

Revelation 8:1-6

Listening God

Did you feel the mountains tremble? So goes a song we sing, and for some people across the UK this week it was a reality as the largest earthquake since 1984, measuring 5.3 on the Richter scale, hit Gainsborough Lincolnshire at 1am Wednesday morning. I went on holiday there once, actually. I wonder whether the house we stayed in was affected. Approximately 250 earthquakes hit the UK each year, but only a tenth of them are actually felt. In Western Turkey, where John was writing the book of Revelation, they were much more common and much more severe. In AD17 a massive quake destroyed “twelve cities in one night” (Eusebius), including Pergamum, Sardis, and Philadelphia. Massive funds were put into rebuilding them. In AD 60 it happened again, bringing the ruin of Colossae and Laodicea among others. Smyrna was destroyed in AD 178, a little after our period, and it continues to suffer major tremors on a regular basis.

Earthquakes, in the ancient Pagan world were usually seen as a sign of the gods’ displeasure. They were frightening not only in their own terms but also because you then had to find out, and make amends for, whatever you had done to upset the deities. But in the Judeo-Christian worldview, earthquakes tended to be seen more simply as a sign of God’s awesome presence. Richard Bauckham, in an important 1977 article, sums up John’s vision as, *“the God whose voice once shook Sinai will once again shake heaven and earth.”* (Climax of Prophecy, p.209)

We’ll return to the awesome presence of God in the third part of this sermon.

The Seventh Seal

The passage, Revelation 8:1-6, begins with the words, **“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”** (8:1) These are the seven seals that bind up the scroll we came across in Chapter Five (5:1-9) - that scroll which only the Lamb of God was worthy to open and read. Six of them were opened in chapter 6, and we then had a different perspective detour in chapter 7. So here at the beginning of Chapter 8 we have the seventh and final scroll - seven of course, being the number of perfection or completion.

It’s interesting that each of the six seals coming before unleashed some kind of calamity, but when the seventh seal is broken it reveals the presence of God. Later on in Revelation we come across Seven Trumpets and Seven Bowls of God’s wrath. Again, in each of these sequences, the seventh in the series ushers not so much another calamity as the revealed presence of God - a theophany, if you want to use the theological term. So Revelation never

paints a picture of God simply flinging thunderbolts from on high, but through this repeated structural pattern, not to mention a host of other ways, it shows God very personally involved, interacting, seeking relationship with us. The ultimate, (which is what the number “seven” stands for), the ultimate event of world history - indeed the ultimate event of any of our lives, is neither cataclysmic disaster nor orgasmic nirvana, but to meet with God, face to face. So as we work through these verse I want to show that *God listens, God answers, and God appears.*

God Listens: Silence in Heaven

As God’s revealed here at the start of Chapter 8 we read, **“there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”** Partly it’s a silence evoked by God’s awesome presence, but more importantly perhaps, it’s a preparation for the verses that will follow about the prayers of the saints. Jewish tradition, which included a good deal of speculation about the nature of heaven, affirmed that in the Fifth Heaven, the angels praise God at night, but are silent during the day so that the praises of Israel can be heard by God, or in other places that they simply cease every now and then so the petitions of God’s people and the earth can be heard. No-one’s suggesting this is actually what happens in heaven, but it’s symbolic language to affirm that God listens. And this understanding may well have been in the background of John’s mind.

All the noise, the praise, the worship of creation, the shouts - everything ceases, so that in the silence God can listen to the prayers of his people. Do you ever wonder whether he hears your prayer? Revelation 8, with its image of the silence in heaven, tells us that he does. This is no empty silence. It’s the silence of a God who sets aside his own agenda, clears the business of the day, stops machinery of his court, and makes room to listen. Or to put it another way, listening to our prayers *is* God’s agenda; listening to our prayers *is* the business of God’s day; listening to our prayers *is* part of the machinery of his court. In v.2 John sees **“seven angels given seven trumpets.”** But nothing happens with these trumpets until the prayers of God’s people go up in the next few verses. Everything is put on hold for God to listen to our prayers.

God Listens: Incense

Next, John sees **“Another angel who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of 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.”** (8:3-4) Let’s think about what’s going on here: Something is being mingled with the prayers - to enhance them perhaps, to transform them perhaps, to help them on their journey to the presence of God. Later on, at the end of this sermon, we’ll watch a short film-poem entitled Prayer Journey. It describes how our prayers go

on a journey of the Spirit's moulding. They may start out full of anger - even hatred - but through the Spirit they're moulded to find final expression in the surrendered prayer: "Come Lord Jesus."

Many commentators take this image in Chapter 8 to be a counterpart to the image in Chapter 6 v.9, of the saints crying out for vengeance from under the altar. When I preached on that passage a few weeks back I noted that their prayers were *not* given a "yes" answer because in fact they are told to wait. Simple vengeance, it seems, isn't the answer. In chapter 6 we certainly witness a cry of the heart, but here in Chapter 8 I feel something much more profound going on. The prayers are being mingled with incense, sweetened as they rise to the heavenly throne. It's not a matter of some go-between providing silver-tongued mediation for us, but it's an image of the transformative journey our prayers must often take. St Paul says, **"When we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us, with groans too deep for words."** (Rom 8:26) Maybe this is a different way of expressing something similar.

Sacrificial Worship

Now, throughout the Bible, incense is associated with sacrificial worship. An offering's being made. So here too, the prayers of the saints - which of course are the prayers of you, me, and everyone who bears the seal of Christ in our hearts and lives - become an act of sacrificial worship - and this happens in three ways.

First of all, we're taken back again to Chapter 6 and the cries of those who had been **"slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained."** (6:9) Whenever we give ourselves in faithful service to the truth of Christ - whenever we die to self, taking up our cross, as Jesus put it - we engage in sacrificial worship - and this is the prayer that God hears.

Secondly, our prayers, as Christians, are made *through* Jesus. We recognise our failure and need for forgiveness; we recognise we're unworthy to approach God's throne; yet we also claim the effectiveness of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross - the cleansing of his blood over our sins. This is why we have boldness and confidence and right to enter God's presence. So our prayers before God are offered through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

Thirdly, however, we come back to the prayer journey. It's an aspect of our sanctification - as God says "no" or "wait" to us and our spirits are refined. That's a sacrificial process. How many of us here enjoy it when our prayers receive the answer "no" or "wait"? None of us initially enjoy that. Sometimes we become grateful for it as things evolve, but it's a sacrificial journey as we allow our prayers and spirits to be transformed by *the* Spirit of Christ. As you ponder this image of prayers mixed with incense, think about your own prayers and how God refines them.

We have a listening God. But we also have an answering God, and we see that in the next half verse: **“Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth.”** (8:5a) God listens - God answers.

God Answers: Fire

At first sight this image of the angel hurling a fire-laden censer to the earth seems frightening. It's hardly surprising that many commentators see it as God's "yes" to the cries for vengeance we heard from under the altar in chapter 6. Yet I've already argued that these cries are not answered with a "yes". Rather, they receive a "wait" - and I believe that part of that "wait" is so that the prayers can undergo the journey of refinement. Of course, God does also pay heed to the pain of a suffering world, and he *will* reveal both his anger and his justice - both of which become apparent later in Revelation. However, the bringing of justice and even the expression of God's anger, is a far cry from merely satisfying unrefined human cries for vengeance.

So what is this fire all about? Occasionally in the Bible, heavenly fire is seen as a heavenly judgement (eg 2 Kings 1:10-14), but much more often, and especially in the context of worship going up, heavenly fire is seen as the consummation of the offering - God's total acceptance of the sacrifice. Look at this formative passage from Leviticus 9, for example: **“Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, he stepped down. Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.”** (Lev. 9:22-24)

And we can find other examples from the lives of Gideon (Judges 6:21), Elijah, (1 Kings 18:38), David, (1 Chronicles 21:26) and Solomon (2 Chronicles 7:1). The symbolism of this fire is that the worship and sacrifice is totally accepted. Throughout the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is also likened to a fire, purifying our lives as we offer them in sacrificial worship before God. God meets our offering with the fire of his Spirit, consuming our worship, engaging us in this process of sanctification.

Passionate Consummation

Let me ask you just to ponder this image for a moment: the life-prayers of God's people - rising, mingled with incense, in sacrificially-lived out worship before the throne of God: Your prayers and mine; your life and mine, and met by the fire of God's Spirit, to refine, to receive, to

consume entirely. Revelation speaks of a passionate God - and a God who calls for a passionate people. This image of heavenly fire isn't one of vengeance or judgement, but one of passionate consummation. And this is what happens when our lives are totally consecrated, through Jesus and *his* sacrifice, to God.

God listens, he answers, and finally then, God appears.

God Appears: The earthquake

As the fire flies toward the earth, not in judgement, but because the earth is the place where our lives are lived, we read, **“and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”** In Revelation John speaks about lightning and thunder on four occasions. The first is when he describes the heavenly throne and God's presence on it in Chapter 4. The language is deliberately evocative of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, when the Law was given. The second occasion is here in Chapter 8, where **“an earthquake”** is also mentioned. The third occasion is in 11 v.19, where a **“great hailstorm”** is also added into the phenomena; and the final occasion is chapter 16 v.18-21 where the earthquake's described as **“severe”** and the hail is also expanded upon. Structurally, what this shows isn't so much that the traumas of Revelation get worse as the book progresses, but that the presence of God becomes more intense. He listens, he answers, and he appears.

Come Lord Jesus and the Journey of Prayer

But how does that translate into our lives? Once again I want to return to the theme I've spoken of throughout this sermon - the journey of prayer. You see, in fact, every prayer offered in the spirit of this journey, ends up being the prayer of the last words of Revelation: **“Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”** (Rev. 22:20). **“Amen”** means “we agree”, “so be it”, “truly”. **“Come, Lord Jesus”** is an expression of personal surrender before the sovereignty of God. So our prayers may begin with all sorts of pleas and desires; they may be unuttered, unformulated, the simple living out before God of broken lives in a broken world. But as we bring them before a listening, refining God in sacrificial worship, they end up as three simple words: **“Come, Lord Jesus.”**

The book of Revelation is all about the sovereignty, yet the nearness of God. The simple prayer, “Come Lord Jesus” points to both of these, as we submit to his sovereignty and long for his nearness. God listens; God answers; God appears.

What is your prayer life like? Do you pray regularly, persistently, passionately and humbly? Maybe you've become a little jaded in prayer. Revelation is written to inspire us and challenge us to live lives of sacrificial worship, and to bring honest prayers from the heart, but

also prayers that are open to being worked on *with* the Spirit, mingled with heavenly incense as they're offered to God, as our lives are transformed and refined by the fire of God. Will you make that kind of offering before the throne of God today? Will you both let loose and lay down the desires of your soul before him? Will you bring your life before him and say the words, Come Lord Jesus?

I'd like to end by showing you a short prayer film. The words are by Aubrey Taylor, the music is Brian Eno, and the paintings are by Ecuadorian artist, Eduardo Kingman. We'll watch this film and then spend a few minutes in response.