

Holy Smoke: The Prayers of the Saints

Theme

Incense is both cleansing and an offering. It prepares us to hear and receive God's voice. Our prayers ascend with it to God and our whole lives are to be transformed into an offering unto God and the aroma of Christ to the world.

Outline

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Daniel 3.37–40 (Greek only)

Scripture References

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Luke 1.46–55

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Quote

As the incense catches fire and burns and gives off fragrant smoke, it signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit...who brilliantly illumines our senses and at the same time makes them fragrant with a spiritual fragrance. He illumines, because He is Light and is seen by the pure in heart. He gives off a pleasant scent because He is the Tree of Life, which crucifies [that is, puts to death] the will of the flesh, and makes the whole world fragrant.

— St Symeon the New Theologian *Ethical Discourse* as quoted by Fr Gregorios
[brackets in Fr Gregorios]

Resource

The Divine Liturgy: A Commentary in Light of the Fathers; Priestmonk Gregorios

Welcoming Gifts: Sacrifice in the Bible and Christian Life; Fr Jeremy Davis

¹ References from the Greek Bible; differing Hebrew Bible references are noted in parentheses.

The Prayer of Blessing of Incense from the Liturgy of St James

Master Lord Jesus Christ, Word of God, who willingly brought thyself to God the Father as an unblemished sacrifice on the Cross, who art the coal in two natures which was carried in tongs to touch the lips of the Prophet Isaiah and took away his sins: touch also the senses of us sinners, cleanse us from every stain and present us in purity at thy holy altar so as to offer to thee a sacrifice of praise. Receive also this incense from us thy unworthy servants as a sweet-smelling fragrance; make fragrant the stench of our souls and bodies; and sanctify us by the sanctifying power of thy All-holy Spirit.

Extended Edition E-mail

Scriptures References²

Exodus 30.1 NETS

And you shall make an altar of incense from decay-resistant wood.

Exodus 30.7–8 NETS

And Aaron will burn on it [the incense altar] mixed, finely ground incense. Morning by morning, whenever he prepares the lamps, he will burn incense on it. And whenever Aaron lights the lamps in the evening, he will burn incense on it— incense of perpetuity always before the Lord for their generations.

Leviticus 10.1–3 NETS

And when the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire-pan [censer], they placed fire on it and threw incense on it and offered before the Lord strange fire such as the Lord had not ordered them. And fire came out from the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke, saying,

‘Among those who are near me

I will be shown holy,
and in the whole congregation

I will be glorified.’ ”

And Aaron was shocked [or silent].

3 Kingdoms 2.35g (1 Kings 9.25) NETS

And Solomon would offer up in the year three whole burnt offerings and peace offerings on the altar that he built for the Lord and would burn incense before the Lord. And he finished the house.

² Bible Versions:

ESV: English Standard Bible (a revision of the Revised Standard Version)

OSB/SAAS: Orthodox Study Bible/St Athanasius Academy Septuagint

LES: Lexham English Septuagint (a diplomatic translation of the Vatican Codex)

LEB: Lexham English Bible (From Hebrew OT, and Greek NT)

NET: New English Translation (with extensive translation notes) (not related to the NETS)

NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (an academic translation of the Septuagint , in these quotes proper names have been standardized)

3 Kingdoms (1 Kings) 11.7–8 NETS

And thus he [Solomon] did for all his foreign wives; they were offering incense and sacrificing to their idols, and Solomon did evil before the Lord; he did not go after the Lord as David his father.

In the decline of Solomon, he offers (or allows his wives to offer) incense to false gods and idols.

1 Supplements 6.34 (1 Chronicles 6.49) NETS

And Aaron and his sons were burning incense on the altar of whole burnt offerings and on the altar of incense at every work, holy of holy things, and to make atonement for Israel according to all that Moses, servant of God, had commanded.

2 Supplements 2.2–5 (2 Chronicles 2.3–6) NETS

And Solomon sent to Hiram, king of Tyre, saying, “As you dealt with my father David and dispatched to him cedars to build a house for him to dwell in, behold, I, his son, also am building a house for the name of the Lord, my God, to dedicate it to him to offer incense before him and presentation [of showbread] always and to present whole burnt offerings always, in the morning and evening and on sabbaths and on new moons and on the feasts of the Lord, our God; this is upon Israel forever. And the house, which I am building, is great, for great is our God compared with all the gods. And who will be able to build him a house? — because the sky³ and the sky of the sky cannot bear his glory. And who am I to build him a house? — except to offer incense before him.

2 Supplements 13.11 NETS

They fumigate [burn incense] to the Lord, in the morning and evening, whole burnt offerings and incense of integration and the presentation of loaves on the pure table. And there are the gold lampstand and the lamps for burning to ignite in the evening, because we keep the watches of the Lord, God of our fathers, and you have abandoned him.

2 Supplements 26.16-21 NETS

And as he grew in power, his [Uzziah's] heart was exalted so as to be corrupt, and he did wrong against the Lord, his God, and entered into the Lord's shrine, to burn incense on the altar of incense. And Azariah the priest entered after him and with him the priests of the Lord, eighty mighty sons. And they opposed King Uzziah and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to offer incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated, to offer incense. Go out of the holy precinct, because you are in revolt against the Lord, and this will not win you any glory from the Lord God.”

³ ‘Sky’ sounds better when translated ‘heaven’.

And Uzziah became angry, and in his hand was the fumigator to offer incense in the shrine. And when he became angry with the priests, leprosy also rose up on his forehead in front of the priests in the house of the Lord over the altar of incense. And the first priest and the priests turned toward him and, behold, he was leprous on his forehead. And they hurried him out of there, and indeed he himself hurried to get out, because the Lord had convicted him. And King Uzziah was leprous until the day of his death, and he sat as a leper in the house of separation, because he was excluded from the Lord's house. And Jotham his son was in charge of his kingdom, judging the people of the land.

1 Ezra 6.23 NETS

The first year of the reign of Cyrus: King Cyrus ordered that the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, where they burn incense with perpetual fire, be built.

Judith 9.1 NETS

Now Judith fell face down, and she placed ashes upon her head and stripped off the sackcloth that she wore, and just then in Jerusalem the incense for that evening was being carried into the house of God, and with a loud voice Judith cried out to the Lord.

Tobit 3.7–8 NETS (Shorter Version)

On the same day, it happened to Sarah daughter of Raguel at Ecbatana in Media that she also was reproached by her father's maids, because she had been given to seven husbands, and Asmodeus the wicked demon had killed them before they had been with her as is the case with wives. So the maids said to her, "Do you not know you strangle your husbands? Already you had seven and had no advantage from one of them.

Tobit 6.2–9 NETS (Shorter Version)

Now as they [Tobias and Raphael, disguised as Azarias] walked on the road they came at evening to the Tigris River and camped there. Then the young man went down to wash himself. And a fish leaped up from the river and wanted to swallow the young man. But the angel said to him, "Take hold of the fish!" So the child seized the fish and threw it up onto the land. Then the angel said to him, "Cut open the fish, and take the heart and liver and gall, and put them away safely." So the young man did as the angel had told him. Then, roasting the fish, they ate.

And they both journeyed until they drew near to Ecbatana. And the young man said to the angel, "Brother Azarias, of what use is the fish's liver and heart and gall?" And he said to him, "As for the heart and liver, if a demon or evil spirit troubles somebody, one must burn these things to smoke before a man or woman, and he will never be troubled again. But as for the gall, anoint a person who has white films in his eyes, and he will be cured."

Now as they approached Rages, the angel said to the young man, “Brother, today we shall stay with Raguel. Now he is your relative, and he has an only daughter named Sarah. I shall speak up for her, that she be given to you as wife, because her inheritance falls to you; also you are the only one of her kindred. And the girl is beautiful and sensible. So now listen to me, and I shall speak to her father. And when we return from Rages, we shall celebrate the wedding feast. For I know that Raguel cannot give her to another man, according to the law of Moyses, or else he will be liable to death, because it is right for you to receive the inheritance before any other man.”

Then the young man said to the angel, “Brother Azarias, I have heard that the girl has been given to seven husbands and all died in the bridal chamber. And now I am the only one my father has, and I fear that I may go in and die as did those before me, for a demon loves her, and it harms no one except those who approach her. So now I fear that I may die and bring my father’s and my mother’s life, because of me, to their grave with sorrow. And they have no other son who will bury them.”

But the angel said to him [Tobias], “Do you not remember the words with which your father commanded you, to take a wife from among your people? So now listen to me, brother, for she [Sarah] will become your wife. Also do not worry about the demon, for this night she will be given to you as wife. Now when you go into the bridal chamber, you shall take embers of incense and lay upon them some of the fish’s heart and liver, and you shall make smoke. Then the demon will smell it and flee and will never again come back. Now when you come near her, rise up, both of you, and cry out to the merciful God, and he will save you and have mercy. Do not be afraid, for she has been prepared for you from of old. And you will save her, and she will go with you, and I suppose that you will have children by her.” Now when Tobias heard these things, he loved her, and his spirit clung to her intensely.

Now that I’ve quoted all of chapter 6, I’ll recommend you read the entire book; it’s not very long.

Tobit 8.1–3 NETS (Shorter Version)

When they had finished dining, they led Tobias in to her [Sarah]. As he went he remembered the words of Raphael, and he took the embers of incense and put the fish’s heart and liver upon them and made a smoke. Now when the demon smelled the odor, it fled to the uppermost part of Egypt, and the angel tied it up.

Tobit 12.15 NETS (Shorter Version)

I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the holy ones and enter before the glory of the Holy One.

Included here because of the cross-reference to Revelation 8.

1 Maccabees 1.54–56 NETS

And on the fifteenth day of Chislev in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, he constructed an abomination of desolation on the altar, and in the cities around Judah they built altars and burned incense at the doors of the houses and in the city squares. And the books of the law which they found they tore up and burned with fire. Antiochus defiles the temple with false sacrifices and incense and goes on to persecute the Judeans (vv. 57 and following).

1 Maccabees 4.41–51 NETS

Then Judah [Maccabee] ordered men to fight those in the citadel until he could purify the holy places. And he selected uncorrupted priests, devotees of the law, and they purified the holy places and took the stones of pollution to an unclean place. And they took counsel concerning the altar of whole burnt offering, which had been defiled, as to what they should do with it. And there fell to them a good counsel, to tear it down so that it would not become a reproach to them, because the nations defiled it. And they tore down the altar and put away the stones on the mount of the house in a suitable place until a prophet would come to give an answer concerning these things. And they took whole stones according to the law and built a new altar like the former one. And they built the holy places and the inner areas of the house and sanctified the courts. And they made new holy vessels and brought the lamp stand and the altar of incense and the table into the shrine. And they burned incense on the altar and lit the lamps, which were on the lamp stand, and they gave light in the shrine. And they placed loaves on the table and spread out the veils and finished all the works which they made. Judah Maccabee (the Hammer) cleanses the temple after reconquering and removes the defiled altar and sets up a new one, consecrating it with incense.

Psalms 50.17–19 (51.15–19) NETS

O Lord, my lips you will open,
and my mouth will declare your praise,
because if you had wanted sacrifice, I would have given it;
with whole burnt offerings you will not be pleased.
Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and humbled heart God will not despise.

Psalms 140.1–2 (141.1–2) NETS

O Lord, I cried to you; listen to me;
pay attention to the voice of my petition when I cry to you.
Let my prayer succeed as incense before you,
a lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice.

Song of Songs 3.6 NETS

Who is this coming up from the wilderness,
like columns of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
of all the perfumer's powders?

Song of Songs 4.6 NETS

Until the day breathes
and the shadows stir,
I will go on my own to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of frankincense.

Wisdom of Solomon 20.21 NETS

But the experience of death touched the righteous also,
and a plague came upon the multitude in the wilderness,
but the divine anger did not long continue.
For a blameless man hastened to act as their champion,
bringing the weapon of his own ministry,
prayer and propitiation by incense;
he withstood the wrath and set an end to the disaster.

Sirach 39.13–21 NETS

Listen to me, O devout sons, and blossom
like a rose growing by a watery stream.
Like incense send out a sweet fragrance,
and send forth a blossom like a lily.
Spread abroad a voice, and praise together,
and bless the Lord for all his works.
Give majesty to his name,
and acknowledge with praise of him,
with songs on the lips and with lyre,
and in this manner you will speak with thanksgiving⁴.
“All the works of the Lord, that they are very good,
and every ordinance will occur in its time.
It is not possible to say, ‘What is this? To what end is this?’
For everything will be sought out in its time.
By his word water stood as a heap,

⁴ from ESV, NETS ‘acknowledgement’

and by an utterance of his mouth, reservoirs of water.
By his ordinance is all good pleasure,
and there is no one who will diminish his salvation.
The works of all flesh are before him,
and it is not possible to hide from his eyes.
From age to age he watched,
and nothing is a wonder before him.
It is not possible to say, 'What is this? To what end is this?'
For all things have been created for their uses."

Malachi 1.11 NETS

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is glorified among the nations, and in every place incense is brought to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty.

Isaiah 1.10–20 NETS

Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Pay attention to the law of God,
you people of Gomorra!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I am full of whole burnt offerings of rams,
and I do not want the fat of lambs
nor the blood of bulls and goats—
not even if you come⁵ to appear before me.
For who asked these things from your hands?
You shall trample my court no more!
If you should offer fine flour, that would be futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
Your new moons and sabbaths and great day
I cannot endure. Fasting and holidays,
as well as your new moons and your feasts,
my soul hates.
You have become repugnant to me⁶;
I will no longer forgive your sins.
When you stretch out your hands to me,

⁵ Or 'Neither shall you come'

⁶ Or 'You have made me full,' in the sense of 'I've had enough.'

I will turn away my eyes from you;
even if you make many petitions,
I will not listen to you,
for your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; become clean;
remove the evil deeds from your souls
before my eyes;
cease from your evil deeds;
learn to do good;
seek judgment;
rescue the one who is wronged;
defend the orphan,
and do justice to the widow.
So come, and let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
even though your sins are like crimson,
I will make them white like snow,
and though they are like scarlet,
I will make them white like wool.
And if you are willing and listen to me,
you shall eat the good things of the land,
but if you are not willing not listen to me,
the dagger will devour you;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken these things.

And this is why we read Isaiah during Lent, we have neglected the grace of God and need to return to him. The Mysteries are not magic that work if we perform them technically correctly.

Isaiah 6.1–8 NETS (modified)

And it happened in the year that King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and raised up, and the house was full of his glory. And seraphim stood around him; each one had six wings, and with two they covered their face, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And they cried out one to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And the lintel was raised at the voice with which they cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “O wretched that I am! I am stunned; for being a man and having unclean lips, I live among a people having unclean lips, and I have seen the King, the Lord Sabaoth, with my eyes!”

Then one of the seraphim was sent to me, and he had in his hand a live coal that he had taken from the altar with the tongs. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips, and it will take away your lawlessness and purify your sins." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go to this people?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Ezekiel 8.9–13

And he [an angel] said to me [Ezekiel, "Go in, and see the lawless acts that they are committing here." And I went in and looked, and behold, vain abominations and all the idols of the house of Israel were portrayed on it all around, and seventy men from the elders of the house of Israel; Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan stood in the midst of them in front of them, and each had his censer in his hand, and the vapor of the incense was ascending. And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing, each of them in their hidden bedroom? For they said, 'The Lord does not see; the Lord has forsaken the land.' " And he said to me, "You will see still greater acts of lawlessness that these are committing."

Daniel 3.37–40 (Prayer of Azariah 14–17) NETS

For we, O Master,

have become fewer than any other nation
and are brought low this day in all the earth
because of our sins.

And in this time there is no ruler and prophet and leader,
no whole burnt offering or sacrifice or oblation or incense,
no place to make an offering before you
and to find mercy.

But rather with a broken life

and a spirit of humiliation may we be accepted,
as though it were with whole burnt offering of rams and bulls
and as though with tens of thousands of fat lambs;
thus let our sacrifice come before you today,
and may it accomplish behind you,
because no shame will come to those who trust in you.

Matthew 2.11 ESV

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Luke 1.8–13 ESV

Now while he [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

Luke 1.46–55 ESV

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

2 Corinthians 2.14–17 ESV

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Hebrews 9.1–5 ESV

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

James 5.16 ESV

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Revelation 5.8 ESV

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 8.1–5 ESV

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then 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 with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Quote:

A certain governor, Fronton, called for them [the holy martyrs Menodora, Metrodora, and Nymphodora]. Although they were great fasters and their bodies were withered, their faces were radiant, illumined by inward peace and the grace of God. He ordered that Menodora be tortured first. Fronton called out to Menodora, who was wounded and bloody: "Offer sacrifice to the gods!" To this the holy martyr replied: "Do you not see that I am offering my entire self as a sacrifice to my God?"

— From the Synaxarion in Orthros for September 10.