

“THE SEVENTH SEAL.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 8:1-5

Introduction

If it was possible to catalogue all the prayers of all Christians ever prayed, what might be the most frequent prayer of all? What prayer do you think is prayed more than any other?

If the book of Psalms is any indication the most frequent prayer is, “How long, O Lord?”

Psalm 13:1-2 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 35:17 How long, O Lord, will you look on?

Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions!

Psalm 74:10 How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

Psalm 89:46 How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire?

Psalm 90:13 Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants!

Psalm 94:3-4 O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?

4 They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast.

Psalm 119:84 How long must your servant endure?

When will you judge those who persecute me?

Revelation 6:10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Most of us have “how long, O Lord” prayers. And not just for us. They can be how long, O Lord, will there be wars and terrorism and persecution and injustice? How long will there be abortions? How long will there be domestic violence? How long will there be struggling with temptation? How long will there be suffering and pain and depression? How long, O Lord?

That prayer has been ringing in God's ears for thousands of years. What will it look like when God finally answers all those prayers?

In Revelation 6:11 we heard a hint that the answer is coming. God told the martyrs in heaven "to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete" (Revelation 6:11).

Chapter 8 of Revelation is an encouragement to keep praying, keeping it up a little longer, there is a relationship between our prayers and God's plans. Revelation is the answer to our "how long" questions.

Let's recap. We have seen John's vision of the Lamb opening six of the seven seals. We said that these seals are like a journey through church history. The reality of the first five seals has plagued the human race from Pentecost to the present to the end of time. The reality of the sixth seal of the great day of God's wrath is coming. The sixth seal marks the end of human history.

So now we come to the *seventh seal* and we are expecting something climatic. Seven symbolizes completeness so we are anticipating a vision about what happens after the second coming and judgment. Perhaps a description of the appearance of Jesus, or the final judgment and a new heaven and a new earth. Something really big.

We expect the grand finale, but instead there is a moment of silence, and then a starting all over again of the same history but with a new series of symbols, this time trumpets. And after that more symbols.

Revelation is not straight chronology. It's like a symphony in which a musical theme is repeated with variations. What happens now is like a musical rest where the whole orchestra pauses in silence before taking up a new symphonic variation with trumpets.

The Significance of the Silence after the Seventh Seal, vs. 1.

What actually happens seems very anticlimactic. Silence. What is this silence and what does it mean?

We have said before that much of that is in Revelation is in the OT. So we can turn there for help in interpreting some of the symbols and visions in Revelation. In the prophets there are several references to silence in conjunction with the beginning of God's judgment.

Zephaniah 1:7 Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near.

Zechariah 2:13 Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

This is the silence of foreboding, of the calm before the storm, of the grim expectation of judgment. This is the silence of be still and watch and wait and see what God is about to do.

The sixth seal announced a great judgment on the wicked. What is the proper response to such sober news? Is it not to stand in silent awe at the holy God? Is it not to be absolutely still realizing what everyone deserved?

The scene we would expect with the seventh seal is delayed, first silence. This thirty minutes is like a moment of silence before the next dramatic scene opens. This will be followed by three more cycles of what will happen in the world, and then we will be shown what really happens in the end.

So be patient. For now it is enough to know that God is still on His throne, Christ is still at the center of all things, and God's people will be preserved through all that comes.

What kind of noise was being made at the time the seventh seal was opened? It was the noise of worship. But when the Lamb opens the seventh seal all that ceases, the singing of the living creatures and elders, the lyres and harps, the singing of the multitude, it all stops and there is silence in heaven.

So when is the silence over? When the trumpets sound? No, it lasts until the trumpets of judgment are finished. The worship and singing resumes in chapter 12 and 15. The silence makes room for the trumpets of judgment until they are finished.

The Preserved Prayers of all the Saints, vss. 2-4.

We won't say anything about the trumpets or the seven angels in the presence of God tonight. Let's move on to verse 3.

Revelation 8:3-4 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

This is a beautiful vision and an encouraging vision for all the saints.

In the OT Temple the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense were separate. Twice a day the priest would go to the brazen altar or altar of sacrifice and get some hot coals to mingle with the incense so it would rise upward symbolizing the prayers of the people.

Luke 1:9-10 according to the custom of the priesthood, he [Zechariah] was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

In John's heavenly vision the two altars are merged into one, like the merging of the incense and the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 5:8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 6:9-10 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw *under the altar* the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long* before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

These are not meek prayers of meek saints. These are bold prayers that cry out for justice and righteousness, that cry out for God to vindicate Himself and His name, that cry out against evil and for good. How long until you uphold justice, how long until you establish righteousness?

Jesus taught us to pray for God to hallow His name and for His kingdom to come and for His will to be done. All those prayer are preserved in heaven and now all those prayers are about to be answered.

As the seals could not be opened until the Lamb opened them, so the trumpets could not sound until the prayers of the saints rose to God. What we see here is that the prayers of the saints play a very significant part in what God is doing, in the accomplishing of God's purposes on earth and in initiating God's judgment.

The holy fire of God's purposes is fueled by the incense of all the prayers from all the saints accumulated on the altar of God.

The Answer to all the Prayers Accomplished, vs. 5.

Revelation 8:5 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.

Do you ever think prayers aren't powerful? Just listen to this great effect. The prayers of the people of God are accumulated until the appointed time of their fulfilment and then they are taken up like fire from the altar and thrown to earth to bring about the consummation of all God's purposes.

The unremarkable, often unnoticed prayers of God's people are answered with remarkable, noticeable power. The prayers that went up return with thunder.

This is the answer to the millions of prayers for "Thy kingdom to come." Not one of them has been lost or forgotten or ignored, everyone heard.

When God is directly and decisively acting on earth, that action is often depicted as thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and earthquakes (see Mount Sinai; Exodus 19:16-19). This is God's response and answer to the prayers of the people of God.

This is the climax of history with God giving His final answer to all the prayers of His people. And this is why heaven is silent. God has heard and now God answers.

That these words are a sign of the final judgment will be clearer as we come to the end of the seven trumpets (11:18) and the end of the seven bowls (16:18). There is more detail to come in the book of Revelation.

Revelation 16:17-18 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" 18 And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

Application and Conclusion.

Do you think God is listening to your prayers? Do you think He is too busy or has too many bigger concerns to pay attention? Is anyone up there listening?

He hears every prayer. He sorts out our meaning and hears every syllable, even every nuance of meaning. He takes the thoughts of our minds seriously, each of our emotions and feelings. He even comprehends what we aren't saying, or struggle to put into words. Every groan, every murmur, every sentence started but not finished.

He hears every "how long, O Lord," every "have mercy on me," every "why have you forsaken me," every "your will be done," every "glory to you O God for you are worthy."

The distinguishing characteristic of Christian prayer that makes it unique from all other prayer is the certainty we have of being heard by the living God of the universe (see TDNT, 8:203).

The long delay in the answer is not procrastination or indifference or because we have been forgotten or because our prayers weren't good enough. It is because all along God has been preparing for action.

Our prayers are being stirred and *mixed* with fire from the altar of God. What has ascended up to God will descend back down. The fire is the exceedingly abundantly beyond all we could ask or imagine.

If you have been praying but feel discouraged in prayer or feel like God isn't answering your prayers, if you are wondering if your prayers will ever be answered, here is your answer. Every

prayer offered in faith in Jesus Christ is heard and stored up, some to be answered now, some later. God will answer.

There is a connection between the prayers of God's people and the accomplishing of God's purposes both to save and to judge. These things happen in response to our prayers. The answers come straight from the throne of God.

Let this truth encourage us all to pray again and again, "Hallowed by thy name and thy will be done and thy kingdom come."

Let's join our prayers with countless millions past, present and future until their cumulative weight reaches their appointed proportion and God answers in blessing or judgment.