

Revelation

*Part Twenty-Three
The Prayers of All the Saints
(Revelation 8:1-13)*

With Study Questions

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When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. ³ Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw *it* to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. ⁶ So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. ⁷ The first angel sounded: And hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to the earth. And a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. ⁸ Then the second angel sounded: And *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. ⁹ And a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. ¹⁰ Then the third angel sounded: And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹ The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter. ¹² Then the fourth angel sounded: And a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day did not shine, and likewise the night. ¹³ And I looked, and I heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound" (Revelation 8:1-13)!

Introduction

Most will acknowledge that any advancement in character, integrity, creativity, and maturity comes at a cost. And the payment for progress in virtue often involves some type of suffering. Over and against the massively unbiblical notion that faithful living will immediately render health, wealth and some type of measurable prosperity, history, and Scripture, is replete with faithful Christians who died young, penniless and by all human standards, miserably.

We should not be put off by this. It is the difficult, yet glorious, expectation in the life of the Christian that we will be met by such suffering.

The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the Lord tests the hearts (Proverbs 17:3).

It is through this refinement/suffering that individuals, and the communities they form, become more sanctified. At the same time, Jesus taught that though for some, this suffering is a matter of refinement (pruning), others are entirely consumed.

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned (John 15:2, 6).

All this to say that there is a God in heaven who does not allow the people, or events, in this life to go unaddressed. God's people will be refined, and His enemies will be stopped. Downward moral and spiritual arcs will be halted. God may be patient (to the point of apparent inactivity, as with many Psalms), but there comes a time. And the time (let's call it a visitation) may be extended to us individually or corporately.

We saw such a time prophetically anticipated by John the Baptist. It was to the religious leaders of Israel that John preached of their corporate apostasy (walking away from God) with the words "**Brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7)**! John then used yet another metaphor.

His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12).

Something was about to happen. We have discussed the transition from BC to AD, from Old Covenant to New Covenant, or as Simeon called it when seeing the baby Jesus,

Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel (Luke 2:34).

Paul wrote, **“when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son” (Galatians 4:4)**. There is a great deal of speculation regarding what is meant by the **“fullness of time.”** Some say Jesus was born at the perfect time due to the vast reach of the Greek language and ability to internationally communicate. Others suggest that the Roman postal routes and road systems were perfect for the beginning of the Great Commission. But there is another **“fullness”** to be considered.

When it was explained to Abram why his descendants would be enslaved four hundred years, part of the explanation was that the...

...the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full (Genesis 15:16).

The freedom of the Israelites (the Exodus) would correspond, according to God’s perfect providence, with the expulsion of the Amorites from the land, due to their full rebellion. Such was the case with Israel during the time of Christ.

The true church had become a **“den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13)**. So egregious, so full, had their rebellion metastasized that Jesus taught that upon that generation would...

...come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah (Matthew 23:35).

It can be convincingly argued that religion (even the true religion) had become its darkest, and government (Rome) had become its most beastly. The iniquity was full. All of this is the historical context in which Revelation is written. Now the cataclysmic end of the Old Covenant would **“soon”** take place, as indicated twice in the first three verses of the letter. The church needed to be prepared.

Therefore, John is instructed to reveal, to unveil, Christ as, **“the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5)** in His glory (Revelation 1:12-17). He then exhorts the seven churches (truly, all churches) to remain faithful, lest they find themselves with the chaff rather than the wheat when the winnowing fork has its way (Revelation 2, 3). Finally, he will explain the details of this historical judgment upon Israel then Rome (Revelation 4-18).

And lest we think this is merely a history lesson, Paul warns the church (similar to Christ’s warnings to the seven churches) that if they follow the example of Israel’s unbelief, they will find themselves under similar judgment (Romans 11:19-21). This was something those seven churches were in real danger of and something which seems to be happening with great regularity in our present era.

You will recall the presentation of a scroll in chapter five which, Christ, and only Christ, is worthy to open. This scroll contains Christ’s righteous, authoritative, and active role in the course of history, especially as it pertains to *judicial and*

redemptive events that will soon take place (Revelation 1:1, 3). There are seven seals which bind the scroll. Every time a seal is opened it previews these judgments that would fall upon Jerusalem. We are now at the final seal.

When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets (Revelation 8:1, 2).

As Christ opens the seventh seal, foreshadowing the judgment about to fall upon apostate Jerusalem, there is silence for half an hour. After what must have been the ear-splitting, jubilant, mirth of praise in the earlier chapters, there is intense silence. This may be, as some suppose, the calm before the storm. A half hour of silence on a stage could seem like an eternity!

But when you add the seven trumpets, one of the great victories recorded in the Old Testament comes to the fore. Jericho, the enemy of God's people, would fall at the blowing of the trumpets (Joshua 6). And part of the instruction in the winning of that battle comes in Joshua 6:10:

Now Joshua had commanded the people, saying, "You shall not shout or make any noise with your voice, nor shall a word proceed out of your mouth, until the day I say to you, 'Shout!' Then you shall shout" (Joshua 6:10).

What must strike the student of the Old Testament here is that Israel is now in the place of Jericho! The trumpets will be blown against them. There are many uses of trumpets in Scripture: Liturgy (1 Chronicles 15:24). 2. A new king (1 Kings 1:34). 3. Warning of approaching judgment, urging national repentance (Isa 58:1). 4. Summoning the congregation for worship or battle (Numbers 10:1-10). 5. Blown at feasts and the first day of every month (Numbers 10:10). Here, they seem to indicate judgment.

Yet we should marvel at the mechanisms employed by God to bring this judgment, to halt this evil!

Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw *it* to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake (Revelation 8:3-5).

Again, we see unmistakable references to the Old Testament with altars, incense, and censers. Another angel with a “**censer**” (that which holds/burns incense [2 Chronicles 26:19]) stands at the altar and offers incense with the prayers of the saints. This would certainly include the prayers from Revelation 6:9-11, prayers that God would bring justice. It is thrown to the earth with noises, thunderings, lightnings and an earthquake. God is now answering the prayers of the saints for justice.

Having been raised in relative freedom, prayers for justice seldom make the top of our lists. This is not so at other times and in other places. Soul killing religions and body killing governments are a bitter part of the world in which we live. If only we could grasp the power of prayer, as indicated above! It’s as if God takes the prayers and transforms them into a celestial weapon that is thrown upon the earth to halt evil.

Here I find myself in agreement with Chilton, who wrote:

Church history is the key to world history: When the worshiping assembly calls upon the Lord of the Covenant, the world experiences His judgments. History is managed and directed from the altar of incense, which has received the prayers of the church.¹

Earlier we saw how Israel is now in the place of Jericho (Jericho had become a symbol of God’s power and intent to give the land² to His own covenant people). As the angels begin to blow their trumpets, we see judgments that had befallen Egypt in their persecution and slavery of God’s own Old Covenant church. Israel is now in the place of Egypt.

So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. ⁷ The first angel sounded: And hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to the earth. And a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. ⁸ Then the second angel sounded: And *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. ⁹ And a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. ¹⁰ Then the third angel sounded: And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹ The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter. ¹² Then the fourth angel sounded: And a third of the sun was struck, a third

¹ David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, p. 233.

² Hartley, J. E. (1999). [915 in 77](#). R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., & B. K. Waltke (Eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 407). Chicago: Moody Press.

of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day did not shine, and likewise the night (Revelation 8:6-12).

We haven't the time to go into great detail regarding this apocalyptic language. But we should note a few things.

First, as stated, the judgments bear a striking resemblance to the judgments brought upon Egypt (again, the enemy of God's covenant people). **"Hail and fire"** are the seventh plague (Exodus 9:13-35). The sea becoming **"blood"** is the first plague (Exodus 7:14-24). A **"third"** of the sun struck, similar to the ninth plague of darkness (Exodus 10:21-29). And though not directly addressed in the plague, the bitterness of the poisonous water associated with **"Wormwood,"** this **"water of gall"** (**Jeremiah 9:15**), reverses what God had provided through Moses, where they could not drink **"waters of Marah, for they were bitter"** (**Exodus 15:23**). They were made sweet when Moses cast a tree into them.

Once again, we see that God is not neutral when it comes to the affairs of man and the quest for evil. The wonderful promise to preserve His church as they overcome the **"gates of hell"** (**Matthew 16:18**), to **"bless those who bless...and curse those who curse"** His covenant people (**Genesis 12:3**) is front and center in Revelation.

From the church's perspective, the means by which this kingdom advances is through the Great Commission, the loving of our neighbor and the making of disciples.

From a divine perspective, God will providentially bring His judgments upon evil. And prayer becomes a vehicle by which this happens. It is also notable that the very people who had deluded themselves into thinking they had divine favor while rejecting the Divine Savior were on the wrong side of these divine judgments.

It is also helpful in our grasp of this language to excavate the Old Testament where **"mountains"** often typify kingdoms (Psalm 46:2; Isaiah 2:2; Zechariah 4:7; Jeremiah 51:25; Matthew 21:21). We will also read that a failing solar system (falling stars, etc.) indicates a judgment of a nation or city (Isaiah 13:9-11, 19; 24:19-23; 34:4, 5; Ezekiel 42:7, 8, 11-12; Joel 2:10; 28-32; Acts 2:16-21).

Why this repetitious one-third? This should make it clear that this is not the final judgment, which would not be only one-third. If the full consummation of the new heavens and new earth were in mind, it would be total judgment.

We also need to be reminded that Paul had indicated that the judgment of Israel would not be full. Similar to comparisons to Jericho and Egypt, Paul compared Israel to **"Sodom"** (**Romans 9:29**). Sodom was entirely destroyed! But Israel would not be. There would be a **"remnant"** (**Romans 11:5**). Isaiah uses the image of a **"stump"** through whom the New Covenant would grow (Isaiah 6:13; 11:1).

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit (Isaiah 11:1).

In discussions of eschatology, the place of the Jews becomes prominent, generally more in dispensational circles than reformed. But it is worth noting that question 191 of the Larger Catechism as how we are to pray. Part of the answer is

...the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called...

The reference to one-third excludes the final judgment. It also reveals that the judgment of Jerusalem is not total annihilation. The one-third beckons us to the inheritance laws found in Deuteronomy 21:16, 17 where the rightful heir receives two-thirds of the inheritance. As the chapters continue, the intensity of the judgment becomes more severe.

And I looked, and I heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound" (Revelation 8:13)!

We will pursue this in the near future. But we must ask, what is the takeaway from a chapter like this? There is a battle for the souls of people, for your soul. Whether it is false religion or beastly governments, we need to recognize that we are in the midst of a spiritual battle. There is a side, both in history and eternity, which will prevail.

We tend to dislike speaking this way, but we are called to take a side. Speaking of His overcoming of Satan, Jesus taught,

He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad (Matthew 12:30).

Neutrality is not a true option. What we see in Revelation is Christ preserving His church. Would we pledge our souls to religions that demand everything but provide nothing? Would we seek to find our peace in governments promising relief, health and welfare while they don't even know our names? Or would we trust in a Savior who emptied Himself of all things that we might gain all things? Would you trust in a Savior who died that we might live? In this respect, the call in Revelation is no different than that found in all of Scripture. Trust and obey.

Questions for Study

1. Scripture speaks of refinement through suffering. Have you found that to be true in your own life? How (pages 2, 3).
2. How can we be assured that the suffering, or pruning, in our lives won't consume us (page 3)?
3. Explain the historical context during the life of Christ. What do we learn from John the Baptist, Simeon, or the words of Christ Himself (pages 3, 4)?
4. In light of these types of difficulties, what is it important for the church to know (page 4)?
5. How did Israel become like Jericho (page 5)?
6. What was the mechanism used by God to employ His judgments (pages 5, 6)?
7. Compare Revelation 8:6-12 to what happened to the Egyptians. What is the lesson for the church (pages 6, 7)?
8. Discuss what we learn from the use of one-third in Revelation 8 (pages 7, 8).
9. What is the overall lesson to Christians in this chapter (page 8)?