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Revelation 8:1-5

14th Message

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SILENCE!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we come to the seventh and final seal. Last week we saw that there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. At the end of the sixth seal a question was posed: who can stand on the terrible day of the Lord, the day of his wrath, the day when he turns his face on a world that has turned its back on him? Though it seems that the question is rhetorical, we saw that the opening of the seventh seal was delayed so that the question could in fact be answered. There are people who can stand when God turns his face. God's angelic servants stand, ready to do his bidding: to seal God's people so that henceforth they come under God's ownership and protection. The saints now have nothing to fear from the first death. Indeed, the saints who pass through the first death are able to stand in the presence of God, where they add their voices to the ongoing song of praise to God and to the Lamb. Having been reassured about the status of God's people in the face of God's judgments, we are now ready for the opening of the seventh seal.

The opening of each of the first six seals has been a noisy event. Each time the Lamb opened one of the first four seals, John heard one of the four cherubim say, "Come!" The first is described as speaking "in a voice like thunder." Presumably the summons of the other three cherubim was just as thunderous. When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw the martyrs calling out to God in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" When the Lamb opened the sixth seal there was a great earthquake (6:12). Four voices like thunder, the martyrs crying out in a loud voice, a great earthquake: these are noisy events. Especially with the sixth seal, it seems we are building to a climax. We expect that the opening of the seventh seal will be even noisier than the other six. We could not be more mistaken!

A. Silence in heaven

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. (Rev 8:1 NIV)

Revelation is full of surprises, and this is one of the greatest. Nothing has prepared us for this. Instead of the expected escalation in the noise level, there is complete silence. Why this silence? What does it signify? Why does it last for a half-hour? Why is it in heaven that there is silence and not on earth? These are difficult questions to answer. Our primary source book for understanding the imagery of Revelation is the Old Testament, but here it lets us down; there is nothing comparable. It is true that three of the prophets issue a command to be silent before the Lord: "the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab 2:20); "Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD near" (Zeph 1:7); "Be still before the LORD, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (Zech 2:13). But these commands are addressed to mankind on earth. They neither command nor describe silence in heaven.

This half-hour of silence is a unique event. I think it serves at least three purposes. Looking back, it is the climax to the worship in

heaven. Looking ahead, it builds suspense, and it sets the stage for the prayers of the saints.

B. Silence: the climax of worship

Firstly, this silence is the climax to the worship going on in heaven around the throne. The seven seals, together with the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, are part of a sequence of visions which forms the central section of the book, chapters 4-16. This whole sequence of visions is shown to John when he is caught up to heaven in the Spirit in order to be shown "what must take place after this" (4:1-2). Though John is in heaven "in the Spirit," the visions which he is given alternate between events in heaven and events on earth. We have already seen that the dominant feature of the visions in heaven is the worship that goes on around the throne. At the center of the universe stands a throne; John refers to this throne forty times. The throne is occupied: John's usual way of referring to God is "the one seated upon the throne." By referring to him this way he says far more than if he had simply called him God. Also upon the throne is the Lamb, John's usual title for Jesus. Around the throne are gathered several concentric circles of worshipers. Closest to the throne are the four cherubim, God's throne attendants. Next are the twenty-four elders. Next come the myriad myriad angels. We saw last week that these heavenly beings are joined by earthly creatures who have been made fit for heaven: the martyred saints. All these creatures, heavenly and earthly alike, have offered their seven-fold worship to God and to the Lamb: "praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12).

Seven songs have been sung so far. The first two songs are addressed to God, the one seated upon the throne. Day and night the four cherubim sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8). The twenty-four elders respond, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (4:11). The praise expands to include the Lamb, to whom the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders together sing a new song, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (5:9-10). Countless angels join in, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (5:11-12). All creation responds, addressing its praise to both God and the Lamb, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (5:13). To these five songs, the cherubim, who started the chorus, add their "Amen!" (5:14).

The innumerable multitude of saints now joins the chorus, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:10). The angels respond, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and

thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12). Having sung their praises, these creatures, both heavenly and earthly, shut up. In silence they worship their Creator and their Redeemer. Silence is the climax of their worship, not an interruption of it. Silence enhances their worship, not diminishes it.

Among other things, Revelation is a book for and about worship. John, exiled on Patmos, sent the book, in the form of a letter, to seven churches of Asia, where it was read aloud to each church. The first of seven beatitudes is addressed to the reader and his hearers: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it" (1:3). The reader is not reading to himself in the comfort of his own living room; it's because people read the book that way that they fail to hear it properly. No, the reader is reading the book aloud to others, to the church gathered in assembly. Revelation is written to be heard by the church gathered together. Perhaps we should have a service like that, where Revelation is read and we pause to sing all the songs. That would be a profound worship experience. It would also profoundly affect how we understand the book. It would enable us, for example, to hear the half-hour of silence in the context of the first seven songs of praise.

Revelation is a book which reorients. Imagine the church in Ephesus, chief of the seven cities. It was a city full of temples: the famous temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; temples to imported Egyptian gods; temples to the deified Julius Caesar and to *Dea Roma*, Rome deified; the temple to the Roman emperor Domitian, where he was worshiped as lord and god. These temples were filled with statues and priests and incense and worshippers. Also within this city there was a church, a group of Christians who gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They probably met in someone's home. They had no statues, priests, incense or dancing girls; no pomp or circumstance. As religious spectacles go, theirs' wasn't much to behold. They lived in a noisy city, and it's obvious from Jesus' message to his church in Ephesus that the noise was getting to them, for they had forsaken their first love (2:4). The Christians in Ephesus needed reorientation. That's what this circular letter gave them: a series of visions to reorient them, to enable them to hear clearly through the noise, to see clearly in the gray world of Ephesus. Having this book read aloud to them would remind them that they were the church of Jesus Christ; that the true throne stands in heaven not on earth; that the one who is truly Lord and God was not Domitian, but the one seated upon that heavenly throne; that their Savior was not Rome nor Caesar, but the slain Lamb. They would hear of the worship around the heavenly throne. True, their own liturgy wasn't spectacular compared to that conducted in the numerous temples in the city. But Revelation showed them that they were united with the heavenly liturgy of the cherubim, the elders, the angels, and the martyrs.

We live noisy lives. I don't mean just the audible noise to which we are exposed. We are constantly bombarded with more and more items clamoring for our attention: junk email, telephone solicitations, advertising, companies demanding ever more of our time and energy, hectic schedules for our kids. On and on it goes. We feel frazzled, dazzled, overloaded, disoriented. We long for relief, for rest and relaxation. What we need is not a spa treatment or "The Ultimate Relaxation CD." We need something that will cut through all the noise. Nothing does this better than Revelation. Revelation restores our vision, enabling us to see and hear clearly. It clarifies a

confusing grey world into stark black and white. The most appropriate way to encounter these reorienting visions of Revelation is in the church gathered together.

We long for calm and stillness, yet we have a hard time with silence today. Prolonged periods of silence make us uncomfortable. For a generation raised on MTV, "prolonged" is anything over five seconds. Silence is a vital part of worship. But it's not silence for silence's sake that we should seek. If you just want calm repose, then by all means put on the latest "Most Relaxing CD Ever." No, the silence we seek is the silence that forms the climax to our worship. It's the silence that comes in response to an overwhelming vision of God and of the Lamb. We bring our praise and then we shut up, in rapt adoration of the one around whose throne we are gathered. As the hymn says, "we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love and awe."¹ Have you ever had such a vision of God and of the Lamb that, having sung your praises, you are dumbed into silence, "lost in wonder, love and awe"?

C. Suspense: The seven trumpets

A second effect of the silence is to build suspense. The sixth seal in particular has prepared us to expect a climactic end to the series of seven seals. The opening of the seventh seal has not produced it, but we know that there are only seven seals. Since there are no more seals to open, what now? There must be something more.

And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. (8:2)

There is indeed more to come: seven trumpets are to follow the seven seals. The seven angels to whom the trumpets are given are described as those "who stand before God." These are the Angels of the Presence, the seven Archangels. Two of them are named in the Bible: Michael (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Rev 12:7) and Gabriel (Dan 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26). Intertestamental Jewish literature gave names to the other five: Phanuel, Raguel, Raphael, Sarakiel and Uriel.

Both the Hebrew word and the Greek word translated "angel" mean messenger. These seven archangels are standing before God as his servants, ready to be sent out on any mission that God commands. Their next mission will be to blow the trumpets. But first there is another delay. The seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls all follow this pattern. After the initial sight of the seven there is an interlude during which John is shown something important in heaven. The three series of seven primarily affect the earth, but if they are viewed merely on the earthly plane they make little sense. They seem like random acts of violence from a vengeful God. It is these intervening visions in heaven that give meaning to the subsequent acts on earth. The seven trumpets are here seen for the first time, but the first one is not blown until 8:6. In the intervening three verses John sees something which explains the significance of the trumpets.

How do the seven trumpets relate to the seven seals? Both the opening of the seals and the blowing of the trumpets bring God's judgments upon a world that has turned its back on him. The standard dispensational futurist interpretation understands the judgments of the seals, the trumpets and the bowls as following sequentially, chronologically one after the other. But this is not how I understand the book. The three sets of seven follow a similar pattern. The initial sight of each set of seven is followed by a vision of something in heaven which provides a heavenly context for the earthly effects.

The first four of each seven form a unified set: the first four seals are four horsemen; the first four trumpets and the first four bowls affect the land, the sea, the fresh water, and the sky, respectively. The fifth and sixth of each set are more loosely arranged. The sixth of each set brings the final climactic act of judgment: the sixth seal brings the terrifying day of the Lord; the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl each unleash an invasion across the Euphrates. Between the sixth and seventh seals and between the sixth and seventh trumpets is another interlude during which we are shown visions which provide answers to troubling questions raised at the end of the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet. These prepare the way for the climactic seventh. The opening of the seventh seal brings a half-hour of silence in heaven. The blowing of the seventh trumpet brings the great cry, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15). The pouring out of the seventh bowl brings the loud proclamation, "It is done!" (16:17).

Trying to read Revelation as a timetable of events that will happen in chronological order creates many problems. The climactic act of judgment arrives three times; so does the climactic seventh. Let me remind you that the chronology of the book is the sequence of visions, not the contents of those visions. There is no need that the contents follow a chronological order. The three series of seven are better seen as three variations on the same theme, like a musical fugue in which the theme is repeated with variations. Alternatively, you can liken Revelation to a tapestry, in which themes are interwoven, reappearing throughout the book.

The opening of the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets. So closely tied together are these that it is difficult to determine where the seventh seal ends and the seven trumpets begin. The trumpets will be a second variation on the theme of God's judgment upon a world that has turned its back on him. But, since it is a variation, there will be something different: the nature of that difference, and hence the significance of the trumpets, is explained in 8:3-5.

D. Setting: The prayers of the saints

A third effect of the silence is to set the stage for the interlude between the initial vision of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the first trumpet (8:6).

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. (8:3-5)

In the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament there were two altars. In the courtyard stood the large altar of burnt offering on which the priests offered up sacrificial animals morning and evening. In the Holy Place inside the tabernacle and later the temple stood the much smaller altar of incense, immediately in front of the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Every morning and every evening the priest on duty was to burn fragrant incense "so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come" (Exod 30:8). The incense represented the prayers of the people rising up to God. We see this close connection between the incense and prayer in the story of Zechariah:

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. (Luke 1:8-13)

In Revelation there is only one altar in heaven, the heavenly pattern for both earthly altars. An angel approaches the altar carrying a golden censer, which he uses to offer up before God both the incense he is given and the prayers of all the saints which that incense symbolizes. Who are these saints and what are their prayers? It certainly includes the martyrs under the altar, seen after the opening of the fifth seal. They had cried out, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" (6:10). They had been killed by "the inhabitants of the earth," those who had turned their backs on God. Why was God allowing the death of these martyrs to go unpunished? Why was he allowing evil to flourish on earth? Why did he not visit his judgment upon the slayers of his people? Why? Why? Why? But these are not the only prayers. The angel offers up the prayers of all the saints, which includes the believers on earth. Among other purposes, Revelation is written to encourage the believers on earth to pray. What is their prayer? Seven times Jesus says, "I am coming." The believers are to join John in praying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). "How long?" and "Come!" These are the prayers of the saints. These are the prayers which are gathered up and offered to God as a pleasing aroma, a sacrifice for his pleasure. The prayers go up before God, meaning that they come to his attention, to the attention of the one seated upon the throne at the center of the universe.

Some say that the purpose of the silence is so that God can hear the prayers of his saints. In reality God doesn't need heavenly silence to hear his people pray. But the silence does provide a dramatic stage for the prayers of the saints. The saints are agitated, "How long? Why? When?" But in heaven all is calm. God is not agitated as he listens to the prayers of his saints. But this does not mean that God is uninterested. Quite the opposite! Having heard the prayers, God does something. The angel fills his censer with fire from the altar, and hurls it to the earth. Immediately there is thunder, lightning and an earthquake, phenomena associated with theophany, with the manifestation or appearance of God. These phenomena occurred when the throne was first seen (4:5). Here they occur as the climax to the seventh seal. They will recur as the climax to the seventh trumpet (11:19) and to the seventh bowl (16:18). God is roused, let the earth beware! The seven angels prepare to sound their trumpets. Now we see the significance of these trumpets: they are God's response to the prayers of the saints. God is there and he is not silent.

How does prayer work? I confess I do not know. It is clear that God wants us to pray, and that he hears us when we do pray. It is also clear that he is sovereign and we are not. Within Revelation the absolute sovereignty of God is never in doubt: he is the one seated upon the throne. Yet here God listens to the prayers of his people, and incorporates answers to those prayers into his will. But he does so without compromising his sovereignty. By faith I hold on to both sides of this seeming contradiction: God is sovereign, but he hears our prayers.

Revelation calls the saints to patient endurance (e.g., 13:10; 14:12). How are the saints to endure? We need vision and we need prayer. We need a vision of the true realities in the unseen world. We need prayer, prayer that these realities become true on earth as they are in heaven. Jesus has given us the model, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...deliver us from evil.” Such a prayer will have effect. In *Reversed Thunder*, his book on Revelation, Eugene Peterson expresses this well:

The Apocalypse is a fusion of vision and prayer. When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. A climax has been reached. The silence prepares the imagination to receive an incredible truth. While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were ranged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn't they have mental breakdowns? Why didn't they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar of God with a censer. He mixed the prayers of the Christians with incense (which cleansed them from impurities) and combined them with fire (God's spirit) from the altar. Then he put it all in the censer and threw it over heaven's ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were “peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (Rev. 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert's phrase, as “reversed thunder.” Prayer reenters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it.²

The seven trumpets are God's response to the prayers of his saints, of those who pray, “Thy kingdom come.” The blowing of the seventh trumpet will bring the ringing declaration, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). The prayers of the saints will have been heard! God's purposes will have been accomplished on earth as in heaven. It will be done!

Let us close by offering up the prayer which our Lord instructed us to pray, confident that God hears and responds, confident that such a prayer changes history.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.

Hear Thou the prayer Thy servants pray,
Uprising from all lands today,
And o'er the vanquished powers of sin,
O bring Thy great salvation in.³

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.

1. Charles Wesley, *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, 1747.

2. Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 87-88.

3. John H. B. Masterman, *Almighty Father Who Dost Give*, 1922.