

## Strange Incense



David Wilkerson March 1, 1986

I want to talk about a horrible abomination in the house of God that is not being dealt with. I have felt the breathing of God's wrath against this sin in my own life. The Holy Spirit has taken me into the depths of this hideous thing, exposed it to me — and called me to preach about it!

It has to do with the other side of prayer! The dark, evil, sinful side! The abominable kind of prayer! Prayer from the hearts and lips of unconsecrated, unholy Christians.

David said, "You give heed to prayer which is not from deceitful lips...but as for the guilty, let his prayer become sin..." (Psalm 17:1 and 109:7).

God warned His people Israel, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from my sight. Cease to do evil..." (Isaiah 1:15–16).

God could not have made it any clearer; the need is not for more prayer — but for holy prayer! What a frightful prophecy this is — God's people spreading out their hands in prayer and supplication in great and multiplying numbers, and God is not listening! It is because we have been told that no one can ascend the holy hill of God except those with clean hands and pure hearts. These supplicating multitudes had unclean hands and evil hearts. God said, "I am weary of it all...I can no longer endure it..." (Isaiah 1:13–14). "He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9).

To call adulterous, fornicating, compromising Christians to prayer is to lead them into a sin against God that is worse than all the other evils in their lives combined. We had better get to the laver before we approach the golden altar of incense. Offering prayer to God through unclean lips and lifting polluted hands can bring down His wrath and perpetuate hideous judgments.

God's Word likens prayer to incense — an aroma that goes up before God to the throne. David prayed, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee; the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice..." (Psalm 141:2).

John removes all doubt about it: "And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints..." (Revelation 5:8). I believe this incense includes all the praying, all the praising of God's people. I. The Offering of Corrupt Prayers to a Holy God is an Unspeakable Horror in the Heavenlies!

Not a single corrupt prayer falls to the ground innocently! Every prayer from unclean lips of a Christian is gathered in an angelic censer — and one day must face the consuming fire of a holy God.

There is a scene in Revelation 8 — so awesome, so incredible, I can't comprehend it! "And when He broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God; and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints upon the golden

altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer; and he filled it with the fire of the altar and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them. And the first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up" (Revelations 8:1–7).

In Revelation 5 John describes the thunderous, exultant voices of the living creatures, the elders, and myriads of angels — thousands of thousands of them all singing with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

What a loud, glorious scene as every created thing in heaven lifted voices in concerts of praise. "And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. And the four living creatures kept saying, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshiped" (Revelations 5:13–14).

In Revelation 6, we hear also the loud crying of the martyrs underneath the altar, "And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Revelation 6:9–10).

In Revelation 8 all heaven is hushed! For nearly half an hour the elders kneel in silent wonder. The living creatures, the cherubim, the seraphim, all are hushed and speechless. The martyrs are silent wonder. Angelic choirs are not singing; the harps have been put aside; and there is not a sound in heaven. All is hushed! Why? It is because the seventh seal has been broken and they have seen the frightful judgments written on the seventh document. Seven angels with seven trumpets stand ready to inflict death, destruction and fiery judgments on the earth.

This indescribable silence has something to do with prayer! It has to do with incense. The time has come for a holy God to bring to His altar every prayer of His people for righteous judgment. He is going to put His consuming fire under the incense to test the aroma! Will it be a sweet smelling savor — or a stench in His nostrils? "And another angel came and stood at the altar holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the Lord" (Revelation 8:3).

There are two kinds of incense mentioned in God's Word. One is pure — the other is called strange. God commanded that only pure incense be offered to Him on the golden altar. "You shall overlay it with pure gold...And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. And when Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a libation on it" (Exodus 30:3–9).

You shall offer no strange prayers on my altar! There was a death penalty on all who offered strange incense to God. In the Old Testament, God was trying to show us His heart against corrupt praying. He intended to show us how serious this matter of corrupt praying is in His sight. This is clearly seen in the way God dealt with the two sons of Aaron. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, It is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.' So Aaron, therefore, kept silent" (Leviticus 10:1–3).

There, before the altar of incense, lay the two sons of Aaron. Two young priests who dared approach God to offer incense with polluted hands and hearts. They are dragged out to the front of the sanctuary. Aaron must have wept! How frightful! What kind of God is this? Praying men killed at the altar.

Moses solemnly brings the Word, "God says — those who approach Me must honor My holiness! I will not let this be a light thing among my people!" God help us to see what a holy life—and-death matter prayer is.

The word strange, to be an adulterer, to be an alien or outsider. It was what they had become. They had become

fornicators, idolaters, rebellious, adulterous of heart. They were priests who had become aliens to God because of pride and unforsaken sin. It is what you are and what you have become that makes your prayer what it is: holy or strange! Unforsaken sin becomes a stronghold for Satan; and it corrupts everything you bring to God.

What strange incense is pouring out of the lips of many compromising servants of the Lord today. Many are counseling rebellion. Many have lost the fear of God. They have no vision of the holiness of God. A holy man of God turns people away from sin; a corrupt minister causes many to stumble. "My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me, and stood in awe of My name. True instruction was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:5–7).

God singles out adulterers as those He no longer hears. Their incense is strange; their prayers and tears are an abomination. God's heart is sick of it all. "And this is another thing you do; you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant" (verses 13–14).

God also singles out those who have gotten soft against sin. It has to do with a permissive attitude toward divorce. It has to do with telling worldly-minded Christians that God still delights in them. It has to do with ministers who refuse to show God's people the difference between the holy and the profane. "For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and him who covers his garment with wrong, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously. You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, How have we wearied Him? In that you say, Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them, or, Where is the God of justice?" (verses 16–17)

The prophet Ezekiel was given a vision of the elders of Israel offering incense — even though their minds and imaginations had become totally corrupted by sin. Leaders, ministers, praying — while their hearts were full of idolatry and wickedness, "Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall. And He said to me, 'Son of man, now dig through the wall.' So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. And He said to me, 'go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.' So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around. And standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand, and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land'" (Ezekiel 8:7–12).

They thought, "God is overlooking our sin. As long as we pray, offer incense, God is appeased." It is not incidental that the Word declares, "Jaazaniah stood among them..." Jaazaniah means "God hears!" What arrogance sin causes. They actually believed God was hearing their prayers, even though laden with sin.

God indicts His people for corrupting prayer before the idols of gold, silver and materialism. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God cries out against burning holy incense before the self-centered gods of this age. It is a cry against those who use prayer to reach selfish goals — who use prayer to enrich themselves — who pray only to get something out of God. "You also took your beautiful jewels made of My gold and of My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images that you might play the harlot with them. Then you took your embroidered cloth and covered them, and offered My oil and My incense before them. Also My bread which I gave you, fine flour, oil, and honey with which I fed you, you would offer before them for a soothing aroma; so it happened, declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 16: 17–18).

"You offered my incense before these idols," God said, "You sat on a splendid couch with a table arranged before it, on which you had set My incense and My oil" (Ezekiel 23:41).

II. Holy Incense Offered by Holy Hands Shielded the Priest From Judgment.

"And he shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil. And he shall put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, lest he die" (Leviticus 16:12–13).

The mercy seat represents the very presence of Christ. If the priest had pure incense, pure garments, he could come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy. He would not die, but would see the glory of His presence.

We talk so flippantly about Daddy God; we speak so arrogantly about getting our rights; we even try to manipulate God through prayer. But God help those today who have no awe, no reverence for the mercy seat. You say, God no longer deals with His people so severely. No one dies under grace. Under grace, strange incense leads to "twice dead and plucked up by the roots!"

John once laid his head on the bosom of Jesus. John saw Him in His humanity but not in His holiness. On the Isle of Patmos he had a vision of Christ now glorified, and it was a shattering vision. Christ now had eyes like a flame of fire — feet like burnished bronze when caused to glow in a furnace — and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And John fell at His feet as a dead man. You can't be flippant and giddy when you've had a vision of His holiness.

God has determined to judge, cast down and destroy all the altars and incense offerings of those who refuse to walk in holiness before Him. The curse of the Mosaic covenant included a threat that God would disown the altars and destroy the incense of the Israelites if they walked in disobedience. "Yet if in spite of this, you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you; and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins. Further, you shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters you shall eat. I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols; for My soul shall abhor you. I will lay waste your cities as well, and will make your sanctuaries desolate; and I will not smell your soothing aromas. And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it" (Leviticus 26:27–32).

Look again now at that hushed scene before the altar of God in Revelations 8. I hope you can see what I see! I see two kinds of incense. There is the much incense which was given to the angel. To me this represents the tainted prayers of Laodicean Christians. There is also the incense already burning on the altar — the pure, holy incense of the sanctified. The fire on that altar has never gone out — that pure, holy praying has continually been a sweet savor to the Lord.

The angel was told to mix this much incense, this much praying, with the incense already on the altar. But when God's consuming fire touches it, something happens.

For centuries the smoke of the incense of holy saints has covered the mercy seat. It has been accepted; it has been a shield against judgment. But now look at what happens; the angel suddenly flings the censer out of God's presence — out upon the earth — and terrible judgments break out.

Corrupt prayers do not shield from judgment — they cause judgment!" And the angel took the censer; and he filled it with the fire of the altar and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them. And the first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up" (Revelations 8:5–7).

It is true that God sends judgment to avenge the prayers of the righteous and the martyrs. But the Word also reveals that stubborn and unrepentant hearts are storing up wrath for the day of judgment. "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Romans 2:4–5).

The prayers of the selfishly ambitious are being stored up as so much strange incense; and one day our holy God will pour it all out on their heads in distress, wrath and indignation. "But to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek" (Romans 2:8–9).

Think of the frightful effect of corrupt prayers. Not only is God not hearing these kinds of prayers — not only is He weary of them — not only are they an abomination to Him — they bring God's woe–woe–woe to those who dwell on the earth. They open the very pits of hell!

I hear it said, "If Christians will all pray — God will spare this nation from judgment." We forget to add, "...if they repent, confess and forsake their sins!" But God only hears and answers holy prayers from holy hearts. Let millions of church-goers pray! Let multitudes of lukewarm Christians pray and stretch out their hands calling for mercy and blessings. God will spew it all out of His mouth.

Tainted prayers from sinful lips do not shield from judgment. They cause judgment! "Then the Lord said to me, A conspiracy has been found among the men of Judah and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They have turned back to the iniquities of their ancestors who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold I am bringing disaster on them which they will not be able to escape; though they will cry to Me, yet I will not listen to them" (Jeremiah 11:9–11).

In Exodus 37:29 we learn that the holy anointing oil and the pure incense was the work of a perfumer. In Ecclesiastes 10:1 it is said, "Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink..." In Hebrew, a perfumer is one who mixes oil and incense. The angel of Revelation 8 is God's perfumer, the one who mixes the incense. But he will not mix the strange, stinking incense corrupted with dead flies.

There were times in my walk with God — and I say it shamefully — there were dead flies in my incense. My prayers were a stench in His nostrils, because a pet sin clung to me. I cried an ocean of tears over the sin, but I really didn't want to let it go.

Do you encourage others to pray with filthy flies in your own incense? Do you believe God is going to accept your prayers when the dead flies of secret, unforsaken sin has caused them to stink before His throne? Be honest! Is there a dead fly in your incense? Is sin shutting out your prayer life?

Certainly God will hear the prayer and cry of a repentant heart. He hears even the sinner's prayer of contrition. But He said His ears are closed to the corrupt, putrid prayers of disobedient and rebellious Christians. "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry [ears to hear — for the righteous]" (Psalm 34:15).

But listen to what God said to His children in Israel who committed abominations: "and He said to me, Do you see this, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose. Therefore, I indeed shall deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor shall I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I shall not listen to them" (Ezekiel 8:17–18).

III. The Apostles Prophesied That in the Last Days There Would Be a Division in the Church Regarding Prayer!

The apostles of our Lord Jesus clearly warned some would give themselves over to lust and worldliness, and their prayers would become mockery. But others would arise, keeping themselves in the love of Jesus, building themselves in the love of Jesus — building themselves up in holy faith — praying in the Holy Ghost! "But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken before hand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were saying to you, In the last time there shall be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts. These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life" (Jude 17–21).

The lines are already drawn. Those devoid of the Holy Spirit, bound by lust, worldly, will continue to mock the Lord with strange incense. God warns they will go on praying by habit. Theirs will be empty words, vain, powerless. They will be stripped of all discernment. God said through Isaiah, "Then the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote, therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed" (Isaiah 29:13–14).

Isaiah says their prayers are mockery because they are lying. Their sins testify against them. They are praying lies — and that is mockery! "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken falsehood, your tongue mutters wickedness. For our transgressions are multiplied before Thee, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities:

transgressing and denying the Lord, and turning away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words" (Isaiah 59:2, 3, 12, 13).

We have a holy intercessor, Christ our Lord. He intercedes for His church! He has sent the Holy Ghost to search out a people who will come into the holy of holies with pure incense! The Holy Ghost knows how to pray according to the will and mind of God. I don't know how to pray, but if I come to the Spirit's light, if I allow Him to search me, probe me, convict me, reprove me, if I yield to His leadership and forsake my sins — I will pray in the Holy Ghost according to the perfect will of God! "And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will do God" (Romans 8:26–27).

What I hear the Spirit saying to me and to the church is, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8).

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