



Part 19 – Silence in Heaven and the Prayers of the Saints

Revelation 8:1-5

Chapter eight begins with the breaking of the seventh seal which depicts a silence in heaven following the final judgement depicted in the breaking of the sixth seal (6:17). The silence in heaven is that of holy awe following the final judgment.¹ It may also be considered the quiet before the storm as the vision of the trumpets will reveal the judgment of God, once again, upon the wicked. The seals depict the various categories or forms of judgment while the trumpets describe the judgments themselves.²

Silence in Heaven

Vs. 1 – “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

Silence often signals an intentional transition or building of tension or anticipation. In this case, the silence is likely intended to underscore the soberness of the moment as God's judgment is poured out on the earth. “The silence is that during which the angel burns the incense on the altar to accompany the prayers of the saints.” As a result, “at the climax of history, heaven is silent so that the prayers of the saints can be heard, and the final judgment occurs in response to them.”³

Seven Angels and Seven Trumpets

Vs. 2 – “Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.”

Whereas the seven seals largely portray the experience of God's people in a world under judgment, the seven trumpets depict the experience of the unbelieving during that same period of time. This helps explain the escalating horror of the description (8:7ff).

In the Scriptures, trumpets are used to announce the Lord's arrival and significant events connected to his blessings or judgment. With the blast of trumpets Israel was called to holy assembly before the Lord (Num. 10:2-3). Trumpets signaled the good news that the year of Jubilee had arrived (Lev. 25:9). Trumpets sounded at the coronation of a king (1 Kings 1:34). A trumpet was used to assemble nations for the purpose of afflicting judgment upon Babylon (Jer. 51:27). When Christ returns, his appearing will be announced by the blast of trumpets (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). “The seven trumpets used in the siege of Jericho (Joshua 6:2-21) and the trumpet that sounds the alarm before the terrifying day of the Lord in Joel 2 are significant precursors of the trumpets in Revelation.”⁴

The Prayers of the Saints

Vs. 3 – “...and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne.”

In the tabernacle and the temple the altar of incense was placed near the ark of the covenant which was symbolic of God's special presence with his people: “Set the gold altar of incense before the ark of testimony” (Exodus 40:5). The altar of incense stood immediately outside the heavily curtained entrance to the Holy of Holies (Exodus 40:26-27). The priests would burn incense upon the altar as a depiction of the prayers of the people rising before the Lord's throne. On the Day of Atonement, the priest would burn a large enough quantity of incense that the smoke would engulf him as he entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of atonement (Lev. 16:12-13; 1 Kings 6:22).⁵ In John's vision, there is no veil between the altar and the holy presence of God.

Vs. 4 – “...and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.”

The “saints” mentioned in verses three and four begin with the martyred saints who are depicted as being under the altar (6:9-10). The prayers of the martyrs and of all the saints have been heard and God will

¹ Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2018) p. 165

² Vern Poythress, *The Returning King* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000) p. 121

³ Richard Baukham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 70

⁴ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 140

⁵ Dennis Johnson, 142

answer with righteous judgment upon those who have shed their blood. The content of the saints' prayers (6:10) is clearly indicated in the Lord's response of casting fire upon the earth (8:5). The seven seals depict the forces that are enacted in the seven trumpet judgments. The Lamb's judgment will be the appropriate response to the cruelty poured out upon his saints in this present evil age. "In the silence imposed by the seventh seal God hears his embattled church's cries, which rise before him as a sweet savor."⁶ All creation will know that the Lord is righteous and that he judges justly.

Fire From the Altar

Vs. 5 – "Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth..."

The censor filled with fire is symbolic of the judgments that will be depicted in the seven trumpets. There is a purpose behind portraying the judgment of God as fire cast upon the earth which has nothing to do with speculations regarding meteors or missiles. Rather, the fire of the burning censor is meant to portray the calamities befalling the earth as the outworking of God's judgment. It is important to note that the fire of judgment comes from the holy altar before the throne of God, a place of impeccable purity. The seals of God's judgment are opened by the Lamb (6:1-17; 8:1). The seven trumpets of this very judgment are sounded at the Lord's direction. God's judgment upon the wicked is not an ethical compromise. God's wrath is not to be considered a "lesser of two evils." God's judgment is and will be wholly righteous, the response of perfect justice to wickedness.

The Thunder of Heaven

Vs. 5 – "...and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake."

These particular phenomena are often described as accompanying the presence of God Almighty. Whether at Sinai (Exodus 19) or the temple (Isaiah 6) such phenomena capture the holy awe that belongs to God's manifest presence. Here the connection between the fire of judgment and the presence of God is clear.

1. There is a connection between high thoughts of God and godliness.

"High thoughts of God" are those thoughts that conform to the Lord's full self-revelation in Scripture. It is to meditate on how he is revealed throughout his word and not simply on a few conveniently selected attributes which tend to reduce him to an idol of our own making; a merely better version of ourselves. A low view of God will always lead to impiety, ungodliness. A God without judgment or righteous wrath may generate warm thoughts but will never inspire repentance or awe or holy devotion.

Small thoughts of God undermine the gospel and strip the cross of its power. A God who is loving but possesses no anger over wickedness would be our moral inferior for his love would be sentimental rather than substantive. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr described liberal Christianity as "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without justice through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Such a way of thinking about God will inevitably undermine our awe, our gratitude, our faith, and our devotion.

2. Prayer is a privilege, not a burden.

The ways in which prayer is symbolized in this passage ought to encourage every Christian. The prayers of the saints are heard by God and stored up, never disregarded. Indeed, we see in this passage the Lord taking decisive action in response to his people's prayers. His timing is not always ours but is always in harmony with perfect wisdom. In prayer, we approach our Father with confidence as dearly loved children. Prayer is pleasing to God like a pleasant incense. And God responds to his peoples' prayers.

3. Meditating on God's judgment gives us a proper sense of urgency.

We need a proper sense of urgency for our own souls and the souls of our neighbors. The passages of Scripture which describe God's judgment require us to think about the ultimate matters of life's end and what lies beyond this life. Christians are necessarily concerned about eternity. We know that this brief life is only the prelude to eternity. A disregard for God's judgment will always redefine the church's mission from making disciples to being just another community service organization more interested in social programs than the souls of her neighbors. A proper awareness of the judgment of God keeps the church on mission.

⁶Dennis Johnson, 142