

**Series:** The Scroll with 7 Seals (a study in Revelation)

**Sermon Text:** Revelation 8:1-5 Seal #7

**App:** {manuscript/slides, live polls, q/a}

*Revelation 1-7* is a hubbub of activity with visions of the risen Christ, letters He dictated to 1<sup>st</sup> century churches, and portraits of people in heaven who celebrate, sing, pray, weep, and ask important questions. Vivid images depict Jesus as the historical executor of God's last will and testament--God's final wishes and righteous judgements aimed at settling His estate and restoring the creation He so loves. Now, notice the attention-grabbing contrast of the next scene in *Revelation 8:1: When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour*. We must all wrestle with the question: "How do I feel about silence, and why?". In this always-on world, *silence* can be a welcome reprieve (to gather our thoughts/selves in stressful seasons) or a useful tool (to gain the focus of children/audiences). For others, *silence* is seen as an unwelcome and unentertaining (boring) visitor who brings us baggage we'd rather not reopen. Ironically, this *heavenly hush* speaks volumes, and despite all the conjecture, John offers us the interpretation and application. After the long interlude of *chapter 7*, let's recall that *8:1-5* flows from *the 6<sup>th</sup> seal* where in *6:10 martyred souls cried out, "O Sovereign Lord...how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"* As we're about to see, this *7<sup>th</sup> seal* is God's long-awaited response to their faith-filled cries, which naturally lends itself to this...

**BIG IDEA: God always responds to the prayers of His people.**

Let's do a quick poll: Which statement seems best? (A. Prayer prepares me for battle. B. Prayer is the battle.) The site, "My Utmost for His Highest" is a storehouse of sermon notes scribed by Bidy Chambers, the wife of the late Oswald Chambers. Their October 17) page says: "*We think of prayer as a commonsense exercise of our higher powers, as something that gets us ready to do God's work....prayer is the miracle of the redemption at work in me—a miracle which, by the power of God, produces the miracle of the redemption in others...Prayer doesn't prepare us for battle; prayer is the battle.*" I wonder, "What do you think about that?". Despite ample evidence in oodles of bible stories, cravings for quick fixes make us doubt that prayer is never a waste of time. It certainly helps when in a pinch or in a trench, but prayer is a dish best suited for a crockpot, not a microwave. In fact, *the smoke* in *verse 4* depicts God savoring prayers the way we might enjoy the aroma of a simmering stew, chili, or roast. The silence in heaven, therefore, seems to illustrate God's mercy, patience, long-suffering, and omnipotent ability to quiet the noise of heaven and earth, so He can hear from, respond to, and work with the people He partners with to renew creation! Ponder these 2 questions with your people this week: "How is God's choice to work

through people like a redo of the Garden of Eden, and what does it reveal about a believer's role in God's redemptive purposes?" (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10).

Before we believe our **BIG IDEA** (God always responds to the prayers of His people) we must edit our expectations of God, and embrace the attitude of Jesus who said, "Not my will, but yours be done." With that in mind, notice John's next observation of the *7<sup>th</sup> seal* in *verse 2*: ***Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.*** It's hard to determine if *the silence* ended here or in *verse 6*, but regardless, the mere mention of *angels* with *trumpets* is a contrast that, throughout the Bible, involves announcements and warnings from God. While there's more about *angels*, *trumpets*, and their 21-horn salute in our notes, let's stare into the sovereign **silence** of *verses 3-5* once more where ***another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.***

The symbolism gets fuzzy here because back in *5:8* John said the "***golden bowls (a.k.a. censers) full of incense...ARE the prayers of the saints***", yet *incense* is being offered here WITH *the prayers of the saints*. The problem with interpreting apocalyptic images is how they often overlap, leaving us with just the author's interpretation or insinuation. You see, *incense* appeared with *prayer* in many Old Testament texts like Leviticus 16, Psalm 141, and Ezekiel 10 where *prayer* was associated with priestly sacrifices, *the smoke* of which became either a pleasing or displeasing smell to God. In *Revelation 8*, this *8<sup>th</sup> angel steps in* like a priest and morphed *the prayers* of martyred saints (*6:10*) into *smoke* signals that ascended to **God's throne**. Such images bring up more questions to ponder with your people this week like: "What role do angels play in our prayer life and in carrying out God's responses?"; 2) "What word pictures are used in the Bible to help humans grasp spiritual concepts?"; and "What sort of power is there in a faith-filled prayer?". James 5:16-18 says to, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." In *Revelation 8*, the *8<sup>th</sup> angel* poured the *censer* of *prayers* on *the altar*, ***filled it with fire from the altar***, and then ***threw it back on the earth*** which began to *shake* like it did in *chapter 6*. Sort of like vegetable soup in a divine crockpot, the pain-soaked prayers of the martyred souls simmered for a while

before being ladled out in *judgment on the earth*. So, to summarize...the prayers of God's people were received, fused together in a stew, and dished out *on the earth*! Folks, this is irrefutable proof that *prayer* is a powerful weapon in spiritual warfare and again, where we came up with today's **BIG IDEA: God always responds to the prayers of His people.**

Ponder this profound proffer from Professor NT Wright (p.79): "*The sequence of divine judgments, necessary for evil to be conquered and God's glorious new world to emerge, is not a mechanical plan which will grind forward irrespective of human agency. God, as we have seen, is committed to working in the world through human beings. Prayer, even the anguished prayer of those who do not understand what is going on, is a vital element in this mysterious co-operation (see Romans 8:26–27).*" I wonder, "*Do you believe that?*" In a messy world where we mess up often, it's hard to fathom God still wanting to partner with us and even use our thoughts, words, and actions to repair and restore what we've broken. Yet, texts like **Revelation 8** and Romans 8 vividly illustrate how, in Christ, everything in our lives (e.g., experiences, circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, pains, traumas, frustrations, failures) is stewed into a redemptive soup and simmered over the coals of God's altar, not just to be ladled out as fiery judgments on the unrepentant but mainly to renew God's beloved creation.

This post-resurrection reality led to this powerful testimony in 1 Corinthians 15: "*Behold! a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (which) will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed...then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'* Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, (believers) be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." I wonder, "*What might you say about God's redemptive activity in your life?*" Friends, if prayer matters in spiritual warfare, then sharing our stories does too--even our weakest, most unsavory and embarrassing moments matter to what the Lord is doing here. We'll invite you to share briefly during our upcoming feast, but first, let's partake in the Lord's Supper together--the tastiest biblical image of all! As our deacons come to serve, I'd like to share something about this multi-sensory visual aid. Jesus wants this holy meal to slow us down so we can savor the life-sustaining Bread of Life and the sin-cleansing Blood of the Lamb. It echoes what we heard before from Exodus 34, that "*The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in qualities like faithfulness, steadfast love, and truth.*" We like to linger at the Lord's table to remember that God is never in a hurry. In fact, learning to embrace His steady, patient pace deepens our experience

of joy. So, those at any faith level who seek to follow Jesus by grace through faith are invited to partake with us, and for those who just aren't there yet...enjoy this rare moment of rest compliments of Jesus.

### **Bible Translation Resources (to go with last week's lesson):**

These resources are best read in this order (click on links in the articles for even more info).

- Articles from Got Questions ([True](#), [Accurate](#), [Reliable](#))
- Article: [Is the Bible 100 Percent Accurate](#)
- Article: [5 Reasons Why the Bible is True](#)
- Article: [Can we Trust the Bible?](#)
- Book: [Can we Still Believe The Bible by Craig Blomberg](#)

### **Considerations for discussion leaders:**

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

**Preparing for and applying our worship series from Revelation:** During this series it would help to repeatedly read over the chapter we're exploring. It would also be beneficial to utilize a commentary that explains the various interpretive strategies used throughout church history. If you need a suggestion, please ask! We should also be thinking about our “*next step*” in our relationship with Jesus. The Bible isn't meant simply to “*inform*” but to also “*transform*”, and a next step always begins with faith in Christ--either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Our help comes through Christ's Spirit and His church body!

### **Other application questions** (Don't forget the underlined questions in the sermon notes above!):

- How do things like hearing and smelling engage other faculties such as our memories, our feelings, etc.?
- Do you believe that prayer makes a difference, and if so, what sorts of things do you pray for?
- Sometimes God appears silent in response to our suffering, particularly the suffering of believers experiencing persecution in certain corners of the world. What hope can be found for us and other such sufferers in Revelation 8:1-5?
- What do our prayers, praises, and other responses reveal about who and what we view as worth living for?

### **Other Articles/Songs/Videos:** Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project

### **Quotes related to this passage:**

- **Why is heaven silent?** “Some believe it allows time for God to hear the prayers of the saints in verses 3–4. That is certainly possible. What is more certain is, “It is a dramatic pause that makes

even more impressive the judgments about to fall upon the earth” (Mounce, Revelation, 170). A similar idea can be seen in several Old Testament passages: The Lord is in His holy temple; let everyone on earth be silent in His presence (Hab 2:20). Be silent in the presence of the Lord God, for the Day of the Lord is near (Zeph 1:7). Let all people be silent before the Lord, for He is coming from His holy dwelling (Zech 2:13). (Akin, 169)

- **Angels and trumpets:** “Angels are the agents of heaven and act on God’s behalf. The angels ‘standing before the throne’ in 8:2 are undoubtedly the seven archangels of apocalyptic tradition; in 1 Enoch 20:2–8 they are named as: Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa’el, Gabriel, and Remiel. Here they are given seven trumpets, making them the royal heralds used in time of war (1 Sam 13:3), at the dedication of the temple (2 Chr 5:12), at the enthronement of the king (1 Kgs 1:34, 39) and often in worship. The Mishnah, an ancient Jewish source, tells us that there were 21 daily blasts in the temple, 48 on feast days (m. Sukkoth 5:5), and the trumpet was the chosen instrument announcing the eschaton (4 Ezra 6:23; Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16).” (Osborne, 150)
- **Uses for trumpets:** “After the seals (and as part of the fulfilment of the seventh seal) we have the seven trumpets. Trumpets were used for various purposes in ancient Judaism, sometimes in worship (especially at certain festivals) and, not unnaturally, in battle. One of the most celebrated of the latter occasions was when the Israelites circled Jericho and then, at the blast of their trumpets, the walls fell down flat (Joshua 6). More generally, trumpets were blown for warning, to sound the alarm (e.g. Joel 2:1; Amos 2:2; 3:6). That seems to be the point here. The trumpets herald great plagues, the worldwide version of the plagues of Egypt at the time when God was making ready to rescue his people from slavery.” (Wright, 78)
- **Trumpets:** “According to Numbers 10, called the people together, announced war, and proclaimed special times and events. They were sounded at Mount Sinai when the law was given (Exod 19:16–19), when Jericho fell (Jos 6:13–16), and when the king was enthroned (1 Kgs 1:34, 39). A trumpet will sound at the rapture (1 Thess 4:13–18) and when Christ returns (Matt 24:31). These in chapter 8 are eschatological trumpets of judgment. Christ, with all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18–20), summons His angels to carry out His will on earth.” (Akin, 170)
- **The 8<sup>th</sup> angel:** “After the angels with trumpets appear, another angel arrives in 8:3 to take the next step toward the outpouring of judgment. While some believe this is Christ because of his mediatorial work in bearing the prayers to God, I think that is unlikely. Rather, this continues the priestly task of 5:8 where the elders and living creatures carry golden bowls, or censers, of incense holding the prayers of the saints.” (Osborne, 150)
- **The place of prayer:** “Prayer activates us and engages us in spiritual warfare in the present and also the future. And it is not a battle, a war, lightly to be entered. Ephesians 6:18 tells us that prayer is essential as we engage in spiritual battle, and must be constant, alert, and persevering. We should offer these prayers and supplications for ourselves and ‘for all the saints.’ David Platt notes several aspects of the spiritual conflict we are to engage. Looking at warfare prayer in the context of Revelation 8–11, he says: 1. Our battle is fierce! — There are demons who are fighting you and want to destroy you. 2. Our prayers are effective! — Our cries go up and His kingdom comes down. 3. Our God is faithful! — He will demonstrate His power, vindicate His people, extend His mercy, and uphold His justice. (‘Life of the Christian’). Most Christians do not consider prayer to be anything at all like this. But it is! Look now at the presence of our prayers in heaven and the power they unleash...Mounce again is helpful: ‘The scene in heaven suggests that there is something sacrificial about genuine prayer. Both the believer and his prayer enter the presence of God by way of the altar’ (Revelation, 175).” (Akin, 170-171)

- **Quote by Richard Trench:** “Prayer is not getting man’s will done in heaven, but getting God’s will done on earth. It is not overcoming God’s reluctance but laying hold of God’s willingness.”
- **The censer:** “An open-topped pan that was made of bronze in the tabernacle (Exod 27:3) or gold in the temple (1 Kgs 7:50). It would have coals put in it from the altar of burnt offering and then incense to offer prayers before the Lord (Num 16:6–7). The incense combined three aromatic spices: resin and galbanum gum from shrubs and trees, mollusk scent from shellfish, and frankincense, which was also a gum resin. These were ground to powder and placed in front of the altar of incense, symbolizing the prayers of God’s people ascending to God (Psa 141:2). The incense would be placed on the coals in the censer and give forth smoke that ascended to God on his throne, together with the prayers of God’s people. Note the contrast of the smoke here with the smoke of 14:11 and 19:3, which depicts the torment of the evildoers. Here the smoke is joyous worship; there it is terrifying judgment.” (Osborne, 151)
- **Smoke and incense:** “The fact that the smoke of the incense goes up with the prayers of the saints shows that the petition of 6:9–10 is now being presented before God. In the Bible, incense is always associated with sacrifice, so that the sacrifice, accompanied by a pleasing aroma, will be acceptable to God. These verses echo Lev. 16:12–13, where the priest takes the censer full of coals off the altar before the Lord, fills his hands with incense, and puts the incense on the fire before the Lord. In Ps. 141:2 prayer is associated with incense and compared to a form of sacrifice: “May my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.” The fact that incense is offered from the altar shows that the prayers of the saints who were slain for their testimony (6:9) represent the sacrifice of their lives in the cause of Christ, and so their petition for judgment in 6:10 has been found acceptable to God...The portrayal here is modeled to a great extent on Ezek. 10:1–7, where an angel standing in the temple of the Lord takes fire from between the cherubim and scatters it over the city, emphasizing the decree of God’s judgment narrated in Ezekiel 9.” (Beale, 166-167)
- **Incense:** “In the temple, the incense was placed on coals in the censer as part of the morning and evening offering, with the ascending smoke signifying God’s acceptance of the sacrifice and prayers as a “sweet-smelling” offering (Exod 29:18; Lev 1:9; Num 18:17). That is exactly the image here, as the angel fills the censer with fire from the altar, indicating that God is pleased, and then hurls it down to earth... The first coals caused the incense and prayers to ascend to God; the second becomes fiery judgment, possibly alluding to Ezekiel 10:2–7, in which coals of fire are taken from the throne and scattered in Jerusalem.” (Osborne, 151)
- **Half/Hour:** “The duration of this silence is about half an hour. ‘Hour’ in Revelation often refers to the suddenness of the time of judgment of the wicked (3:3; 11:13; 14:7; 18:10), whereas ‘half’ is associated with ‘times’ of crisis and judgment in Dan. 7:25; 9:27; and 12:7 (which lie behind the forty-two month period of Rev. 11:3, 9; 12:6; 13:5). About half an hour might not refer so much to the precise temporal duration of the silence (about) but figuratively emphasize the suddenness and unexpectedness of a decreed judgment.” (Beale, 165)

**Bibliography** (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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