



## One Half-Hour Silence in Heaven

### ***Revelation 8:1-2***

In Revelation 5 we read that when no creature in heaven or earth is considered worthy to open the scroll sealed with seven seals this honour falls to Christ. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof. This book or scroll contains the seven judgments, which God will pour out upon the world. Chapters 6 and 7 record how the Lamb opens the first six of these seals, which brings us right up to the end of the world. It speaks of the cosmic catastrophes, which will signal the arrival of the great Day of the Lord.

One would expect, therefore, that the seventh seal will immediately usher us into the presence of the Judge of heaven and earth. Yet, when we read chapter 8, we are told of other events which must take place before the end comes.

The seventh seal consists of seven trumpets symbolizing judgments that will occur again and again throughout this dispensation, in increasing intensity and scope. These judgments are very terrible, yet they do not refer to God's final doom. The fact that they are trumpets indicates that they are primarily intended as warnings to the wicked. When they see all these frightening things taking place they should turn from their sins and repent.

### **An Unexpected Pause**

Let us now read Revelation 8:1-2. *"And when he (i.e. the Lamb) had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God, and to them were given seven trumpets."* Before the seven trumpets will be revealed there is a pause in heaven, a silence of about half an hour. This is most unusual. Heaven is the place where God is continually praised by myriads of angels and redeemed saints. There is joy, there is happiness and loud hallelujahs resound.

### **The Reason for this Silence**

We are told of a thirty-minute silence. There must be a reason for this. And of course, there is. This mysterious silence has to do with the contents of the seven judgments that are about to be revealed. All heaven stands in suspense, holding its breath, as it were. So awful is the wrath of God, which is about to be revealed, that the inhabitants of heaven stand spellbound for half an hour in breathless and silent amazement!

### **The Altar of Incense**

Next, we are told that the seven angels who stand before God are each given a trumpet. They do not, however, proceed to blow these instruments right away, but they must wait for the signal. Before they will sound their trumpets, thereby releasing God's judgments, something else has to take place first. In verse 3 we read, *"and another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer, and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne."*

In the book of Revelation heaven is often described in terms of the Old Testament temple and there are many references to the priestly service in the sanctuary. We have an example of this here. It says that an angel stands at the altar of incense and that he was given much incense,

which he then had to offer together with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar that stood before the throne of God. Two things are said here: 1) that the prayers of saints are on the altar and 2) that the angel adds incense to these prayers.

In Leviticus 16:12,13 we read, *“And he (that is, Aaron the high priest) shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small and bring it within the veil. And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not.”* There is beautiful symbolism here. The altar of incense was lit with fire from the altar of burnt offering and that incense in turn was brought to the Ark of the Covenant and sprinkled on the lid of the ark, called the mercy seat. In other words, before the prayers of God’s people could be accepted, atonement had to be made for their sins.

## **Our Prayers Need Cleansing**

In John’s vision the angel standing at the altar of incense is none other than Christ who is adding incense to the prayers of the saints. This means that these prayers had to be cleansed before they could be presented to God.

The incense represents the power of Jesus’ blood. He has given Himself for us as an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour or aroma.

Here we learn that even the prayers of God’s children are tainted with sin. We need the cleansing of Jesus’ blood, not only for our daily sins, but even for the prayers we send up to heaven. They always contain elements with which God is not pleased. How selfish our petitions often are! How much of the flesh there is in what we ask of God! That is why our prayers must first be purified before God will accept them.

And that is precisely what Christ does in heaven! That is why He is at the right hand of the Father. He is our Intercessor there. When our prayers reach the sanctuary on high, Christ adds the incense of His merits to them. *“And unto him was given much incense.”* No wonder! On the altar were laid the prayers of all the saints; consequently much incense was needed.

Who are these saints? They are the people of God who are still on earth. In Revelation 6, John saw the souls of the martyrs under the altar and he heard their cry: how long, Lord? But here the reference is to those saints who are still alive. It is the Church militant of all the ages. Yet, in a special sense John is referring to the saints of his own day: the persecuted believers who were crying to God for help in their afflictions. We are told that these prayers are heard. In verse 4 we read, *“And the smoke of the incense which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand.”* Their prayers are accepted by God for Christ’s sake.

## **Christ Our Great Intercessor**

What a comforting thought this is! Christian, have you ever seen the glory of Christ as your Intercessor? Your prayers, no matter how urgently sent up or sincerely meant, cannot reach the ear of a holy and righteous God unless you present them in Jesus’ name. Of course, we all do this. We always conclude our prayers with the words: in Jesus’ name. But this is not a magic formula, as if the mere repetition of these words will bring down blessings from heaven.

We must always plead the name of Jesus from the heart and that implies a conscious, felt need of Christ and His atoning blood. Then we are keenly aware that God cannot accept our prayers on the basis of anything in us. All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags! (Isa. 64:6)

Faith, however, sees Christ standing at the golden altar before the throne. Much incense is in His hand. Christ’s blood is all-sufficient. It is able to cleanse us from all our sins. Maybe we are afraid He won’t hear our prayers. Who am I, a sinful, polluted creature! I don’t even know how to pray or what for. Are you mixed up? Can you pray only in broken sentences or not even that? Can you do no more than sigh or groan? Go to the Lord and say: Lord, teach me to pray in Jesus’ name.

Accept me for Thy Son's sake alone. Because there is abundance of incense in Jesus' hand, the prayers of all saints -- that is all believers, great and small, strong and weak -- are heard. They all reach the throne of God and are answered by God.

## **How God Answers The Prayers Of His Saints**

It says in verse 5, *"And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire of the altar and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake."* The Lord pays attention to the cries of His people. Their prayers sent up in much weakness and perhaps bathed in tears, came down again crowned with heaven's acceptance. What a tremendous answer God sends from His throne! Voices, thunderings, lightnings and an earthquake -- these were the signs or tokens that God paid attention to the crying of His people.

This tells us also something about the contents of the prayers of the saints. They evidently prayed for the judgments of God. They asked not just for their own safety and wellbeing but before anything else they were concerned about the glory of God, and the vindication of His cause.

## **Imprecatory Prayer**

What a test this is for us! Do we ever pray like this? That God's judgments may come on a wicked, God-dishonouring, Christ-rejecting, and Christian-hating world? The souls under the altar did (Rev. 6:9-10). They had been *"slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held."* They were martyrs now in glory and they are asking that God's justice be done: *"How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"*

These are our departed brothers and sisters! They paid the supreme sacrifice for their loyalty to Christ. There are many believers today who are treated the same way. All over the world the cries of the persecuted are going up to heaven: *"For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter"* (Rom. 8:36). Should we not join them in praying for God to rise up and save His people and destroy His enemies?

But should we not pray for the conversion of sinners? Yes, indeed, but if sinners will not repent and continue their rebellion and mistreatment of His people, it is entirely right and even necessary for Christians to pray, at least sometimes, for God's judgments to fall on His enemies. Listen to the psalmists, *"O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth; render a reward to the proud"* (Ps. 94:1, 2); *"when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me"* (Ps. 119:84).

God did hear such prayers in the past and will do so today, absolutely.

*"God shall arise and by His might put all His enemies to flight with shame and consternation... But let the righteous, blessed of yore, Joy in their God as ne'er before, faith's victory achieving..."*

Psalter 420:1

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