

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: It was probably about 15 years ago that I heard about a new service from a company called Lindsay Scientific in Vermont that offered *“a direct link to the Heavens that can electronically beam prayers, hopes and dreams into space, into time, ... into forever.*

“Our equipment accepts your letters or drawings, and launches them electronically at the speed of light on a powerful microwave radio beam into deep space. As soon as they are sent, they become available to be intercepted by God...

“Until now, the best you could do was to say prayers aloud in the hope that He would hear... We make possible a prayer that physically exists—not just a thought or an utterance... Your prayer, made from the same ‘stuff’ as the light of the Sun and the stars, will be ‘out there’, ready to say to any Heavenly Power who gives it attention: ‘I am here, Lord, and I wanted to tell You...’

“Customers will receive by mail a handsome 8.5 x 11 inch Broadcast Certificate suitable for framing. The cost is \$9.95 per page... With our service you can place your prayer directly before God in Heaven.”

- B. Well, that’s crazy! And I have a better idea. I want to take you today to an amazing passage in **Rev. 8:1-5**. Years ago I read a book about Revelation by Eugene Peterson. He took the title for his book from a remarkable poem on prayer by the 17th century British pastor, **George Herbert**. The poem, entitled “Prayer (I),” is simply metaphorical phrases describing prayer, and one of them, drawn from this passage before us, described prayer as *“reversed thunder.”* These few verses give us a unique and vivid picture of prayer and what it accomplishes. [Read vs.] The first stunning thing about this picture is this:

I. PRAYER GETS HEAVEN’S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION (8:1)

- A. We’re obviously stepping into the middle of a very mysterious part of the Bible. John is describing the stunning vision God gave him when John was in exile on the little island of Patmos, off the coast of modern Turkey. There are lots of different ideas about the timetable and structure of this book, but one thing is sure here: up to this point, this has been a very loud book! Heaven has been full of the sounds of worship—vast angel choirs, voices like the sound of many rushing waters, *flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.*” But now it says, *“there was silence in heaven for about half an hour,”* and when we look to see why the first thing we see are the seven great archangels standing before God, and seven trumpets are put into their hands. **Trumpets are the harbingers of judgment,** as when the seven priests’ seven trumpets sounded on the seventh day after seven circuits of Jericho brought the walls down. **Trumpets are also the heralds of freedom**—the Year of Jubilee, of God’s peace and the canceling of debts, the coming of God. The trumpets of the seven archangels are held at the ready as all heaven falls silent.
- B. One reason for the silence is that the breaking of that seventh seal portends terrible judgment, to unfold as each trumpet sounds. Look back to **Rev. 6:9-10**, which is telling us about the breaking of the seven seals on God’s great scroll. As the first four seals are broken, God releases the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Now the fifth seal in **v.9-10**... Now read **8:3**... the prayers we read about here surely include the prayers of the martyrs pleading for God to judge the earth, the very thing the trumpets will signal.
- C. Another reason for the silence seems to be the rapt attention God gives to prayer. Just as all was silent in the Old Testament tabernacle when they priests made the incense offering, so here in heaven it is quiet. Remember the little verse by A. A. Milne,
- “Hush! Hush! Whisper who dares!
Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.”*

V.3 speaks of *“the prayers of all the saints,”* so our prayers are in view here also! Our prayers are among those that silence heaven. **R. H. Charles** wrote, *“The needs of the saints are more to God than*

all the psalmody of heaven.” **William Barclay** said, “Even the music of heaven and even the thunder of revelation are stilled so that God’s ear may catch the whispered prayer of the humblest of his trusting people.” Turns out, we didn’t need microwaves! **Vv.3-4...**

II. PRAYER IS THE INCENSE OF HEAVEN IGNITED FROM THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE

- A. The biblical symbol for prayer is incense. In the holy place of the OT tabernacle—what I like to call the living room of God—there was a lamp stand, a table of bread, and an altar of incense. In **Ex. 30:34-38** God gave Israel a very specific recipe for incense and he ordered, “*Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD.*” Morning and evening incense was burned there in God’s presence, plus being added to various sacrifices. Now we learn that what God prescribed for Israel so long ago in the wilderness was a kind of re-enactment of what was always happening in heaven. **Rev. 5:8** says that the 24 Elders around God’s throne in heaven carried “*golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*”
- B. The thing about incense is that it requires fire to release its fragrance. It’s different from perfume. With incense, hot coals or fire is necessary to release its beautiful aroma.
- C. The fire that ignites our prayers, turning them into incense, comes from the altar of sacrifice (v.3). In the OT tabernacle there were two altars, the golden altar of incense in the holy place, and the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard outside. The fire from the altar of sacrifice was the only fire that could be used to ignite the incense. The book of *Revelation* only mentions one altar in heaven’s temple, apparently serving both functions, but still the incense must be lit from the fire on the altar of sacrifice.
- D. The altar of sacrifice in heaven is surely stained and afire with the blood of those martyrs we read about in ch.6, for they gave their very lives for the cause of Christ. But most importantly, the altar of sacrifice in heaven is where the blood of Jesus is set before God as the sacrifice for our sins. **The fire is the signal that God accepts the sacrifice.** So do you see the imagery here? Our prayers find their fragrance when ignited by the fire from the sacrifice of Christ. Our prayers are nothing more than crushed flowers without that fire. They are only the faintly scented potpourri of positive thinking without that fire. They are nothing more than life’s spices in a bottle without that fire. They are only warm wishes without that fire. The prayers which give fragrance to heaven draw their potency and beauty from Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins, accepted by God. God hears the prayers of all people, I think; how could he not. But only those prayers ignited at the altar of Christ’s sacrifice are incense in heaven, and a force to be reckoned with on earth.
- E. Our prayers, once ignited, fill heaven with a holy fragrance (v.4). The point of incense, of course, is the fragrance, and in this case, it is God who delights in this aroma. Think of that! We’ve read about the stupendous sights and sounds of heaven, things which we cannot even yet imagine. But the *fragrance* of heaven is our prayers! *Our prayers!* Have you heard our prayers?!? They seem so... ordinary, so unimpressive. But when our prayers are biblically shaped, making God’s name holy, praying for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, when they are prayers confessing our sin and confronting Satan’s evil, prayers for our Father’s provision and help, all lifted in the name of Jesus Christ, no matter how halting or plain or fragile they may seem, God breathes them in with a smile of delight upon his face. Prayer perfumes heaven!

Illus.: More than 15 years ago I preached a sermon from this text on the radio in the Pittsburgh area. A few days later I got a letter from a lady named Isabelle Fisher. I loved this comment: “*I had it in my heart that the only man-made thing in Heaven was the scars in [Christ’s] hands and feet and side--- but [this passage] has made me know that—our prayers will be there too. Praise the Lord!*”

Now in **v.5** there is a startling change in the picture... When I think of incense in a censer I think of a priest walking down the aisle of a big quiet church swinging a golden ball, heavy with fragrance. It is solemn, dignified, passive. But now, it is as if the priest suddenly gathers the chain and smoking ball into his hands,

hikes up his robes, goes into a full windup and pitches that censer, grenade-like, out the door into the street, where it explodes on impact!

III. THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS, AFIRE WITH CHRIST'S SACRIFICE AND OURS, INVADE EARTH WITH GOD'S SALVATION AND JUDGMENT (8:5)

- A. When the incense of our prayers is turned earthward it becomes incendiary. In heaven, prayer is a holy fragrance; turned to earth, it becomes a bombshell! Does that description of what happens when the flaming censer hits earth sound familiar? We see it before this in **Rev. 4:5**... And then there is the story of God descending to meet his people in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai, after he delivered them from Egypt: **Ex. 19:16-19a**... This description, *"thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake,"* are the manifestations of the presence of God. When the censer set aflame in heaven crashes into earth it is *God* who is there. Illus.: Years ago I wanted to put down some of those sticky tiles on our basement floor, but I was told the floor had to be cleaned first with muriatic acid. Man, when I poured that stuff on the concrete it actually smoked and hissed and the cement instantly turned white. That's sort of what it is like when the holy God invades earth unshielded.
- B. Illus.: This week, Jairo and Kristi Robertts sent me an account they had written of the things Jairo's parents, (also) Jairo and Blanca, went through as a pastor and wife in Columbia, especially during the '70s and '80s. In 1975 a Communist guerilla group named M19, squeezed by the government *"would pillage the church for money and supplies. Many times holding hostage the missionaries and churchgoers (sometimes during an actual church service). They often threatened to burn down the church and the homes of Christians in the community. One time the guerillas locked everyone (in the middle of a service) into the church and told them that they were going to set the church on fire. They were never able to start the fire and eventually left. **Every time they church was held up or threatened, the church would gather together and pray.** God would always answer their prayers by binding the guerillas from destroying the church and village. Jairo and Blanca described it as God literally stopping the flames from being able to spread and from guns jamming and not being able to fire, and so on. Not one missionary or congregant was ever harmed."*

We must pray! We must lift of Jesus' name and glory. We must pray for our church and our nation and other nations, for persecuted believers and for our own brothers and sisters in need and distress of every kind. We must pray against evil, and pray for grace outpoured. We must pray alone and together, whenever we can. We must pray for lost people and lost causes. **Prayer is not the last resort of the hopeless. It is the fragrant confidence of the faithful.**

- C. Prayer releases the holy presence of God on earthly places. Prayer really is *"reversed thunder."* We may need patience as God collects prayers or waits for his divine timetable, (this passage is ultimately describing something yet to happen), but the prayers of the saints inevitably are transformed from incense to high explosives, hurled back to earth with pin-point accuracy by the angel at God's right hand. And whether Christians are delivered or they die, wherever our prayers collide with sin-stained life, wherever our prayers crash into the terrible darkness, God Almighty himself invades with all his rumbling, flashing, rolling holiness, riding on the flaming missiles of our prayers. And things can no more stay the same than if lightning struck or an earthquake shrugged its mighty shoulders!

And one great day, while all is chaotic on earth, heaven will fall silent, as if the very angels are holding their breath. The seven mighty archangels will be summoned to the presence of God and of the Lamb and each will be given a trumpet. In the waiting silence, *"the prayers of all the saints"* (ours will be there, too) will be lifted up before God, who will breathe in their pleas as incense: *"How long, O Lord?" "Save us!" "Your kingdom come." "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."* Ah, the fragrance of heaven!

Silently another angel will draw fire from the altar of the sacrifice of Christ and the incense prayers will blaze, and the angel will hurl that censer toward earth, roiling and resounding with the presence of God. And then the seven angels who have the seven trumpets will prepare to sound them. And when the six trumpets have unleashed God's judgment, then the seventh will sound, and loud voices in

heaven will shout in triumph, *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever!”* [Rev. 11:15]