



river west church

Prayer and the Purpose of God

Revelation 8:1-5

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Silence in Heaven

In Revelation chapter 8 we come to a dramatic pause in the action that is taking place in the Heavenly Throne Room. The Lamb who was worthy to open the first six seals of the scroll now opens the seventh and final seal, and all of Heaven understands the magnitude of the moment. All worship stops, all action ceases. Dramatic silence ensues. The scroll is open.

John has seen some pretty spectacular things in his visit to Heaven. He has seen the Almighty Creator God seated on the throne, the object of all worship (Rev. 4). He has seen the all-important scroll in God's right hand, the scroll that represents God's perfect conclusion to all of redemptive history. John has seen the Lion who is a Lamb, the only one worthy to open the seven seals which have kept the scroll closed until the proper time. John has seen the worship of this Lamb (Rev. 5). John has witnessed "mini-judgments" as each seal is opened, pointing to the ultimate judgment to come (Rev. 6&7).

But now John sees silence. And we should be asking "why?" Why is John taken up from earth to witness silence in Heaven? The answer may surprise us. The silence in Heaven represents an anticipation of God's imminent action. Judgment is coming and Heaven cannot wait for the final events to unfold. John is allowed this glimpse as a reminder that the anticipation in Heaven ought to be shared on the earth among the people of God. If it matters in Heaven, it should matter to us on earth. In fact, as we are about to see, we should be praying to God for this moment to come.

Prayer on Earth

The assumption of the Book of Revelation is that Christians respond to the evil and suffering in our world by turning to God in prayer. What is more, these prayers are pleasing to Him. Do you believe that? The action that now unfolds in Revelation 8 forms a powerful picture of Christian prayer. An angel steps forward to make preparation for the judgment and wrath to come with the opening of the scroll. Incense is burned, and the prayers of the saints rise to God as a fragrant offering. This is powerful Old Testament tabernacle imagery in which the priests would offer burnt sacrifices to God on behalf of the people (Ex. 30:1-10). In the Old Testament, the burning of incense was a common way to picture prayer rising to God from His people (see Psalm 141:2). This is really stunning! We can't miss the significance of this. The Ancient of Days, the Almighty Creator God who is on the throne is pleased when we pray to Him. He is not disinterested, or annoyed. He's not preoccupied. Our prayers, rightly offered, rise like a sweet smelling fragrance. But there is more. The salvation and judgment that will bring human history to a close is, in part, a response to the prayers of God's people!

Prayer Answered

"Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth..." (vs. 5). What happens when the people of God pour out their hearts to Him in prayer? What happens when we suffer or witness the suffering of others and cry to God for justice (see Rev. 7:10)? What happens when we lament; when our hearts break and we turn to God? Revelation 8 gives us the answer. God hears. God is pleased. And most shockingly, God responds.

The action of the angel in verse 5 represents God's answer to the prayers He has heard. The sovereign, all-powerful creator God responds to mortal, insignificant, people.

In Revelation 7:10-11 we saw a powerful vision of suffering Christians crying out to God for justice. They are instructed to wait. They're not scolded. They're not ignored. God says, be patient. The time is coming. Keep praying. Pray for mercy and grace to be poured out into hardened human hearts. Beg God for justice and wrath against the evil and sin that devastates our world. God is going to answer these prayers. Do you believe this? Do you pray like this? My hope this morning is that as we explore Revelation 8 together, we will become more convinced of the significance of prayer in the Sovereign purposes of God.