

Patmos and Prayer

We are taking a little different look at the book of Revelation for a few weeks, sharing what I believe to be some important insight for the church. I'm sharing this series with Sarah because she is my "go to" Old Testament scholar and you need to know the O.T. in order to appreciate Revelation. We are focusing less on "let's try to match everything up with current world affairs and political realities" and more on "let's see if we can discover Biblical truths about God and his people in all times." If you remember in chapter 5-6, Jesus, the Lamb took the scroll and began breaking the seals to open the scroll. Chapter 8 begins with the opening of the seventh seal. **"When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."** Revelation 8:1-6

With all the activity of heaven, the continual worship described in Revelation 4 and 5, the activity around the throne, the opening of the seven seals and the resulting events on the earth, it seems odd, but suddenly there is silence in heaven. Apparently the worship and singing is halted, the angels stop their preparations, the 24 elders fall silent. Everything is on pause John says, for "about half an hour." What is the silence all about? It seems to be about prayer!

Have you been in a crowded room, everyone is talking, voices and laughter, and then someone walks in or walks onto a stage and the room suddenly falls silent. It's because the focus shifts. In heaven, silence shifts the focus from busy activity to all eyes on the prayers of the saints. Everyone watches in hushed reverence as the angel prepares the censer with incense and offers the prayers of all the saints on the altar before the throne of God. There is silence and reverence as the prayers come before the throne; silence as response to the prayers is prepared; silence as all of heaven acknowledges the purpose and power of the prayers of God's people.

The censer holds incense which is a metaphor for the prayers of the saints. **(Show picture)** The angel mixes the prayers with the incense and then combines the prayers with fire from the altar, a sign and symbol of the power and Spirit of God. But whose prayers are these?

Which prayers? The last prayers we saw in Revelation were the prayers of the martyrs asking “How long O Lord?” Is it their prayers being answered? I think this image shows us that no prayer is lost, no prayer is ignored. All prayers rise before God on his throne. And notice, the prayers, the incense and the fire from the altar are mixed together in the censer and then hurled to the earth and **The earth is shaken by the prayers of God’s people!** Imagine the response of John’s audience when they read this. Marginalized, persecuted, under attack, helpless before the power of the empire, then they read John’s words. The prayers of the saints offered in heaven shake the world! The prayers of God’s people bring the glory of God to be seen and experienced on earth. That’s what the lightning and thunder was showing (see Rev. 11:19) Wait. What? Prayer did this? The earth responded to the prayers of God’s people. The prayers of God’s people advance the end time events and purposes of God. Prayer brings a manifestation of the glory of God!

Think about John himself as he sees this vision. In the opening chapter of the Revelation, John lets us know he is suffering in exile on the island of Patmos. Alone, isolated, sent there as a prisoner of Rome, removed from his family, friends, the churches he cared for, removed from all help, powerless. Eugene Peterson wrote, “On the island called Patmos, Rome showed St. John who was in charge. Every lonely hour on the barren rock was proof that Rome determined St. John’s destiny, that Rome’s word was the final word on his life, that Rome’s decree set the limits within which he was permitted to exist. St. John was alone, powerless, and bereft.” But that wasn’t the end of the story. **John was exiled on Patmos, but John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day!** That means John was praying. John knew who was really in charge. Prayer brought him to a greater truth, a new reality, another understanding, a “revelation” of what was really happening and who really had the power. Prayer brings the glory of God.

This world, all its trouble, all the violence and wickedness, all the pain of exile and isolation and powerlessness, that’s not all there is. That’s not the whole picture. There is a heavenly, eternal reality that John sees and understands. God speaks, He commands, He acts, but there must be someone aware, someone listening, someone praying. That’s what John was doing. John put himself in a place to hear God, to see the Lord and his glory. John put himself in the Spirit. In exile, on Patmos, John prayed, worshiped, and focused on the Lord.

You may be on your own Patmos, but the question is, Are you “in the Spirit” today? Are you praying? This morning did you enter into worship, did you put yourself in a position to hear

the Lord, to see the Lord, or are you pre-occupied with the problems of Patmos? Are you more focused on exile and isolation and empire than on Jesus and the throne of God. Peterson says “in the Spirit” is “a posture of receptivity before God.” It was “in the Spirit” that John receives his revelation of Jesus. It will be “in the Spirit” that we see Jesus, in control in the events and circumstances of our life! In the Spirit we find hope.

Prayer combines the experience of being on Patmos and being in the Spirit. It is the crossroads where we realize we are powerless in our own strength and yet at the same time we realize the God we are addressing in prayer can do all things. **Sometimes it takes Patmos to move us to prayer!** It may take Patmos to move you to get “in the Spirit.” Have you been there? Alone? Powerless? In desperation you call on the Lord and begin to worship and cry out to him and you find yourself “in the Spirit”, caught up in the Lord’s presence and you realize you are part of something bigger, something greater, something world changing and you know God’s got this. He’s in control. The answer is coming. That’s what prayer does!

Notice it’s prayer mixed with fire from the altar. It’s prayer and the fire of the Holy Spirit, prayer and the anointing of the Holy Spirit that changes things. Not empty repetition of words but prayer and fire born of relationship.

Prayer rises up before God John says. He lets us know God is present, God hears. Heaven grows silent as God listens. He listens to every prayer, every hope, every lament, every hesitant attempt at praying when we don’t know exactly what to say, God is listening. I know it doesn’t seem that way. I know answers are delayed. I mentioned the last prayers we heard in Revelation were from the martyrs who were crying out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood.” Revelation 6:10. Revelation 8 lets us know their prayers were heard and the answer is coming, even though the answer is delayed.

Eugene Peterson wrote, **“When we know that delay is not procrastination, that our waiting is not because of someone’s indifference, that we have not been forgotten, then the waiting is not intolerable. Important things are being done while we wait. The action on earth, seen from the heavenly place is a drama of victorious redemption...Prayer orients us to God’s design...Out of the silence of heaven, actions are prepared. The prayers are not simply stored on the altar, they are mixed with the fire of God’s Spirit and returned to the earth. [Prayer] is the most practical thing anyone can do. It is not mystical escape, it is historical engagement. Prayer participates in God’s action. God gathers our cries and our**

praises, our petitions and intercessions and uses them. The prayers that ascended to God now descend to earth.” Eugene Peterson

I don't think we realize how important, how powerful intercession and prayer is. T. F. Torrance was a Scottish Anglican Theologian. Here's what he says about the power of prayer in his book on Revelation. **“In the first six seals we see the dark hinterground of human history, the principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness that mastered the events of history and bring in their anti-Christian career such terrible calamities upon the earth. There we see the dark powers of the world apparently triumphant over the cause of God. But now we see further and deeper into the secrets of God. As the 7th seal is opened we read the profounder mysteries of world events. What is it that we see? What are the real master powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayers of the Saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth. The real cause of the world disturbance is the prayer of the church and the fire of God!”** “Certainly we may count totalitarianism as the great enemy of human peace on the plane of history but actually it is the cross of Christ that is the supreme aggressor. Actually it is the fire of God that has caused the trouble. What Hitler tried to do, for example, was to stamp out the fire, but the real initiative belonged to the living God.” **“The real aggressor is the man or the woman who prays in the name of God. The prayers of the saints and the fire of God move the whole course of the world. They are the most potent, the most disturbing, the most revolutionary, the most terrifying power that the world knows...It is through prayer that the Spirit of God comes upon the church in tongues of fire. It is through prayer that Satan falls like lightning to the ground. It is through prayer that the Voice of the Gospel thunders through the clouds of darkness. It is prayer that causes earthquakes and shakes history to its very foundations. That is the deeper secret of Heaven and of God's Book in Heaven, and the first fact revealed by the opening of the seventh seal. Jesus Christ came not only to bring peace, but a sword. He came to cast fire upon the earth. All history is tortured by that fire burning at its heart.”** T.F. Torrance

The church prays and God acts. It's time for the church to pray and time for the earth to be called to repentance again. I'm going to wrap this up and leave the rest for Sarah, but look at

verse 6. **“Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.”**

Rev. 8:6 Trumpets in the Scripture are used as a warning, a call to prepare for battle, a call to prepare for feasts and days of celebration. Trumpets sounded the beginning of the year of jubilee, announced the new year and the Day of Atonement. Trumpets were blown at the daily sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem as the lamb was placed upon the fire of the altar.

Interestingly the lamb couldn't be placed there or the trumpet sounded until the priest offered incense on the golden altar in the temple. The action on earth reflected the action in heaven. Paul says a trumpet will blast announcing the resurrection and the catching away of the church. The trumpet wakes us up and announces that God is moving in response to the prayers of the saints.

What follows as each of seven trumpets are sounded is disturbing to read. Disasters coming upon the earth. This world begins to suffer the consequences of its sin and rejection of God. One third of the earth is scorched, the seas and waters are made bitter, the sun moon and stars are darkened. John and his readers, controlled and persecuted by the empire are made to realize as they read, in spite of evidence to the contrary, **All of creation is subject to God's power and judgment.** God is sovereign and we are not! We need to remember that!

More trumpets and a scourge of demonic locusts are released, death comes to one third of the population of the earth. It concerns me that sometimes the church sounds like “Come on Lord, kill all these sinners. Avenge us.” Even the martyrs prayed that, but notice even in all of the devastation, **God continues to show mercy, calling all to repentance.** In all these plagues one third is destroyed but God spares two thirds because he is not willing that any should perish but all should come to repentance. Even in judgment there is still mercy. The trumpets warn people to repent, to turn to the Lord before the plagues come. **“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons and idols of gold...nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.” Rev. 9:20-21**

After the fourth trumpet is sounded one third of the sun, moon and stars turned dark. “A third of the day was without light and also a third of the night.” Rev. 8:12 The earth and its inhabitants are plunged into darkness, people suffering and dying in darkness as judgement comes. Sin and its consequences, the judgment that comes is horrifying. But there was another horrifying judgment of sin that came, another moment when the earth quaked and the sky turned black as night in the middle of the afternoon. It was the moment of Jesus' death on the cross as

the substitute for our sins. All of God's judgement fell on him instead of on us. We deserved the punishment. We were the guilty and Jesus was the innocent lamb, the sacrifice placed upon the altar to take away our sins and the sins of the world. Paul writes, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" 2

Corinthians 5:21

What I'm telling you is that **Judgment is coming but judgment has already come.** You don't have to suffer the judgment of God for your sins because Jesus has born that judgment for you. If you will turn to him and repent of your sins, believe in your heart that he died for you and rose again, ask him to forgive you of your sins, he will. He'll forgive your sins and cleanse your heart and mind and life. He will make you a new person in Christ. Then you don't have to fear judgement because your sins have been forgiven.

As I've looked again, Revelation 8 and 9 isn't about sinners getting what they deserve, it's about the church seeing our responsibility to pray, to pray God's will on earth as it is in heaven, to pray for God's mercy, to pray that people will heed the warning of the trumpets and get ready. Judgment is coming but judgment has already come and you can turn to Jesus and find mercy and grace and forgiveness of sins. The trumpet is about to sound and now is the time to get ready! You don't have to face the darkness of Revelation, you can come to Jesus and the light of his mercy and grace today!

It's time for the church to pray, as never before. It's time for everyone to prepare our hearts, ready for what God has prepared for this world and for his church.