

The interlude in the midst of the seven seals is now over, and the book of Revelation turns again to visions of judgment. But we should not think that that means that there is only terror to be found in this reading. It also has its comfort too, because our reading for today shows us why God is doing these things. It shows us the reason why God is sending judgment upon the earth.

And so we are told that the Lamb breaks open the seventh and the last seal on the scroll that was given to him. Verse 1 of our reading says: "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." This silence is actually kind of surprising for a couple of different reasons. It's surprising, first of all, because all of the other seals seemed to have more about them, don't they? When the Lamb broke open the first seal, for example, and the horsemen rode forth, or when he broke open another seal and there was an earthquake. It seems like more happened when the other seals were broken open. But this is also surprising because up to this point in the book of Revelation heaven has been anything but silent. The whole time that John has seen the vision of heaven, he's heard all kinds of things. He's heard the song of the angels. He's heard the praises of the living creatures and the elders. He's heard the redeemed speaking their praises to the one who sits on the throne. It's just been one constant song, one constant praise from the very beginning. But now heaven falls quiet. It's completely silent for a short period of time. Now why is that? What does this mean?

It's because, Christians, silence in the Bible often goes before judgment. We see several examples of this, especially in the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus, for example, Israel is standing next to the Red Sea, and they're afraid because the Egyptians are about to attack them. They're afraid that they're going to be destroyed. But God says to Israel through Moses what he's about to do. We are told in Exodus chapter 14: "Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.'" So the people didn't have to do anything. All they had to do was be quiet, and the Lord would take care of it all. He would bring judgment down upon the Egyptians, just as he did when he pushed the Red Sea back over them. And they never had to deal with them again. So silence went before judgment.

And we also see an example of this with Zephaniah. Because centuries after the Exodus, Zephaniah speaks about the coming day of the Lord, the day when God would judge his people for their sins, when he would bring down his wrath upon Judah. And Zephaniah says in chapter 1: "Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near." So the people would be silent because God was about to act. He was about to bring his judgment down.

Now, there are other examples of this, especially in prophets like Habakkuk and Zechariah. But they all point towards the same thing. Silence goes before the judgment. And that's exactly what's happening here in Revelation. Heaven is silent because God is about to judge the earth. He is about to bring down his wrath upon evil, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

But the tension only seems to increase as we move forward and see the angels preparing for what comes next. We're told in verse 2: "Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them." Now, these seven angels are seven special messengers of God, those who stand before him and who carry out his will. Gabriel, in fact, is one of them. We know

this because of what Gabriel says to Zechariah when he is telling him about the coming birth of John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Luke, Gabriel says: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." So these seven angels, then, are his special messengers. But these seven angels are given trumpets, which are symbols of the judgments which are to come. And we will hear them blown one by one in the coming chapters. So it's a very tense moment indeed. Judgment is coming. God is about to act. Let all the earth keep silence before him!

But now another angel appears. And this angel goes and he stands before the altar which is before the throne of God. We've seen this altar before with the fifth seal. This is the same altar that has the souls of the martyrs underneath. But this angel has in his hands a great golden censer, a large golden bowl, which is fairly flat and shallow. And he feels this bowl with incense that he burns on the altar. Now, incense in the Bible is often used as a symbol for prayer. We hear, for example, in Psalm 141: "Let my prayer rise before you like incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" And it's the same thing here. With the incense is mixed together the prayers of all the saints, so that when the fire consumes the incense, those prayers go up with the smoke before the throne of God. But all of this shows that these prayers are acceptable to God. They are a pleasing smell to him. And he hears them and he answers them. And that's what we see the angel doing. God is about to answer the prayers of his people.

But what happens next? We're told in verse 5: "Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake." So that fire, then, is cast down in judgment. This angel also becomes an agent of God's wrath. But notice where this fire comes from, Christians! The same fire that was used to burn the incense that sent up the prayers of the saints is the fire that is now cast down upon the earth, because the two are connected. This is happening because of their prayers. Everything is happening as an answer to the prayers of the saints. In fact, the prayers of the saints are the reason why God sends these judgments in the first place. So everything that we see happening in this reading, then, is happening as a response to those prayers. There is silence in heaven because God is about to do what his people have asked him to do. There is the seven trumpets given to the angels, because they are about to carry out the judgments that God's people have asked for. And even the casting down of the fire happens as a response to those prayers. Prayer is a reason why God judges the earth. Prayer is a reason why he acts to save his people. God brings evil to an end because he is answering the cries of those who call upon his name. Prayer is a mighty thing!

So Christians, why are we so often timid in our prayers? I think we are tempted to think that our prayers aren't going to do anything, that they just are going to go out there and it won't make any difference, because God's going to do something else anyway. Or even when we do ask him something in prayer, we might think that we don't need to ask for all that much, because God's too busy or he has other concerns. He's just going to do what he wants. But Christians, there is power in prayer! We can see that power at work here. God acts because of prayer. God brings judgment because of prayer. God will even bring the Last Day because of prayer. Prayer is mighty! Prayer is a living thing! Prayer moves the heart of God.

This is why so many of the psalms ask God to do something about evil, even asking in ways that seem pretty violent to us. Psalm 5, for example, which we spoke this evening, says: "Make them

bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you." There's even other psalms that speak about God breaking the arm of the wicked or breaking the teeth in their mouth. It all seems so violent. But there is nothing wrong with these prayers! In fact, we should pray every day that God would bring an end to evil. We should pray every day that God would build up the righteous. We should pray every day that he would break the power of evil. We should pray that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. And we shouldn't just shrug at evil and think that maybe it will just go away if I ignore it. No, we are called to pray that God would do what is right, that God would bring justice upon the earth.

Now, we should also pray that God would convert our enemies, that he would make them Christians, because there's actually nothing opposed between those two prayers. Because either way, evil is going to come to an end. God can bring evil to an end by making them believe, so that they repent and turn away from that evil. But he can also bring evil to an end by simply ending it, by destroying it, making it nothing forever. But either way, God is the one who is doing it. And God will answer our prayers just as he has promised to do.

I think the best way to think of prayer, Christians, is as waging war, a spiritual battle. In fact, this is how Paul describes it in Ephesians 6, when he says: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Our enemies are not just men, but they are demonic powers, those who are driving the evil that we see in the world. But we are not helpless in this war. We have a mighty weapon: prayer, which has been given to us by God. And that's why Paul includes it in the armor of God in Ephesians chapter 6. In fact, he even says that we should pray "at all times in the spirit, with all prayer and supplication." Because prayer is not something we do hoping that God maybe might do something eventually. Prayer is how we fight! Prayer is our weapon, Christians. It's a weapon we must not be afraid to use.

Therefore, let us pray, calling on the Lord to bring evil to an end. Let us pray that God would set all things right. Let us pray that he would bring the Last Day, so that evil would be destroyed forever. Let us pray and not stop, because this is our calling as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. And God will answer our prayers, as he has promised to do through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Lord God of Hosts, who breaks the arm of the wicked and sets all things right, bring an end to all the evils which we see around us, and deliver us from all our troubles, as you have promised to do through Jesus Christ, your Son. We ask this in his name. Amen.