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The Smoke of the Incense with the Prayers of the Saints Revelation 8

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Silence is a powerful thing and especially so in liturgy. Maybe it's the influence of our culture which is constantly on the go that in contemporary worship we feel that we've always got to be building. Even when we're given a pause to reflect and to pray in our worship and liturgy, the piano or the organ or the band still plays quietly, either to set the mood or because real silence is just something we find uncomfortable. That makes silence, when we do experience it, all the more powerful. Sometimes we need times of silence so that we can take stock and reflect on what's happening and come out the other side of it more conscious of God's glory or of our own sinfulness and of his great mercy. Sometimes we come out of the silence more conscious of the need for our prayers.

John has been given a vision of the heavenly court, he's been invited into the Lord's throne room, to be let in on the deliberations of his council, so that he can take back a message of hope to a church on the verge of great tribulation. The redeeming lamb has taken his place, the angelic hosts and the earth-bound church have joined their voices in his thunderous praise. And the lamb has broken the seals on the scroll containing God's plans. And judgement has been announced on Jerusalem. Four terrifying horsemen ride out and the winds are poised to blow, all bringing destruction on apostate Israel for her rejection of the Messiah and her persecution of his church. At the same time, John sees an angel sent out to seal the faithful—to mark them out as belonging to God and to the lamb. They will be swept up in this great tribulation as well, but God will preserve them and see them through to the other side. The old Israel will be judged. The new Israel will be vindicated. And the nations will stand in awe to see the mighty deeds of the God of Israel who is faithful to his promises.

And as John wrote, these events were already unfolding in Judaea. Within about a year, they would reach their climax. John's vision is building. And now, suddenly, the action stops, the thunderous praises of heaven cease, and a dramatic silence falls. We'll pick up with Revelation 8:1-6.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And 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. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

When they were opened, the first six seals on the scroll announced judgement on Israel and Jerusalem and so, now that the faithful have been sealed and marked out as God's own, we might have expected hell to break loose with the seventh seal, but instead silence falls over heaven. Probably not what we expected. I think there are two things in view here, two bits of imagery of the Old Testament that are being drawn on, and I don't think it has to be one or the other. Revelation is packed full of imagery drawn from throughout the Old Testament and especially the prophets, and it's often the case that one bit of imagery calls back to multiple passages or events in the Old Testament, creating a composite or multi-faceted image here.

First, that this silence is kept as an angel ministers this offering of incense takes us back to the tabernacle and the temple. Think of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father. Luke describes him going into the temple to make the daily incense offering at the altar. And while he's in the temple making this offering, Luke writes that "the whole multitude of the people were praying outside" (Luke 1:10). The 19th Century Jewish scholar, Alfred Edersheim describes the incense offering this way and saw that our passage here was shaped

by that action in the tabernacle and temple:

"Slowly the incensing priest and his assistants ascended the steps to the Holy Place, preceded by the two priests who had formerly dressed the altar and the candlestick, and who now removed the vessels they had left behind, and, worshipping, withdrew. Next, one of the assistants reverently spread the coals on the golden altar; the other arranged the incense; and then the chief officiating priest was left alone within the Holy Place, to await the signal of the president before burning the incense. It was probably while thus expectant that the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias. As the president gave the word of command, which marked that 'the time of incense had come,' 'the whole multitude of the people without' withdrew from the inner court, and fell down before the Lord, spreading their hands in silent prayer.

It is this most solemn period, when throughout the vast Temple buildings deep silence rested on the worshipping multitude, while within the sanctuary itself the priest laid the incense on the golden altar, and the cloud of 'odours' rose up before the Lord, which serves as the image of heavenly things in this description."¹

We've seen already the prayers of the saints ascending. In the midst of tribulation, the Lord hears the prayers of his people. And he not only hears. The church, as she worships is united with the heavenly courts. Seven angels stand before the Lord and are given seven trumpets and it's difficult not to draw a connection between the seven angels John has shown us already, the angels that represent the seven churches to which he wrote, and those here. Exactly how that connection works I can't say, but part of what John reveals is that there really is something to our prayer, "on earth as in heaven". Our worship is the thin space where heaven and earth overlap and we, filled with the Spirit and united to Jesus, are drawn up into the heavenlies. Our prayers rise as incense and the Lord responds, but first the churches blow the trumps that herald the judgement to come. Brothers and Sisters, there's amazing consolation in this. In those times when it feels our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling, in those times when it can feel as

¹ *The Temple* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 127-128.

though the Lord doesn't hear us, in those times when we gather with each other to worship and just aren't "feeling it", John reminds us that our prayers really do rise as incense—not just any incense, but an incense that is immensely pleasing to the Lord. He hears. He will act, even if it's not as we expect. And his people, his church, have a share, we have a hand in bringing heaven to earth through our prayers and worship.

The other inescapable imagery here is Israel's siege of Jericho. I expect we all remember the story. On the seventh day of the siege, Israel marched around the city with the Lord's ark leading the way. They marched those circles all day in silence, and after the seventh time round, they sounded their trumpets and judgement fell on the city. The walls came crashing down and the army of Israel, the host of the Lord, swept over the city putting everyone to the sword.

So the prayers of the church in the midst of tribulation arise to the Lord and become the offering of incense on his altar, but the angel then pours his censers out on Jerusalem—the prayers of the saints mixed with the fire of God. "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." John's description of the thunder and earthquake should sound familiar. This is the glory cloud that manifests the Lord's presence. Think of the Lord descending onto Mount Sinai:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled...Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. (Exodus 19:16, 18)

Now, consider that when the people made their burnt offerings on the Lord's altar, it was he who provided the flame. They laid out the sacrifice, but the fire that consumed it would descend from heaven. To kindle any other fire in the tabernacle, what Leviticus calls "strange fire", meant death, as Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu,

discovered. But the Lord's fire was kept kindled by the priests and was used wherever flame was needed for some holy purpose. This is important here, because the Lord commanded that when the Israelites destroyed a city, it was to be burned with fire. In Deuteronomy 13:16 Moses instructs the people, "[B]urn the city and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God." If a defeated city was to be made a burnt offering to the Lord, it would have been burnt with that divine fire from the altar. And just so here, but this time it's not Jericho or some pagan Canaanite city, but Jerusalem itself, judged and cast down for her idolatry and wickedness. The Lord returns to his people, his glory cloud descending on Jerusalem, but this time in judgement to pour out the fire from his altar.

Brothers and Sisters, the saints cried out and their prayers—just as our prayers do today—they rose to the Lord's throne. He hears. And from his altar he pours out judgement on the wicked and vindicates his own. Let me read from Psalm 18. Hear the prayer of David and pay attention to the Lord's response. This part of Revelation follows the pattern of the psalm.

**In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.
Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains
trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the
wind.
He made darkness his covering, his
canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke
through his clouds.
The LORD also thundered in the
heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
And he sent out his arrows and
scattered them;**

he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

**Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were
laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your
nostrils. (Psalm 18:6-15)**

Now the trumpets sound and the Lord's judgement is unleashed. The trumpets follow a pattern similar to the seals on the scroll, with the first four separated from the final three by an interlude. And these images of judgement connected with the seals and trumpets aren't necessarily in any kind of chronological order, one following the other. They're meant, all together, to give us a sense of just how cataclysmic the Lord's judgement on Jerusalem is going to be. Jesus wasn't exaggerating when he said to his disciples, "[L]et those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" and, "[T]here will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matthew 24:16, 21). The remarkable thing is that we have the historical witness of Flavius Josephus, which not only shows us that events unfolded just as Jesus and John said they would, but also that neither was exaggerating just how horrible those days would be.

If the image of the trumpets and their heralding of doom puts Israel in the place of pagan Jericho, the announcements that come with the first four trumpets put her in the place of Egypt and Babylon. Look at 8:7.

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

The Lord had visited Egypt with plagues to deliver his people and now those plagues are visited on Jerusalem. Unbelieving and apostate Israel has become like Egypt, an unrepentant, hard-hearted enemy of God and his people. Josephus describes the aftermath of the Roman's scorched earth policy:

"Pitiful was the aspect of the country, sites formerly beautified with trees and parks

now reduced to an utter desert and stripped bare of timber; and no stranger who had seen the old Judaea and the entrancingly beautiful suburbs of her capital, and now beheld her present desolation could have refrained from tears or suppressed a sigh at the greatness of the change. For the war had ruined all the marks of beauty, and no one who knew it of old, coming suddenly upon it, would have recognized the place, but, though beside it, he would have looked for the city.”²

John goes on in verses 8-9:

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Not being as steeped in the Old Testament and its imagery as John’s hearers were, we probably find this confusing at first glance—right along with Jesus’ saying, “Even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen” (Matthew 21:21). What we need to recognise is that in biblical imagery kingdoms are often described as “mountains”. Ps 46:2, for example expresses faith in time of such trouble, “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.” Or consider the words of Jeremiah speaking judgment on Babylon:

Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the LORD, which destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain. (Jeremiah 51:25)

For years I found that saying of Jesus about casting a mountain into the sea confusing. Sure, with faith all things—at least so long as they’re in accord with Gods will—are possible. But why would casting a mountain into the sea be God’s will? Well, in ordinary terms it wouldn’t be. But then you read the Old Testament and you draw the connection with this

announcement of judgement in Revelation and it makes sense. When Jesus said that he was still talking about the judgement to come on Israel and his words make perfect sense in light of this vision of the prayers of the saints in the midst of persecution rising to the heavenly courts, crying out for deliverance and for judgement on her persecutors. The prayers of the saints are offered to the Lord in faith, and he hears—and, most importantly, he now acts. The “mountain”, apostate Israel, is cast down. Brothers and Sisters, consider again the power of prayer. It was the Roman General Titus who defeated and destroyed Jerusalem, but ultimately Jerusalem was brought down by the saints, because they cried out in faith for deliverance and the Lord heard and acted.

So the image isn’t literal, as if Mount Zion itself were scooped out of the earth and cast into the Mediterranean or something like that. In biblical imagery the sea often represents the nations. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, torn down stone from stone, and the people scattered—forced into exile amongst the nations. But, again, the imagery is that of the plagues that fell on Egypt: the water turning to blood and the creatures living in them dying as a result. Because of unfaithfulness, Israel has become like pagan Egypt. And, importantly, the prayers of Jesus’ people were an integral part of it. How often do we think of our prayers in that light?

Now verses 10-11:

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.

Now the reversal of Israel’s position before the Lord becomes even clearer. The image of the star falling from heaven comes from Isaiah’s prophecy against Babylon (Isaiah 14:12-15), but the name of the star, wormwood, takes us again back to the Exodus from Egypt. When Moses led Israel from the Red Sea into the wilderness, they came to a place called Marah, which means “bitter”. The water there was bitter and undrinkable. But the Lord showed Moses a piece of wood.

When Moses threw the wood into the water, the water became sweet. Now, here, it’s all reversed. This star named wormwood, which means “bitter”, makes the sweet water bitter, leading to the death of many.

The Lord used that episode during the Exodus to make a point to his soon-to-be covenant people. He says to them in Exodus 15:26:

“If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.”

The Lord’s promise to Israel was that if she kept his commandments, he would heal them, but the flip side of that was that should they not keep his commandments, he would deal with them as he had just dealt with the Egyptians. The Lord was patient with his people. When they followed after Baal rather than the Lord, rather than rain down plagues, he gave them wormwood to drink as a reminder and a call to repentance. Jeremiah warned the people and their false prophets repeatedly, using this image of bitter wormwood. So did Amos, warning Israel, saying: “O you who turn justice to wormwood” (Amos 5:7). Consider that’s just what the leaders of Israel did in crucifying Jesus. Think of the sponge dipped in vinegar held to his lips. Justice turned to wormwood.

Now the fourth trumpet, which is as far as we’ll go today.

The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!” (Revelation 8:12-13)

Again, this imagery is symbolic. We see this imagery of heavenly bodies going

² *The Jewish War*, vi.i.1 (Loeb Ed.)

dark, being eclipsed, or falling from the sky throughout the Prophets and it's used to depict the fall of nations and kings. Frederic Farrar in his book on the early Church sums up the fulfilment of what John sees in his vision: "[R]uler after ruler, chieftain after chieftain of the Roman Empire and the Jewish nation was assassinated and ruined. Gaius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, all died by murder or suicide; Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa, and most of the Herodian Princes, together with not a few of the leading High Priests of Jerusalem, perished in disgrace, or in exile, or by violent hands."³ But, again, the cataclysmic imagery here also calls back to the penultimate plague the Lord visited on Egypt: the darkening of the sun.

And then John sees an eagle overhead and as it flies, it cries out "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blast of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!" This is a transition from the first four trumpets to the final three, each of which announces a "woe" that will come upon Jerusalem, but it's also another image drawn from the Prophets to remind us that this is all about the judgement of unbelieving Israel. Hosea 8:1 reads:

**Set the trumpet to your lips!
One like an eagle⁴ is over the house of
the LORD,
because they have transgressed my
covenant
and rebelled against my law.**

Hosea's concern was Israel's faithlessness and idolatry. The Lord's bride had prostituted herself to foreign gods and stood condemned. Judgement was coming. And John now here sees First Century Israel standing under the same judgement. She not only rejected the Lord's Messiah and put him to death, but she has also rejected, persecuted, and even killed his people. As Jesus promised, she had a generation to hear the preaching of the apostles and of the early church, she had a generation to repent and to embrace Jesus the Messiah. And while many did, the nation and her leaders refused and continued to follow the same policies, the same philosophies, the same politics that

Jesus had condemned forty years before. Israel had broken the covenant. The Lord was patient. But finally the sanctions of the law were visited on the a nation of covenant breakers. The kingdom was being taken from the old Israel so that it could be handed over to Jesus the Messiah and to his new Israel. The old temple, long apostate, had to be cast down so that the nations could be brought to Jesus' new temple, his church, so that the everyone, Jew and gentile alike, would see that the promises of the covenant are fulfilled in Jesus himself.

That's as far as we'll go in Revelation today, but what does it all mean for us? How does something that took place in the First Century shape our faith and practice today? Brothers and Sisters, I think the most significant take-away from Chapter 8 is what it shows us of the position of the saints and their prayers before the Lord. In particular, think of what Jesus tells us to pray in light of what we read here. Jesus tells us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven" and I can find no better illustration of what that looks like than what we see in Revelation. The Church in tribulation cries out to the Lord. She cries out as a suffering and persecuted people, pleading for the Lord's deliverance—and notably pleading for the Lord's judgment on her enemies. There's an imprecatory element to the prayers of the Church in Revelation and that's something that contemporary Christians struggle with, but those imprecatory prayers calling for judgement on the unrepentant wicked are there throughout Scripture, especially in the Psalms. But the Church doesn't cry out in desperation alone; she cries out in faith and in hope, because she knows the faithfulness of God. This is where those imprecatory prayers calling for judgement fit in. God's people know that even as he redeems and makes new, he also judges evil. To pray, "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven" is a call for both deliverance and judgement. The two go hand in hand. But most of all, consider how we see here our prayers rising to the throne of God. Sometimes it may feel like our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. Sometimes we may feel unheard. But John shows us that our prayers do, indeed, ascend to God's throne and that they are the offering made on the heavenly altar of incense. Brothers and Sisters, as we who have been united with Jesus and filled with God's Spirit

pray, our prayers cannot but be heard, for it is Jesus himself, our high priest, who brings them before his Father. So pray, Friends, "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven," and do so in faith knowing that Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again and that he now stands in the heavenlies to present our offerings to God.

³ *The Early Days of Christianity* (New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin, 1882), 453.

⁴ LXX ἀετός