

Introduction:

A. One of the pivotal experiences of my ministry happened a month after I began, back in January 1979, 40 years ago. I attended an annual conference for Free Church pastors. The theme was revival. Not the tent revival kind but the great revivals in the last 300 years. I learned of one historic revival that started with two elderly women who met to pray, and prayed *outside* their church doors because the pastor didn't think their presence warranted unlocking the doors! Dr. Walter Kaiser also opened our eyes to the great revivals in Israel from 2 Chronicles. The key takeaway for me that has never left me was that God works when his people *pray*; *pray together*; and *pray persistently*. "*If my people will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face...*"

I've never been great at prayer but I have never forgotten those lessons. I remember going to the front of the church at the end of the conference to commit myself to praying for revival.

- B. Prayer—especially prayer together—has never come naturally to any church I've served. It's always an uphill battle. I have tried everything I could think of to prompt God's people—to prompt *you*—to pray, not just about our personal concerns but about God's kingdom concerns, including the vigor and holiness of our church, our outreach and missions, our country and world. I can tell you one thing for certain: it is far, far easier to get people to a Friday night dinner than to a Sunday morning prayer time.
- C. Today I want to take you to an amazing passage about prayer: **Rev. 8:1-5**. Years ago I read a book by Eugene Peterson about *Revelation*. He took the title for his book

from a remarkable poem on prayer by the 17th century British pastor, **George Herbert**. Herbert's poem, entitled "Prayer (I)," is simply metaphorical phrases describing prayer, like "*the Churches banquet... the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage, ... a kind of tune.*" One of his metaphors for prayer is "*reversed thunder,*" which is the title of Peterson's book. **Rev 8:1-5 gives us a unique and vivid picture of prayer and what it does.**

- D. **Let me set the stage.** In the preceding chapters John has described the opening of seven seals on God's great scroll setting his final judgment in motion. The first four seals released the terrifying Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The fifth revealed the cries of the martyrs for God to bring justice and the sixth unleashed a worldwide earthquake and a *heaven-quake*, shaking loose the very stars of the heavens, so that people cried out for the mountains to fall on them. "*For the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it.*" Then in **ch.7** there was the glorious scene of all the saints gathered before God's throne. Then, as we turn to **ch.8, everything stops.**

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 seven trumpets were given to them.

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 God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, 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.

In the Old Testament trumpets were the harbingers of God's judgment but also were sounded to begin the Year of Jubilee. Here, the seven angelic trumpeters stand at the ready, but silent.

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.*” The tumult of judgment. But now it says, *“there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”* Why? Apparently just so the accumulated prayers of God's people can be brought to God. While this is a picture from the end of time it makes clear something we might forget:

I. OUR PRAYERS GET HEAVEN'S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION (8:1)

- A. In that pregnant silence, *our* attention might have been focused on those mighty archangels, but *God's* attention was on the offering of incense, the prayers of his people. It is a reminder of the rapt attention God gives to prayer. Just as all was silent in the Old Testament tabernacle when the priests offered incense, so here in heaven it is quiet. **All that happens after this comes in answer to our prayers.**
- B. **V.3** speaks of “the prayers of all the saints,” so our prayers are 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.”*

Vv.3-4: *“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 God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The*

smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand."

II. OUR PRAYERS, IGNITED FROM THE ALTAR OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE, BECOME THE INCENSE OF HEAVEN

- 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."* Do you ever think of your prayers that way?!

- 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.

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.

- C. 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.
- Our prayers are only the faintly scented potpourri of positive thinking without that fire.
- Our prayers are nothing more than life's spices in a bottle without that fire.
- Our prayers are only warm wishes without that fire.

Almost all people pray, and I don't doubt that God hears all prayers for he hears everything. What's more, he answers some of those prayers. **But the prayers of his people—those whom Jesus has redeemed from their sins—are holy incense made of a sacred recipe of forgiveness, faith and fervency brought to the heavenly altar where they are ignited from the fire of Jesus' sacrifice.**

- D. 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! Revelation tells us about the stupendous sights and sounds of heaven, things which we cannot even 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 in their aroma with a smile of delight upon his face. **Prayer is the fragrance heaven!**

Illus.: Many 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: “*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.*” 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 imagine 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 temple door into the street, where it explodes on impact!

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

- A. When the incense of our prayers is hurled earthward it becomes incendiary. In heaven, prayer is a holy fragrance; turned to earth, it becomes a **bombshell!**
- B. Does that description of what happens when the flaming censer hits earth sound familiar? We see it before this in **Rev. 4:5**, “From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.” 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. 19:16-19**, “*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. ... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it*

in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.”

This description, “*thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake,*” are the manifestations of the presence of God. **When the censer of prayers set aflame in heaven crashes into earth it is God who is there.**

- C. So the point here is that while our prayers rise so quietly, so unobtrusively, so haltingly to heaven, they don't stop there.

The prayers of God's people, fragrant and flaming, are hurled earthward and where they land, the presence of Almighty God invades like an earthquake or thunder.

Do you remember when the early believers prayed in Acts 4 for God to stretch out his hand to demonstrate the power of the Gospel? “*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*”

- D. The next chapters tell of the terrible judgments unleashed as each of the seven trumpets is sounded, but the sense I get is that all that happens next is God's explosive answer to the prayers of his people, culminating in the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the complete triumph of God and the coronation of Christ over all. And all this is in answer to our prayers. When we pray, “*Come, Lord Jesus,*” this will be God's great answer.
- E. Prayer rarely seems powerful when we're doing it. Prayer gets its potency—its fragrance and fire—only when it reaches the presence of God. So never be put off when prayers seem unimpressive. **But we must pray as people who expect our prayers to return as reversed thunder!** We must lift up Jesus' name. We must pray for our church, for 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 for lost people and lost causes. We must pray alone and together, whenever we can.

Prayer is not the last resort of the hopeless. It is the fragrant and flaming confidence of the faithful.

- F. Illus.: Some years ago **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 the 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.***"

- G. 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, wherever our prayers crash into the terrible darkness, wherever our prayers target the Enemy, 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 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, roiling and resounding with the presence of God. And then, as answers to our prayers, the seven angels who have the seven trumpets will prepare to sound them. And when each of the six trumpets have unleashed God's judgments, 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]