

Silence in the Presence of the Holy

Revelation 8:1-5

Introduction

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” I first read those words more than twenty years ago in John Piper’s *The Pleasures of God*. Second only to the Bible, that book has had a profound impact on my life. I have owned several copies over the years; my first copy had to be replaced because I wore it out, and the copy on my shelf today is well marked. To give you a sense of why Piper’s book means so much to me, let me read something I underlined from his chapter, “The Pleasure of God in His Creation”: “What is the universe but the lavish demonstration of the incredible, incomparable, unimaginable exuberance and wisdom and power and greatness of God! What a God he must be!”¹

In that book, Piper says this about prayer: “God is the kind of God who delights most deeply not in making demands but in meeting needs. Prayer is his delight because prayer shows the far reaches of our poverty and the full riches of his grace.” Then he gives an image for prayer that has stayed with me. He says, “Prayer is the walkie-talkie on the battlefield of the world.” It is not a domestic intercom to increase the comforts of the saints, but a wartime means of calling upon God for courage, protection, provision, reinforcements, and the advance of His Word.²

It is not that I didn’t believe Piper’s words then; it is that prayer was not part of the culture of my heart in the same way that it is now. My prayer is that what we learn from Revelation 8:1–5 will help us see prayer the way heaven sees it.

Last week, we saw that John heard the number of God’s sealed people—144,000 from the tribes of Israel—but when he looked, he saw a great multitude no one could number from every nation, tribe, people, and language. I do not believe these are two different peoples of God, but Jews and Gentiles gathered into one redeemed people through Israel’s Messiah, the Lamb who purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

We also saw that the list of the 144,000 has the feel of a military census, like Numbers 1, where Israel was counted by tribe according to the men able to go to war. But Revelation 7 begins with Judah, because from Judah came the Lion who is also the Lamb. In other words, Revelation 7 gives us a symbolic picture of the people of God gathered, sealed, and ordered around the conquering Lamb.

¹ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway; 2026), 85.

² *Ibid.*, 223, 241.

Whatever you believe about the 144,000, their commitment and loyalty to the Lamb is a picture of discipleship and abiding in Jesus. Revelation 14:4 says, **“It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”** They are not pictured as passive spectators. They are sealed saints who live with a wartime ethic.

Now, when we come to Revelation 8:1–5, there is a dramatic pause of silence. At the center of that silence stands an angel at the altar with a golden censer. Revelation has already linked incense with prayer. In Revelation 5:8, the elders held golden bowls full of incense, **“which are the prayers of the saints.”** In Revelation 6, the martyred saints cried out beneath the altar, **“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long?”** Now, in Revelation 8, the prayers of all the saints rise before God with the smoke of the incense. Then the angel takes fire from the altar, fills the censer, and throws it to the earth. The prayers of the saints rise before the throne, and the fire of God’s judgment falls upon the earth.

The Silence Before the Throne of God

Notice what precedes the silence in heaven. Remember what I said previously: if the six seals describe what is happening on the world stage in God’s theater, then Revelation 7 shows us what is happening behind the curtain during the first six seals. Notice the language used in Revelation 7:15–17:

**“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

Remember whose vision this is. It is John’s vision. The John who wrote these words in our Bibles is the same John who heard Jesus say, **“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also”** (John 12:26). To the hungry and thirsty, John heard Jesus say, **“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst”** (John 6:35). Regarding our need for a shepherd, John heard Jesus say, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”** (John 10:11).

What is my point? The language used to describe John’s vision of the multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language before the throne is the language of abiding brought to its final fulfillment. Revelation 7:15–17 shows us the completed experience of abiding in Christ and where it ultimately leads:

- Those who abide in Jesus now, will dwell before God then.
- Those who come to Jesus as the Bread of Life now, will hunger no more then.

- Those who drink from Jesus as the fountain of living water now, will thirst no more then.
- Those who follow Jesus as the Good Shepherd now, will be guided by the Lamb forever then.

To be a Christian is to be a person who abides in Jesus. Jesus never made this optional. If you are struggling to see the connection, let me share what Jesus said in John 15:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” (vv. 1–4)

Then Jesus said of all who abide in Him, **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you”** (John 15:7).

The evidence that you are abiding in Jesus is that you desire to **“follow the Lamb wherever he goes”** (Rev. 14:4). And one of the evidences that you are following the Lamb is that you pray. Listen, abiding in Jesus and prayer are not separate. You cannot abide in Christ apart from a praying life. Prayer is the language of abiding. The sealed people of the Lamb are not passive spectators. They are not casual in their Christianity, and they are not content with merely warming chairs on Sunday morning. They are consecrated saints living with a wartime ethic, and one of the primary ways they wage war is by bringing their poverty, weakness, burdens, and cries before the throne of God.

So, against the backdrop of Revelation 7, where John hears the people of God numbered as 144,000 and then sees them as a great multitude before the throne, the Lamb opens the seventh seal. And when He does, heaven falls silent.

The Prayers Before the Throne of God

Remember what I have said about the book of Revelation: it is the crescendo of the whole counsel of God’s Word, packaged into twenty-two glorious chapters. The themes that run from Genesis 1:1 through Jude 25 converge in John’s apocalypse. Genesis begins, **“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”** Jude ends by praising the God who is able **“to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy”** (Jude 24). Between Genesis and Jude, one of Scripture’s great themes is clear: the people of God live in the middle of a war.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly said, “There is no grosser or greater misrepresentation of the Christian message than that which depicts it as offering us a life of ease with no battle and no struggle at all.... The first thing we must realize is that the Christian life is a warfare, that we are strangers in an alien land, that we are in the enemy’s territory.” The war is ongoing and unrelenting—but our strength to engage it does not come from within ourselves; it comes from

the Lord. This is why Paul wrote, “**For 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**” (Eph. 6:12). This is why Revelation does not picture the church as passengers on a cruise ship drifting comfortably through calm waters. No, we are at war, and the church is made up of sealed, redeemed people who follow the Lamb, resist the dragon, refuse Babylon, and find their source of power and strength before the throne of God through prayer.

That is why Paul urges us to “**put on the whole armor of God**” so we may stand against the devil’s schemes (Eph. 6:11). Yet the armor of God is not secured by human effort, self-discipline, or religious activity. It is ours because we are in Christ. He is our truth. He is our righteousness. He is our peace. He is our salvation. He is the Word who gives us the sword of the Spirit. We put on the armor by abiding in Jesus, and we stand firm in it by praying “**at all times in the Spirit**” (Eph. 6:18).

Now, with the image of 144,000 sealed warriors of the Lamb, clothed in the armor of God and standing firm in prayer, we are ready to understand why Revelation 8:1–5 matters so much. Do not miss where the angel stands in verse 3. He stands at the altar “**with a golden censer,**” and he is given “**much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne.**” Remember, this is not the first time Revelation has connected incense with prayer. In Revelation 5:8, the elders held golden bowls full of incense, “**which are the prayers of the saints.**” Then, when the fifth seal was opened, John saw the souls of the martyrs beneath the altar crying out, “**O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?**” (6:10). Here in Revelation 8, John sees these prayers—the prayers of all the saints—rising before God with the smoke of incense in the presence of God Almighty.

Notice that what rises before God is not only the prayers of the martyrs but “**the prayers of all the saints.**” Not only the prayers of pastors, but all the saints. Not only the prayers of the spiritually mature, but also the prayers of those who are struggling. The prayers of all the saints rise before God. Every person whose faith rests in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, has access to the throne of God through the blood of Jesus. This means that even the weakest cry of the weakest saint, offered through Christ, is not ignored in heaven.

All of this takes place within the silence of heaven, but what John sees cannot be misunderstood: God hears the prayers of all who have been redeemed by the blood of His Son. At this moment, John watches the angel take the censer, fill it with fire from the altar, and cast it to the earth. Then “**peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake**” pierce the silence. These are the images and sounds of the perfect justice of a holy God. Heaven is silent, but God is not indifferent. His people cry out, and He answers in His time, in His way, and according to His holy character. Joel Beeke says of these verses,

Prayer is powerful and effective in this world because God takes more notice of the prayers of His saints than He does the dictates or decrees of governments. When the prayers of the saints ascended to God in heaven, John writes that the earth was shaken with thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake as seven angels prepared to sound seven trumpets. God wants to impress upon us the effectiveness of prayer.... God is saying this: “By your prayers, I will overthrow governments. I will confound human plans; I will turn the world upside down, casting the wicked to the ground and delivering My ransomed people.”³

That is why prayer is not a small thing. Prayer is one of the means by which God accomplishes His purposes in history.⁴ It is not that our prayers bend God to our will, but as we abide in Christ, we bend to His will. And this same God, who “**does all that he pleases**” (Ps. 115:3), is pleased to hear the prayers of His people. Proverbs 15:8 says, “**the prayer of the upright is His delight**” (BSB).

Conclusion

So, permit me to leave you with three questions: If prayer is the language of abiding, what does your prayer life say about your dependence on Jesus? If prayer is the walkie-talkie on the battlefield of the world, have you been using it—or have you been trying to fight in your own strength? If heaven receives the prayers of all the saints, can you really say that God has not heard you, or that your prayers do not matter to Him?

Listen to me: even the weakest saint, crying out in the name of Jesus, is heard before the throne of God. If you are a Christian, you have access to the throne of God through the Son of God because of the blood of the Lamb.

So pray. Pray when you feel weak. Pray when you are afraid. Pray when you do not know what to do. Pray for your family. Pray for this church. Pray for the lost. Pray for those suffering for the name of Christ. Pray for the kingdom to come and for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

John Piper closes his chapter on prayer with a quote from Patrick Johnstone that I believe serves as an appropriate conclusion to this sermon:

“Let us mobilize prayer! We can tip the scales of history. Christians can be the controlling factor in the unfolding drama of today’s world—let us not allow ourselves to be chased around by the enemy, but let us go up at once and take the kingdoms of this world for Jesus (Numbers 13:30; Daniel 7:18)—He is delighted to give them to us (Daniel 7:22, 27; Luke 12:32). In practical terms, may these truths make our prayer lives as individuals,

³ Joel R. Beeke, *Revelation*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 261.

⁴ Richard Phillips

and in prayer meetings, outward-looking, Satan-shaking, captive-releasing, kingdom-taking, revival-giving, Christ-glorifying power channels for God!”⁵

Prayer is not how we bend God to our will; prayer is how we abide in Christ, draw near to the Father, and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, join in the purposes of the sovereign God who hears the prayers of all His saints.

⁵ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway; 2026), 248.