
Zacharias Presenting Incense

Luke 1:5-25

There were, each day, about 50 priests on duty in the Temple. In the early morning, they divided into two groups to make a pre-daylight torchlight inspection of the Temple courtyards. The two groups then met and marched in two columns to the Hall of Hewn Polished Stones where the day's duties were assigned by lot. The lot was used four times during the day: twice before the gate was opened, and twice after. Choosing by lot prevented personal ego or favoritism from having a part in the selections.

The coals of the previous day's fire still glowed on the altar of burnt offering. A priest, chosen by lot, stirred the fire into fresh flame. Then another lot was taken to designate:

- Those who were to take part in the sacrifice itself
- Those in the Holy Place who were to trim the wicks of the golden candlestick (Menorah) and to add oil, and
- Those who were to prepare the altar of incense

By now, morning had broken and, before the worshippers were admitted, the sacrificial lamb was brought out and inspected for its fitness for sacrifice. It was given water from a golden bowl, and then it was laid on the north side of the altar with its face to the west, as tradition described the binding of Isaac. Then the gates were opened to the people.

All of the priests and the people were present as the officiating priest, standing on the east side of the altar, sprinkled the lamb's blood from a golden bowl on two sides of the altar, below the red line which marked the difference between ordinary sacrifices and those which were to be wholly consumed by fire.

In the meanwhile, other chosen priests made everything ready in the Holy Place, where the most solemn of the day's ceremonies was to take place - that of offering the incense, which symbolized Israel's prayers being accepted by God. Again a lot was taken to decide who was to be honored with this highest act of mediation between God and man.

A priest could perform this task only once in his lifetime; and after that he was to be called "rich", leaving to his fellow priests the hope that they

would sometime be called upon to do the "incensing". It was fitting that taking such a lot would be preceded by prayer and confession of their faith on the part of the priests.

One of this group of priests was Zacharias, who was more than 60 years old. He had never been chosen to perform the incense ritual, yet he was well-known in the Temple. Each course of priests was on duty twice a year, and priests were not retired by age, as were the Levites, but only by infirmity. Zacharias was married to Elizabeth, a daughter of a priest, which was considered a two-fold honor. The Bible's testimony of them is that they walked honorably and blamelessly.

Zacharias' first task was to choose two friends or relatives to help him in the sacred service. Their duties were completely spelled out. The first helper removed what had been left on the altar of incense from the previous evening's service; then, in prayer, he walked backward away from the altar. The second helper now came forward and spread live coals taken from that morning's burnt offering; then he, too, worshipped and retired.

As the people and other priests waited outside, Zacharias now stood alone in the Holy Place, lighted only by the seven-branched candlestick. In front of him at some distance, toward the heavy Veil that hung before the Holy of Holies, was the golden altar of incense, on which red coals glowed, as near as possible to the Holy of Holies. To his right was the Table of Showbread; to his left was the golden candlestick.

Zacharias kept waiting until a special signal indicated that the moment had come. He walked forward and spread the incense on the altar. The priests and the people had reverently moved back from the altar in the courtyard, and were prostrate before the Lord, offering unspoken prayer and thanksgiving for God's mercies, provision, and deliverance, along with petitions for blessing and peace. A cloud of smoke from the incense was beginning to form and move upward in the Holy Place.

Zacharias waited until he was sure that the incense was burning well. He would have bowed down in prayer and then reverently left the Holy Place, except that a wondrous sight met his eyes
