

God delights in proper worship, a truth pictured in the offering of incense on the golden altar of the tabernacle. The earthly altar was representative of a spiritual reality in heaven (Hebrews 9; Revelation 8:3; 9:13), given to Israel and for our instruction to explain the delight which God has in proper worship. Five features of the altar for burning incense are noteworthy.

I. Burning incense symbolized in the fragrance the pleasure which God had in proper worship.

1. Consider the physical factors in the altar and the offering of incense:
 - a. Incense was a pleasing smell that ascended in smoke;
 - b. The gold of the altar connected it materially to the tabernacle and its contents.
 - c. The altar was placed directly in front of the Most Holy Place, before the atonement cover, so that the smoke entered before the Lord and the altar became associated with the Most Holy Place itself (1 Kings 6:22; Hebrews 9:3–4).
2. Just as the fragrant smoke of the incense entered the Most Holy Place, God received the offering of Israel as a pleasing aroma.
3. This delight of God in worship, represented by incense, is illustrated by David's plea in Psalm 141:2 and by Aaron's intercessory action against the plague as reported in Numbers 16:41–50.
4. Our worship, whether corporate and formal or individually in our living, is intended to delight God and should therefore be God-focused and not man-focused.

II. Burning incense was integrally connected with the daily sacrifice.

1. This is implied by the connection in the term "altar", a place for slaughter, though no animal was sacrificed on the golden altar, by the timing with the daily sacrifice, and by the common terminology of a pleasing aroma offered up in smoke.
2. The significance of the incense is then tied to the daily sacrifice which as a whole burnt offering pictured full consecration to God and was a reminder of God's provision for a right relationship with Him.
3. This connection is illustrated in Psalm 141:2 and Numbers 16, as already mentioned, but also in the sad account of Nadab and Abihu, who by offering incense with fire not from the altar, were executed by God (Leviticus 10).
4. Proper worship then, as pictured in part by the incense, recognizes our reliance upon God's provision and the worshipers total dedication to God. Cf Luke 14:26; John 12:25.

III. Burning incense was to be a continual practice.

1. This is commanded both by association with the daily offering (cf. 29:42) and by the direct instruction in 30:8.
2. The worshiper was reminded that God's provision was constantly available and that proper worship was to be constant: all of the person, all the time.
3. Israel often failed to worship God correctly in spirit and in form as illustrated in such reports as 2 Chronicles 29 and 34:25.
4. Our worship as well is to be continual and not restricted to Sundays or just with other believers, but when we are alone or watched by unbelievers.

IV. Burning incense for God's delight was to be done exclusively on God's terms

1. The instructions are explicit in verses 7, 9, 37–38: only the priest (Aaron), only the incense, and use the incense for nothing else.
2. Israel was reminded by the incense that God's delight was in worship as He defined it.
3. Disobedience had tragic results for Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10), for Korah & co. (Numbers 16), and for King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16).
4. Our worship like Israel's is also on God's terms and is not determined by our pleasure or plans.

V. Burning incense for God's delight was based upon the atonement.

1. Once a year on the Day of Atonement blood from the sacrifices would be smeared on the horns of the altar of incense and sprinkled against the altar to cleanse and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the people (Lev 16:18–19).
2. There could be no pleasing offering of incense without the atoning blood. Sin had to be properly dealt with. But, as it is explained in Hebrews, the constant repetition of the sacrifice demonstrated its insufficiency and the need for something better.
3. Even maintaining the form was inadequate, since it did not change the heart. Cf. Isaiah 1:11–17. Neither incense nor the slaughter of animals were of themselves pleasing worship. A change of heart was needed.
4. In the atonement made by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we find the foundation for proper worship. His sinless sacrifice was an adequate payment for the penalty of sin. True repentance and complete reliance upon His work alone opens the way for that believer to approach God in worship that is pleasing to Him.

You can be assured that your worship is pleasing to God, when your life has been set apart for God in Christ. Your worship is a delight to God, a pleasing aroma, like the incense from the Old Testament altar. With such assurance you can and should live in continual worship of God, including your praise (Hebrews 13:15), your complete dedication (Romans 12:1), and your prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:6–9). But you must have the foundation of Christ's atoning blood. Only the child of God, who has been born of God, who has been forgiven by God through the sacrifice of Christ, can truly worship God in spirit and in truth.