrax benzoin (gum resin) and Labdanum respectively, both of which drip from their source trees like tear drops. Galbanum is still known by that name today and is distinct from the other ingredients in that it has a very pungent, bitter smell. (The others are all sweet-smelling.)

The origin of the name Frankincense means “incense of the highest quality.” The more ancient name was Olibanum, and while it also bleeds from its tree like tear drops, it has a very light, sweet scent.

Let's take a step back for a second and examine how Jesus answered His disciples when they asked Him how *they* should pray.

He taught them the most famous of all prayers: the Lord's Prayer.

Curiously (really it's not so curious), the Lord's Prayer seems to have four distinct parts that can easily be seen to correspond with the four ingredients of the Temple Incense.

Stacte

He said, *Pray, then, in this way:*

*'Our Father who is in Heaven, hallowed be Your Name.
Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven . . .'*

If you're like me, you may have tended to rush through these first verses of the Lord's Prayer in the past, eager to get to the "give us this day our daily bread" part. I know I've always tended to view the first lines as a "majestic" part of the prayer, focused on giving God glory.

But what if we've been reading those first lines with the wrong tone?

What if instead of a confident declaration this is actually a crying out? What if the tone is *Oh my father, how long until you redeem the earth? There is so much injustice, so much brokenness, my dear Father in Heaven, how long until Your will is done on earth as it is in Heaven?*

Stacte, the first ingredient of the Holy Incense, means "drops," as in teardrops. The original Hebrew word is *nataf*, which means the same thing. This alludes to crying out in prayer. I believe the first part of the Lord's Prayer is actually a crying out over *the state of the world*, and that is represented in the Old Testament by *stacte*.

In modern day, we refer to *nataf/stacte* as Benzoin.

Benzoin has some very interesting properties that correlate it strongly with the first section of the Lord's Prayer.

First, Benzoin drops are gathered by wounding a mature *Styrax Benzoin* tree.

In the same way, if we cry out to God over the state of the world, longing for its redemption, isn't it because we ourselves have been wounded by it? Even as we cry out for others, aren't we ourselves hurt by their pain?

When burned as incense, Benzoin emits a sweet, warm, and *vanilla-like* aroma

If someone tells you that vanilla is their favorite ice cream flavor, don't you look at them twice? The reason is because vanilla is a very simple, *generic* scent/taste. We expect more complex combinations to be someone's favorite, like mint chocolate chip or Rocky Road.

The vanilla scent of Benzoin speaks to the generalized nature of our prayers over the state of the world. Such prayers are not complex or personalized because we don't know as much about other people or their situations as we do ourselves. These prayers are simpler because they are so large in scope.

Benzoin oil is golden-brown in color, which points to the divine-earthly (golden-brown) connection.

May Your Will in Heaven (gold) be done on earth (brown). May Your golden Will be brought down to the brown soil of our habitation.

Importantly, in the art of perfumery, benzoin is commonly used as a *fixative*, meaning it is a substance that retains the power of other aromas longer, keeping them from dispersing rapidly into the air.

In the same way, when I begin a prayer pleading for the world or even just my community at large, it tends to have a focusing effect on the rest of my prayer. It centers me on the things that concern God, rather than losing focus on distractions that shouldn't be important to me but are.

A Kingdom-focused prayer can be a *fixative* for the rest of your prayers.

Lastly, Benzoin has a *lot* of medicinal uses.

Every one of them involves the reduction of harmful bacteria and/or relieving stress.

Kingdom-oriented prayers have the same effect on us. When I regularly spend time praying for those trapped in sex trafficking, I am much less likely to fall prey to spiritual bacteria like the name-it-and-claim-it, wealth-oriented theologies. I also tend to find my stress levels reduced as I remember that my little world isn't that big after all, and that God is sovereign and in control.

Onycha

"Give us this day our daily bread . . ."

The second ingredient in the Temple Incense is *onycha*.

Onycha is a Greek word meaning “fingernail” or “claw” and the best scholarship identifies this as labdanum, a substance that is derived from the rockrose bush. The flowers of the rockrose bush have petals with scarlet fingernail-shaped markings. These markings turn black as they mature.

Raw labdanum resin is usually dark-amber-green but turns black later. It is somewhat malleable at first then becomes brittle as it ages.

The Hebrew name for this essence is *shecheleth* and means “roaring (like a lion).” It has this name because labdanum was originally cultivated by Egyptians who harvested it by combing drops of the resin out of goats’ beards. The temperamental animals would roar from pain as the sticky drops were removed from their hair.

Simultaneously, the Hebrew word *shecheleth* is also related to the Syriac *shehelta* which is translated as “a tear” and the Aramaic *shchl*, which signifies “to retrieve.”

Onycha, like *stacte*, represents a crying out to God in our prayer, but for our personal petitions rather than kingdom-wide prayers. It corresponds to the second part of the Lord’s Prayer, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”*

Like *stacte*, the Hebrew word for *onycha* also relates to “teardrop,” referring to our pain as we rarely ask God for help with things that aren’t hurting or frustrating us. We roar at God like the goats of old as this part of the essence of our prayer is only cultivated in our pain.

Of course, the last linguistic connection is “to retrieve” which clearly reflects what we are trying to accomplish by asking God for our daily bread.

Like *stacte*, *onycha* (or labdanum) has an amber-like scent.

(Vanilla is considered part of the amber fragrance family.) That fact together with the teardrop association clearly indicates that both *stacte* and *onycha* represent types of prayer that are similar in substance: a crying out of a man or woman of God in need.

Yet, *onycha* comes from a bush rather than a tree like *stacte*. This is because *stacte* represents larger, broader, kingdom-oriented prayers and *onycha* represents the smaller, more personal petitions.

Like *stacte*, *onycha* is also used as a fixative in the perfume industry, which means that our personal petitions also help keep the rest of our prayers focused on the right things.

Labdanum (*onycha*) resin is primarily produced by boiling the leaves and twigs of the rockrose bush.

The leaves and twigs represent that which is pruned from a believer by the Master Cultivator and then subjected to the Refiner's fire (the boiling.)

God's uses the trials and frustrations of our lives to produce growth in us, and He wants us to bring Him our needs and wants in prayer. *That* is confirmed by His mandatory inclusion of *onycha* in the formula for the Temple Incense.

One last thought here: Labdanum resin becomes brittle and black and with age.

Therefore, if we fail to bring our petitions to God in a timely manner, our hearts can also become blackened and bitter.

So, bring Him the Onycha prayer freshly.

Galbanum

*"... And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil . . ."*

Galbanum is very different from the other ingredients in that it is the only one of the four that has a bitter scent rather than a sweet one.

Rashi, one of history's most celebrated Jewish rabbis and a well-respected commentator on the first books of the Bible, said that galbanum was included in the Temple Incense to remind us of deliberate and unrepentant sinners.

Galbanum initially gives off a very bitter and peculiar smell, followed by an intense "green" aroma. In perfumery, the green family of fragrances includes everything from green apples to evergreen trees. Specifically, galbanum has been described as a very complex, woodsy smell as if you'd broken open a fresh stalk or pod of peas.

From personal experience, I can tell you that when galbanum is burned, the smell is actually sickening. I tested it and found myself wanting to blow out the flame very quickly after heating it.

This third ingredient corresponds exactly to the third part of the Lord's Prayer, confession of sins.

The bitter portion of the scent represents the poisonous nature of our sins within us. Bitterness is a symbol for poison. The Bible often uses plants and trees as symbols for people, especially believers, so the "green" aspect of the smell represents the life within us being bled out by these sins.

Galbanum gum resin is yellow-green or yellow-brown and looks exactly like vomit. You can't help but be reminded of Revelation 3:16 where Jesus says he will vomit those lukewarm, sinful believers out of his mouth.

If those identifiers weren't enough, galbanum resin contains significant amounts of sulfur . . . which always symbolizes sin.

God included galbanum in the Temple Incense to remind us that confession is a necessary part of our prayers. This also ties back to the purpose of the Bronze Sea outside the Temple. If we don't allow God to regularly cleanse our hands and feet of the dirt we've picked up traveling through the world, He will have no part with us.

I would disagree with Rashi in one aspect. He said that galbanum was included to remind us of the unrepentant sinners around us. I would say that God included galbanum to remind us of the unrepentant sinner *within* us.

Frankincense

"For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

Frankincense is well-known. It was one of the three gifts the magi brought to Jesus at His birth. Its name literally means "incense of the highest quality."

It has a light, lemony scent with a pine-like undertone. This fourth ingredient of the Temple Incense corresponds to the fourth and final section of the Lord's prayer: Praise!

In prayer, we praise God for who He is and for what He has done.

Examining its characteristics, Frankincense helps us to understand this even better.

Frankincense trees can grow in unforgiving places.

The official name of Frankincense is *Olibanum* and it is cultivated from the *Boswellia* tree. Specifically, the *Boswellia Sacra* (Sacred Boswellia tree) which has a very unusual feature. The Sacred Boswellia can grow in very hostile environments, so much so they can even grow out of solid rock. The way in which they grow out of the rock is so secure that even violent storms are unable to rip them out.

Of course, this is reminiscent of us as believers being rooted in the solid rock foundation which is Jesus Christ. If we are rooted in Him, we cannot be uprooted.

"And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock." (Matthew 7:25)

Sacred Boswellia trees are often described as scraggly, but hardy trees.

*"For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground.
He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him."*
(Isaiah 53:2)

It is known that Jesus was not especially attractive in a physical way. God chose to not gift Him with a special handsomeness in order to bring greater glory to His name.

No one can claim that people were attracted to the ministry of Jesus simply because He was handsome or charismatic.

On the contrary, Jesus is the founder of the greatest movement the world has ever seen, yet it happened solely because of who He is and the power of God within Him.

So, He was “scraggly” in form, yet His essence is very hardy. He was not a “*reed shaken by the wind*.” Our Messiah endured more than anyone, and in every way.

Frankincense smells fresh.

The light, lemony freshness of the aroma of Frankincense stands for the fresh new life we have in Christ Jesus. Nothing smells cleaner than lemons, and so we sense through the aroma that Christ has also cleansed us of our sins.

Frankincense is cultivated by striping the trees.

"And by His stripes we are healed."
(Isaiah 53:5b)

To get frankincense, cultivators slash the Sacred Boswellia trees. This process is called “striping,” and the frankincense resin bleeds out in what are called “tears” and then hardens.

The striping process alludes to the wounds Jesus suffered for us during the scourging before the crucifixion.

The first two ingredients of the Temple Incense were also related to tears, but these frankincense tears here represent us crying out not in pain, but in joy!

Frankincense represents praising God for who He is and what He has done. We all have much to praise Him for in our daily life, but by far, the greatest cause of our joy and praise is what He did for us on the cross. Because of His stripes, we have eternal life and can dwell with Him forever.

That is cause for praise even on the darkest of days, and so our prayers should always end on a note of praise.

Morning & Evening

The Temple Incense was to be burned before God on the Golden Altar every morning and every evening.

This means that we are also supposed to pray every morning and every evening. I used to think that once a day was enough. I also used to think that constantly praying throughout the day was the same thing.

It's true the Bible says to pray without ceasing, and I strongly recommend acknowledging God throughout your day. If you love Him, how can you forget about Him? If you love Him, how can you fail to acknowledge Him in all your ways?

Yet, Jesus said that when we pray, we are to go in a room by ourselves and close the door. He's clearly indicating we are to have private times of prayer, times apart from our daily life that are dedicated to praying to Him.

Christians today often call that a "quiet time." I've never been sure I liked that name for it. It's definitely a time for me to be still before Him and listen, but it's anything but a quiet time. For me, those times are the times of greatest revelation and joy.

We are to pray apart from the world every morning in order to declare that the coming day belongs to God. We are also to pray every morning as an act of worship, giving Him the firstfruits of our time.

We are to then pray again apart from the world every evening. We do this to close the day with Him, to recognize His grace and provision for us throughout the day. To seal our time as we spent it with His stamp of approval.

The God-ordained rituals described in Exodus symbolize this frequency through the daily morning and evening offerings of incense.

God is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He wants our mornings *and* our evenings.

The Gold & The Wood

The Golden Altar of Incense was made of acacia (*shittim*) wood and covered with gold.

The Romans stripped branches from the acacia tree to make the Crown of Thorns.

Trees and bushes always symbolize people. The acacia symbolizes God in person (wood), the kind of wood that caused Christ pain (acacia). Jesus was crowned as our King on the cross with the crown of the painful covenant (symbolized by acacia branches) that was sealed by His blood.

Thus, acacia also always alludes to God entering into a covenant relationship with us.

The burning bush from which God spoke to Moses was an acacia. This represented the Son of God burning with the Spirit of God, initiating the Mosaic Covenant with His people.

Noah used *shittim* (acacia) wood to make the Ark, alluding to the Noahic covenant and that the person of the Messiah would provide the means of escape from God's judgment.

Three of the articles in the Tabernacle/Temple were made of acacia wood covered with gold: the Ark of the Covenant, the Table of Showbread, and the Golden Altar of Incense.

The gold covering represents the divine nature of the Kingly Christ covering His human nature (wood) with His immortal self, making Him imperishable.

Thus, through its materials, the Golden Altar of Incense shows that our prayers should be based in the person of Jesus Christ (gold covering wood). We should pray in ways that imitate Him and we should pray according to what we believe His will to be.

That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

The Four Horns

God mandated that the Golden Altar of Incense would be made with four horns adorning its four upper corners.

In the Bible, a horn is always a symbol for authority and the number four always symbolizes the world.

Therefore, God is symbolically saying that the prayers of God's people offered according to the will and nature of Christ have authority over this world.

This does not mean that you or I individually have authority over this world when we pray. However, it does mean that the prayers of God's people corporately do have authority over this world.

After all, Jesus said this was the case:

"Again, I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:19-20)

Jesus is not telling us some magical formula here to get our way in life. He's saying that when a group of us believers are gathered *in His name*, He will be there with them. That phrase *in His name* is important. It is an old way of saying "as my representative" or "as my ambassador." Meaning, if we meet together and we meet in a sincere spirit of representing the will of Christ, He will be there in the midst of us.

And if He is there in the midst of us, His Spirit will inspire us in our prayers to pray as He would want us to. And if we are praying how He wants us to, reflecting the will of Christ Himself, then will not the Father honor our prayers and bring them to pass?

Please note that many believers come from a background where memorized prayers and repeating phrases over and over again are the standard method for praying.

This is not God's will.

In Matthew 6:7, Jesus said:

*"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do.
For they think that they will be heard for their many words."*

No, what God wants for you to do is to pray your heart. Talk to Him sincerely and tell Him whatever you're feeling. He can take it.

The bottom line is this: Pray from your heart, in private, every morning and evening. During those times, pray for God's Kingdom and the redemption of the world, for your personal needs, confess your sins to Him, and praise Him for who He is and what He has done.

And have faith that He is listening and loves you and that your prayers are effective.

*Let my prayer be set before You as incense,
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. (Psalm 141:2)*