

THE SERVICE OF GOD

A SERMON

By Mister JAMES WELLS

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“You shall put incense before you, and whole burnt sacrifice upon your altar.” Deuteronomy 33:10

IT is essential to our eternal welfare rightly to understand in what the true service of God consists. Hence the Savior said to the woman of Samaria, “Woman, believe me, the hour comes, when you shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeks such to worship him.” We have in our text nothing else, when taken spiritually, but a description of that service of God which shall be acceptable. I will, therefore, first point out *the persons whose services shall be acceptable*; and then, secondly, the two parts of their service as here represented; “They shall put incense before you, and whole burnt sacrifice upon your altar.”

First, *the persons whose services shall be acceptable*. The whole paragraph here refers, in the first place, to the Lord Jesus Christ; but then, by the Lord Jesus Christ, it refers to his people also; and I shall therefore just make a few remarks, by way of introduction, as to the persons who shall serve God acceptably. In the first place, they are persons that are joined to the Lord, that are one spirit in the gospel with the Lord. “Of Levi he said,” and “Levi” signifies “joined;” and “he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” Hence in the 56th of Isaiah, “Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord,” that is, to love him where he has loved us, namely, in Christ Jesus; “to be his servants, every one that keeps the sabbath from polluting it;” Christ is the antitypical Sabbath, and he is to be held in his own completeness; if we mix anything with him, we pollute him, as it were. On the sabbath no manner of work was to be done, and especially on the Sabbath of the great day of atonement; it was death to do any manner of work. The man that keeps this sabbath mystically without polluting it is the man that receives Jesus in his completeness. The sabbath means, in its spiritual signification, rest; and Jesus Christ

has put an end to every disturbance, to every adversary, and every evil; and brought in entire and everlasting rest. "Every one that keeps the sabbath from polluting it, and takes hold of my covenant; even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon my altar;" that is, the Lord Jesus Christ; "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." Then in the 50th of Jeremiah, "They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten." The word Levi, when thus taken in the gospel sense, is very beautiful in its meaning. It is a good feeling in your minds to feel that you are one with Jesus as the true Sabbath, as the Mediator of the better, the everlasting covenant, as the way in which both you and your services are accepted. When your heart and soul respond to what he is, it is a sure sign of interest in him; for, "Blessed is he that is not offended in me." But if there be something like antagonism in the spirit of our minds against him, that is an evidence that we are not his friends. We must be of one spirit with him in order to serve him acceptably, and that spirit on our part of course is the spirit of faith, for "without faith it is impossible to please God." We must also stand out boldly and decidedly for him. Hence it goes on to say of Levi, "Whom you did prove at Massah, and with whom you did strive at the waters of Meribah;" the meaning of which we get in the 17th of Exodus. There the Lord, notwithstanding the rebellions and murmurings of the people, when they were, as they thought, likely to die of thirst, brought water out of the rock, and supplied their needs, and thereby proved his faithfulness, mercy, and goodness. This rock, and the water flowing from it, represent two things. First, the rock represents Christ; for the apostle declares, "The Rock that followed them was Christ;" and the water flowing from the rock represents the blessings which are by Jesus Christ. He was constituted our Rock, not on the ground of anything good in us, but in the very face of all our sins; and so also the blessings which are by him. "God commends his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." What an infinity of value there is in being of one spirit with the Lord. We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven without it; for "if any man has not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Thus, then, Levi became decided. "He said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children." I know not what circumstance that especially refers to; but the doctrine implied in the language is very clear. The idea there is that those truths of which I have spoken were more to Levi than his nearest and dearest relationships. You find the same doctrine in the New Testament, where the Savior said, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, his mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Of course, I do not hold the monstrous notion that the word "hate" there means to hate at all; it means to love less; and the idea, if I can express it, is this, that if your near and dear relations should try to get you to give up your oneness of spirit with the Lord, your hope in the Rock of Ages, and in the blessings that are by the Lord Jesus Christ; if you should for their sakes, in order to have their approbation and affection, and be one with them, give up these truths, then you see how unsafe you would be; this would be apostasy; such an one, says the Savior, "cannot be my disciple." I do not, therefore, understand that the words call for any unkind feeling whatever towards those of our relations that know not the Lord. The idea is that we should do our relations no good by giving up the truth; we should do them better, if we offend them ever so, hurt their feelings ever so, by faithfully abiding by the truth. Even if our own life should stand in the way, and we could live only on the ground of giving up God's truth, then we are to give up life rather than give up the truth; because his loving-kindness is better than life. Without this decision there is no acceptable service.

And then mark what is said of these persons whose services were to be acceptable, and how it was that their nearest relations could not take them away from the truth, nor the truth from them; “For they have observed your word, and kept your covenant.” The covenant was that there was to be no God unto them but the one true God; “You shall have none other gods but me.” And if there is one declaration in all the Bible more beautifully fulfilled than another, I do think it is that one; for I do not know anything that the true Christian holds in more contempt than he would another god, another gospel. I do not know anything against which the apostle entered a more decisive and solemn protest than against another gospel. “If an angel from heaven bring another gospel, let him be accursed.” So then, “They have observed you word, and kept you covenant.” Bless the Lord for such a covenant to keep, a covenant that embodies in it our eternal salvation, and every mercy we can possibly need, an everlasting covenant, even the sure mercies of David. Oh, what must we be if we are not decided and firm for these blessed truths! Depend upon it, we cannot have the approbation of the Lord and the approbation of the world too; we cannot have both; if we will have the praise of man, we cannot have the approbation of God; and if we will have the approbation of the Most High, then Satan will stir up people against us, and they will do all they can to injure us; but then their time is short, and “Satan has great wrath, because he knows he has but a short time.” But that is not to hinder our faithfulness, it is rather to increase it, and make us more and more determined, and to cry mightily to God to enable us to stand against all the wiles of the devil, and having done all, to stand at last upon the vantage ground of victory, accepted at last before the Son of God. It is a blessed thing to abide by the truth as it is in Jesus. These are the persons that shall put incense before him, and whole burnt sacrifice upon his altar.

We will now notice, secondly, *the two parts of their service as here represented*; the incense and the whole burnt sacrifice. The incense denotes the fragrance of the sacrifice, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and the people of God putting incense before God denotes that they come in the name of Jesus, and in the fragrance of his wonderful sacrifice. Let us have four or five scriptures to instruct us upon this matter. We shall see that the incense must be understood antitypically and spiritually, and represents the prayers and the praises of the saints by Jesus Christ; and then we shall see how it also represents the intercession of Christ, and the consequences among men of that intercession. In the 141st Psalm, David, who evidently understood the spiritual meaning of the incense, says, “Let my prayer be set forth before you as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Can anything be more beautiful? As though he should say, Lord, all the fragrance that I have in my petitions, and in my soul, all the sweetness, all the good savor, all the pleasantness, I derive from you dear Son. Thus coming in the fragrance of his name, in contrast to the ill savor of what I am as a sinner, in contrast to the wrathful savor of you fiery law, “let my prayer be set forth before you as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice;” Jesus Christ the evening sacrifice. He has put an end to the day of sin and condemnation, and we have in him everlasting joy, everlasting peace. Is it not a truth that there is no savor that does your soul good without Christ? Is it not, on the other hand, a truth that when the Lord is pleased to bless the word to you by Jesus Christ, there is a sweetness and a savor that gives, I was almost going to say, an unbounded confidence in God? Oh, if Jesus’ name be made to you a savor of life unto life, it is because he is yours, and you are his. But we will go to Malachi, to show that the incense must be understood spiritually. The Lord by Malachi speaks in this way: “From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same;” that is, from east to west, from one side of the world to the other side, even to the ends of the earth. Now, “my name shall be great among the Gentiles.” How truly that has come to pass. Let us take here the Lords name in a twofold sense. First, as a

Savior. "You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins," and thereby save them from every evil. Here Jesus represents the name of the Lord as a Savior. Well, is not God great in our estimation as a Savior? Is not his salvation great? Has he not delivered us from a great death, from a great curse, from great wrath; and has he not raised us up to great honor, and great glory, and great possessions? My name shall be great among the Gentiles." So then, a Savior for us, and God with us. In both these respects his name has been great among the Gentiles, is great now, and will be great to us forever. Ah, will the time ever come when we shall cease to recognize the greatness of his salvation, and the greatness of the blessedness of his being Emmanuel, God with us? Why, if God be with me in the pulpit and out of the pulpit, if God be with me while I live and when I die, what can I want beside? See the tortures to which our brethren and sisters in ages gone by have been subjected; but then the Lord was with them, and they realized the truth of the apostle's words, "No, in all these things," paradoxical as it may seem, while we are killed all the day long, and counted as sheep for the slaughter; "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." So that Jesus is greater for us than all that can be against us; He that is with us is greater than he that is with our adversaries; hereby it is, through God, we shall do valiantly; for he it is that shall tread down our enemies. Why, say you, what has this to do with the incense? Well, we will go on and see. "My name shall be great among the Gentiles;" that is fulfilled; "and in every place, incense," there it is you see, "shall be offered unto my name." "In every place," What does the apostle say upon this? "Pray everywhere." Thanks to God for that. You know when the present Prime Minister, Mr. D'Israeli, was at Jerusalem, he was admitted into the Mahometan mosque on the condition that he should not pray while he was there. They said to him, "If you will promise not to pray when you go inside the mosque, we will let you in." It was a curious sort of pledge to require. "Why do you object to my praying in your mosque?" "Why, because whatever you pray for there is sure to be heard, and sure to be answered; and if you were to pray against Mahometanism there, we do not know what mischief you might do." Well, whether Mr. D'Israeli did pray when he got there, or whether he ever prayed at all, I do not know; I am not sufficiently acquainted with him to know that; but still this brings before us the notion that you must pray in this consecrated place, and the other consecrated place. But the apostle says, "Pray everywhere." I am glad he said that, for sometimes affliction will set in, and carry us where we never thought we should be, and if we could not pray there, what should we do? The adversary might say to Paul and Silas, why, you are in prison; you must not pray there; and so, they would limit us. But, "In every place, incense shall be offered unto my name." Ah, wherever there is a living soul, that living soul will meditate, that living soul will pray, that living soul will look to God, that living soul will converse with God. "And a pure offering;" that pure offering is Christ; he is the pure offering that took all our sins away, and makes us pure also, for he presents us without spot, and without blemish, or any such thing. Then the Lord repeats the first part of the verse; "My name shall be great among the heathen, says the Lord of hosts." They cease to be Gentiles, and spiritually become Jews; they cease to be heathens, and become Christians, and shall be Christians forever. Here, then, to serve the Lord by this incense is to come into the fragrance and preciousness of the sacrifice of Christ. You see the two are put together in our text. Again, "In every place incense shall be offered unto my name." Let me see if I can find something about this in the book of Revelation; you recollect, in the 5th chapter of that book, when the Old Testament was to be opened, and the predictions of mercy carried out by the Lion of the tribe of Juda, John saw the four living creatures, "having harps, and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints;" and also the praises of the saints. Dr. Watts is perfectly right when he says,

“These are the prayers of the saints,
And these the hymns, they raise.”

Now these golden vials, of course, represent the people of God in their new creature-ship. So, Job said, “I shall come forth as gold.” Their old creature-ship is a poor earthen vessel; but in their new creature-ship they are valuable; they are precious; “golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints; and they sung a new song,” which is there described. Now the Lord said by Malachi, “In every place incense shall be offered.” Just mark the language of John, “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.” What “every creature” is this? Go back a little further in the same chapter; “they sang a new song;” but none but the new creature, the soul born of God, can sing the new song; none but such know what it is for old things to be passed away, and all things to become new. They are new creatures, and as many as walk according to this new creature-ship, faith in Christ, “Peace be on them,” said the apostle, “and on the Israel of God” at large. Now “every creature in heaven;” that is, every new creature; “and on the earth,” that is, every new creature on earth; “and under the earth,” that is, the righteous dead; “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints;” their very dust has a voice to God; it is true the dust is unconscious of God, but God is not unconscious of the dust; and at the last great day it shall leap out of mortality into immortality; out of corruption into incorruption. “And such as are in the sea.” Some of the Lord’s people have been drowned in the sea; and amidst the eighty thousand merchantmen we have in our merchant service, there are some, both among the captains and the working men, that know the Lord; so that incense oft goes up to him now from the solitudes of the great Atlantic, the Pacific, and other oceans. So, then, John saw this. And then, mark, the incense is described; “saying, blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.” Now these four things, the blessing, honor, glory, and power, must be understood ascriptively. The Lord has blessed us, so we attribute the blessing to him; he has honored us by making us one eternally with his dear Son, heirs of himself, joint-heirs with Christ; thus he has given us a right to become the sons of God, “even to them that believe on his name;” this honor we heartily attribute to him; “and glory,” the glorious achievement of the dear Redeemer, and the glory that is by him; “and power,” ascribing to him power, that is the last thing mentioned. Ah, what would be the blessing, what would be the honor, what would be the glory, if it were not backed up with omnipotent and eternal power? I should think the devil must have been ready to bite his own head off when the apostle Peter was writing the first part of the first chapter of his First Epistle, where he speaks of our election, sanctification, sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, and of the abundant mercy of the Father, according to which we are “begotten again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away.” What would election be without omnipotent and eternal power? What would sanctification, redemption, the inheritance, or anything be without eternal power? Therefore the apostle says, “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time;” so that when omnipotence shall fail, one of the sheep shall be lost, but not before.

“None of the ransomed shall ever be lost,
The righteous shall hold on his way.”

Thus, then, the incense is prayer by Jesus Christ, prayer by the name of him who is our Savior, and God with us; prayer and praise by him who has unsealed the mysteries of the kingdom, brought us acquainted therewith, and made them our delight. Hence, if we go to the 8th chapter of Revelation, we shall there see the incense with the prayers of the saints, and we shall see the effects among men of Christ's intercession.

"Another angel," another messenger; John had been looking at the Lord's servants as messengers, but now here is another messenger, the messenger that Malachi speaks of in his 3rd chapter, the messenger of the everlasting covenant; "Another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him," in a way of ascription, to him was ascribed "much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints." Look at that, friends, our prayers often savor of our rebellion. What, say some, have you ever prayed in rebellion? Yes, many times; and so, have the saints; and Jeremiah partook of this rebellious spirit when he said, "O Lord, you have deceived me." Oh no, he has not. "It is better for me to die than to live, Lord, a great deal," said Jonah, and also Elijah. Why, I have prayed rebelliously sometimes. So that our prayers at all times are mingled with our infirmities. But, as I have so often said, Aaron was to burn incense in the tabernacle when the lamps were dressed, and when they were lighted at night; and the incense between the lamps and the holy place was to keep the ill savor of the lamps from getting into the holy place, where God was. And so Jesus Christ, the fragrance of his name is between you and God, to keep the ill savor of your rebellions and your sins from entering into heaven; so your prayers go, but your sins cannot; they are stopped, neutralized, silenced, and hidden, as it were, by the incense. The prayers of the saints are thus accepted through the perfection of Christ, and the fragrance of his name. "There was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints;" we do indeed need much incense; and his fragrance, worth, and worthiness are indeed great. "And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand." Jesus takes the petition up, and says, Well, it is very awkwardly worded, very deficient, and very crooked, and some of it wrong, but I will put it right; I will take it to my Father, but I will put it right first, and I will take it in my own name and worthiness. By and by down comes the blessing, and we wonder how the Lord could hear such poor, stammering prayers as ours are. Ah, but then Jesus puts them right; our God has appointed him as the way in which the much incense shall give acceptance to the softest call.

"His ear attends the softest call,
His eyes can never sleep."

Then you will see the effects, among men, of the intercession of Christ. "The angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth." What is this fire? Why, the living testimonies of the gospel. "Is not my word like fire?" He cast it upon the earth. How so? By giving the commission to his apostles, and by still giving life and power to the word as preached by his servants. What is the consequence? "And there were voices." Ah, when you are dead in sin, there is no voice then in you after God; there is no voice crying out for mercy; there is no voice saying, O Lord, what I see not, teach me; there is no voice saying, Lord, what will you have me to do? But when the truth reaches the soul, then there is this voice. Oh, what numbers of voices on the day of Pentecost cried out. "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" These voices, then, of supplication, these voices of prayer, men beginning to seek the Lord, are nothing else but the consequence of

the prevailing and reigning power of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there were also “thundering’s.” Just so. “Every idle word that men shall speak; they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” “Cursed is the man that continues not in all things written in the law to do them.” “Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” I can look back at the time when those words were like rolling thunder to me.

I undertook once to put down on a piece of paper all the evil and wrong thoughts I had had during the day; but I found I should have to sit up all night, and then not get them all down. I had as many foolish thoughts when I was writing as would fill a foolscap sheet of paper; and I thought, “It is a foolscap concern altogether; I may as well fold up the paper, and write upon it, ‘Foolscap,’ at once.” Ah, the threatening’s of the Bible were indeed like rolling thunder over my guilty head, and I feared that I should sink into hell; but, bless the Lord, I did not; no, mercy was on the way. And there were also “lightnings.” The flashing threatening’s of God’s word burnt up all my holiness and all my righteousness, and I died to all hope of ever being any better. The Wesleyans kept telling me to be better, but this lightning killed me to all hope; “sin revived, and I died.” And then John says, “an earthquake,” that swallowed up all; not the least hope left. Ah, how well I was then prepared to receive Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ receives sinners; he receives none others. “All that the Father gives me shall come unto me; and him that comes unto me,” by the Father’s gift, “I will in no wise cast out.” And God the Father never gives a soul to Christ without making that soul feel the sinful condition it is in. When the Holy Spirit sets in, and the sinner is made to feel what a poor wretch he is, all his false confidences are swallowed up, and he is prepared to receive Christ, and, if I may so speak, the Savior is prepared to receive him. The Savior would not receive the Pharisee, but he would the Publican; so that what they brought against him as an accusation redounds in the estimation of his people to his everlasting praise “He receives sinners, and eats with them.” So, then, here is the incense; here is the Savior’s mighty intercession. He does not leave us to the earthquake; No; this earthquake is not an earthquake to our persons, but only to our false confidences; they are swallowed up that there should be no confidence left but in the Lord himself.

But a word upon the last branch of the service. “They shall put incense before you, that is, they shall pray in the Savior’s name in all the senses we have stated, and how encouraging this is in the service of the Lord; “and whole burnt sacrifice upon your altar.” The whole burnt offering differed from all the rest in this, that the whole of it was to be burnt; and what was called the whole burnt offering was by the Jews reckoned the greatest offering in the law. We can understand this spiritually. What was the greatest part of Christ’s work; wherein lay that which was the most tremendous, wherein lay that which required his greatest power, but the fiery wrath of God? I like the words of Kent myself, making a little allowance for poetic license,

“On him Almighty vengeance fell.
That must have sunk a world to hell.”

He is the whole burnt offering.

Not only does the whole burnt offering denote the greatness of his sufferings, but also the completeness of his work. He is not a partial worker; he has ended all the wrath; he has ended all the fire.

And now let us name one or two sacrifices in conclusion. What did Abel's sacrifice do? Why, it brought in typically eternal righteousness; "he obtained witness that he was righteous." This sacrifice was only a type. And so, Jesus Christ by the completeness of his work has made things everlastingly right between us and God; they never can get wrong again. What did the sacrifice of Noah do? It brought in the covenant of providence. "The Lord smelled a sweet savor; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done. While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." So that Noah's sacrifice brought in the covenant of providence. Christ's sacrifice brought in the covenant of grace. "This is as the waters of Noah unto me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, says the Lord that has mercy on you." Oh, my hearer, what shall we say to such a God as this? Language is beggared, I was going to say, in attempting to speak our thoughts of him. Oh, there were times with the prophets and apostles when they longed to be where the Lord was; and the Savior himself "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." If his kindness should depart from us, the kindness of men and angels would be a poor thing in comparison of the kindness and mercy of the Most High God. Let us conclude, then, with the next verse to our text. There is by this sacrifice access to God and substantial blessing brought in and final victory. "Bless, Lord, his substance." Ah, the blessing of that sacrifice brings us substantial love, substantial mercy, substantial promises, everything substantial. "Bless, Lord, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; smite through the loins of them that rise against him;" what a mercy to be delivered from a state of enmity against the Most High, for those words will be fulfilled in the case of all that live and die with their hearts heaving against him; "smite through the loins of them that rise against him, and of them that hate him, that they rise not again." Ah, Christian, you may fall in health, and fall in circumstances, and fall in ten thousand senses, but you will rise again. But the enemies of Jesus Christ will be smitten, to rise no more at all.

The Lord encourage us under all circumstances to cleave to him, and to feel an increasing confidence that he will be with us and take care of us unto the last.