

*All Things New: Silence and Prayer*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Zephaniah 1:1-7; Psalm 19; Revelation 8:1-6*

Our final Scripture reading today is from Revelation 8:1-6. May God richly bless us so that we may hear His perfect and holy Word with ears to hear. “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. Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.”

“The seventh seal” is a term a lot of people worldwide have heard of, but not for the reasons you’d expect. In 1957, Swedish director Ingmar Bergman directed a film called *The Seventh Seal*. It’s the story of a disillusioned knight coming home from the Crusades, facing his home ravaged by the black plague, and winding up in a chess game with a personification of Death. It’s considered to be one of the masterpieces of cinema, and scenes from it are honored and parodied to this day. It was inspirational to a lot of major filmmakers.

The film has little to do with the book of Revelation, but one of the key questions it asks about is the silence of God. The film was more concerned with one of our trigger points, mainly, “Why does God seem silent in the face of human suffering?” That’s not what the silence in the first part of Revelation 8 is about, but it’s good for us to talk about silence and prayer, the two main themes of this passage. It’s my hope that we can get some new insights into these two subjects that often intimidate us so that we might practice them more in a biblical and God-honoring way.

As you might remember, Jesus has been opening the scroll given to Him by the Father. He’s the only one who can break its seals and read what is written inside. As the seals were broken, different significant and world-changing events happened, from the spread of the gospel to the spread of famine, disease, and death. We had an interlude where God sealed believers with His name and the name of Jesus to be protected spiritually from the persecution to come. And now we reach the seventh seal.

The seventh seal on the scroll, unlike the other seals, has many different components. The scroll is now open; the record of God’s plan of salvation and judgment can be read and brought about. The seventh seal brings the seven trumpet judgments of God, which we’ll read together next week. Seven angels who stand before God receive these trumpets, and when they sound, the perfect judgment of God is poured out on the universe. Those trumpet judgments will be loud and intense and stunning; no one will miss the blast.

But before that happens, as the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about a half hour. We have to ask – what is that about? The silence is short in the grand scheme of things. Yet it is powerful and dramatic. The silence in heaven is a hush before the throne of God. It isn't about God speaking to us or answering our prayers the way we want to like in the movie *The Seventh Seal*. It's about wonder and respect and gravitas. It is a poignant moment. As the scroll is finally unsealed and the plan of God revealed, everyone is awestruck. No one says a word. The salvation of humanity, this great plan that Peter said even angels long to look into, is opened, and everyone is dumbstruck. There is nothing to say. God's scroll of redemption and justice, of mercy and judgment, silences the host of heaven and all the saints.

It seems like a simple thing, almost an aside, this half-hour of silence. But it captured my attention in a big way, so I want us to think about this for a minute, something to write down as one of our thoughts to ponder this week: *How comfortable am I with silence? How do I relate silence to my relationship with God? Am I ever silent before God?*

Now before we start to answer those questions, I want to point out that the biblical witness is ambivalent towards silence. In Deuteronomy 27, after forty years of wandering in the desert, Moses commanded the assembly of Israel to keep silence and hear, for he said, "today you have become the people of the Lord your God." Psalm 4 warns those who might plan evil to be careful not to sin, to search their hearts, and to be silent. Proverbs 17:28 says, "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue." God repeatedly says He will silence the wicked and the wrongdoer, so it is a form of justice. Jesus was silent before His accusers whose claims weren't worthy of a reply. God commands in Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." There are times to be silent before God out of respect, awe, and holy fear.

Yet silence is not a universal good. The psalmist repeatedly cries out that he cannot be silent, that he must shout the praises of God. Esther is warned that she cannot stay silent before the king, her husband, in order to save Israel from a wicked man's plans. And many people, from Job to Jeremiah the prophet, cannot stay silent in the face of suffering and persecution. They cry out to God, asking for relief, asking God not to be silent and deaf to their cries. Silence is even associated with death; Psalm 115 says that the dead go down to silence and cannot praise the Lord (which was true before the coming of Christ to raise all of God's people).

So when we're talking about silence, we're not saying we should just duck tape our mouths shut. We shouldn't be silent in the face of oppression and persecution, and we shouldn't be afraid to pray our prayers and lift our praises to God. But we need to think about what it means to be silent before the Lord – what silence means to us.

We live in a place of unending noise. As I was typing this sentence, a train was going by. The heat was blowing air in a vent. When those noises went away, I could hear the slow whine of the fans in my computer. We almost can't get to a place of complete silence. We have been exposed to so much noise that some of us, like me, have a condition called tinnitus where we always hear a tone or a hum or a noise.

But we hate it when it gets that quiet, don't we? That kind of silence makes us nervous, scared, concerned. We all think something's going to happen when it's too quiet. I grew up in a home where a TV was always on somewhere. From the early morning 'til late at night, with a possible break for dinner, a TV was usually on...and the older I got, the more things you could watch, the more news that was on, the more common it was a TV was on. If not a TV, a record player, a CD player, a tape player, the radio...a boom box, a Walkman, a Discman, headphones everywhere. Now we stream it all, we have podcasts and Netflix and Spotify, but it's the same thing. Silence unnerves us. We even have white noise machines to help us go to sleep at night.

What are we so afraid of? Why are we unwilling to sit and be silent? It's a trend that has come over into the church too. It used to be that a lot of folks arrived early for church to enter into the sanctuary and be quiet before the Lord before the service started. There used to be silence in the church service, times of reflection. But it doesn't matter if you're old school or new school, silence is going away. Growing up in a typical church, every week there was five minutes of prelude music for the service. Now, in many churches, there are keyboards played in-between songs so there aren't any uncomfortable silence. Pastors pray over a soundtrack so that those awkward pauses aren't too awkward.

For some, perhaps, silence feels like wasted time, time I could be doing something else. It's awkward. Did somebody forget to do something? Is someone supposed to be speaking right now? But more than anything else, silence gives us the opportunity, sometimes even requires us, to contemplate, to think. We are scared of silence because we are afraid of dealing with ourselves and the state of our souls. We are so used to a state of busy-ness and hurriedness that when we stop for a moment, we're not sure what to do with ourselves.

And perhaps what is scariest, in a weird sort of way, is that if we stop long enough, if we're silent long enough, we might actually hear God speaking to us. After all, God spoke to young Eli in a hush in his sleep; after sending a powerful wind and an earthquake and a fire by Elijah, God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. God can come with full dramatics, but He's often heard in the quiet. When Jesus was baptized, the voice came from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased – listen to Him!" We pray and we talk to God and we give Him our requests and if we're doing well, we praise Him and honor Him with our words too; we pray with the Lord's Prayer that God's Kingdom would come and His will would be done. But even when we turn to Him in prayer, we rarely listen – because we don't expect a response. Or maybe we cut off the response at the pass because it might change our lives. God might ask us to do something we are uncomfortable doing, so we talk over Him.

What I'm saying is advice I want to take, so hear me clearly when I say I need to take this under consideration and learn from it too. But we need to be silent before the Lord. We need to spend enough time in prayer to give Him time to not only answer us, but to bring new things to mind, for us to really listen thoughtfully. We need to set aside time just to be quiet before the Lord to prepare our hearts for each day, to be mindful of His presence with us, not just because we know it in our heads as something we read or something we heard in church but because we sense Him with us in our daily time with Him. Because God really does want to speak with us. And not just to tell us to do hard things, but to remind us of His love for us, His grace, His mercy. He wants to answer our prayers and talk to us, not just have us guess by the results!

And I am going to work to include more time for silence in our worship, particularly in our prayers. In the last couple of months, we have been trying to address the Holy Spirit and giving Him room to move; well, that likely means more silence. Not a half-hour every worship service – this passage isn't our pattern to follow! But time to confess sin; time to heal; time to listen; time to just enjoy the fellowship of others without having to say anything; time to appreciate God is with us through the Holy Spirit all the time. This great silence in Revelation 8 is a moment where evil waits in horror while the saints wait in anticipation of what God will do. May we know what it is to be silent before the Lord and know His peaceful presence.

Before we finish today, I want to look at the rest of this short passage and what it says about prayer. An angel with a golden censer offers up incense to God. But along with that incense are the prayers of all the saints. The smoke of the incense and the prayers of the saints go up before God. Then the angel fills the censer with fire from the altar and brings another judgment and signs of God's glory on the earth.

What does this tell us about prayer? I think what it tells us might really change our mindset towards what prayer is. If I understand this passage correctly, what it tells me is this: *prayer is the purest offering we can make to God.* Let's think back to the Old Testament and the sacrifices made before the altar. The sins of the people were atoned for with the gift of an animal. No atonement for sin could be made without an exchange of life – the life of the animal in exchange for your life, which should have been forfeit due to your rebellion against God. There were various sacrifices that you could make to the Lord, some that were required, some that you could give just because you loved the Lord.

And there was a separate altar just for incense. It was offered twice a day by the high priest. It was a regular part of the offerings thanking God for His faithfulness – grain offerings, cereal offerings. Interestingly, God commanded in Leviticus 5:11 that you could not put incense on a sin offering. Numbers 5:15 explains more clearly that any offering made to remind the people of sin in any way could not have incense on it. And there were severe consequences for offering improper incense before the Lord – thousands died for doing it against the command of the Lord.

But we look at the altar in Revelation 8, and what is mixed with the incense? The prayers of the saints. This is actually pretty surprising, because our typical response would be to think that the good works of the saints would be on the altar before the Lord. We want to do good works; God created us to do good works. But that's not what's always before the Lord in heaven on the altar. Sometimes in churches we talk about giving our time, talents, and treasures to the Lord's work. All super important, and we'll talk about that in our annual meeting today. But those aren't on the altar either. What are on the altar are the prayers of the saints.

And notice that the prayers are mixed with the incense. What does that mean? It means that your prayers to God are not sin offerings. You cannot make an appropriate sin offering for yourself, and you don't have to. Jesus is the sin offering made on your behalf, His life given for yours. Because of His sacrifice for you, you are no longer condemned for your actions against God. Instead, through the blood of Jesus, all your sins are forgiven, and you are set free from the law of sin and death. You have eternal life.

Your prayers are an offering acceptable to God that deeply pleases Him. In biblical language, they create a sweet-smelling aroma before God. When we pray, God looks upon us with favor. When we come before Him and bring our lives into His presence through prayer, He is pleased. And those prayers are before the throne of God. They do not get ignored or set aside. If I read this right, they are always before the Father.

This might radically change the way we think about prayer. So much of our prayers are about what we need or what our friends and family or church needs. We think of prayer primarily as a way to change the outcome of something that we are nervous about. But in the Lord's Prayer, we learn to pray for God's name to be glorified, for His Kingdom to come in all its fullness, and for His will to be done. We learn to praise Him from the psalms. God listens to prayer; God answers prayer, though often not in the ways we hope or expect. It is never wrong to bring your thoughts and hopes and anxieties and fears to God in prayer.

But what we should always keep in mind is that our prayers are an offering to God. This week, I had a co-worker who was very upset because her best friend has cancer, and it's not getting better, treatment doesn't seem to be working, she's got a husband and young children, and she honestly didn't know the point of praying if God has determined the outcome already. One thing I mentioned is that we don't know how God will determine outcomes – we don't know how our prayers will affect God's choices. God may be pleased to give us what we're asking for in prayer. But had I been in study on this passage that early in the week, I probably would have also answered, "Regardless of the answers God gives us to our prayers – yes, no, wait, you don't really know what you're asking for – when you pray, God hears you and God loves you and you are making a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord just in asking Him."

Knowing that we've pleased the Lord by coming to Him...doesn't that really change how we look at prayer? It makes me think about it differently. It requires me to shift my prayer focus from a self-orientation to a God-orientation. If I pray for what I get out of it – if I pray to get my requests answered – I'm going to wind up sad and disappointed a lot of the time, because God has to say "no" to many of our prayers to remain being a good and perfect Father to us and to all believers. But if I pray with the goal in mind of pleasing God and having Him smile on me in pleasure, if I pray knowing that God loves me even when He must say "no," if I pray without making my relationship with God contingent on His answers, knowing that I will draw closer to Him and Him to me through my praying, then that changes the whole atmosphere.

When prayer is not about what I want but what God wants, then I can even see the "no" answers as part of God's goodness to me. And when I pray, regardless of what I'm praying for or how I'm praising Him or if I'm sitting in silence with Him – which is just as much prayer as a whole bunch of words – we are putting our offering before Him. And He is pleased. You want to do something for God to please Him? Pray.

Friends, let us find time to be silent before the Lord. May we pray to Him, bringing Him all sorts of requests and needs, but also prayers of praise and desires for His will to be done. May we thank Jesus that we do not have to make a sin offering for ourselves, but instead we can offer pleasing sacrifices of prayer before the Lord. And may we thank the Holy Spirit for leading us and guiding us closer to the Father and Son through silence and prayer.