

Crosspoint Church

Introduction:

- A. [Show censer] Ever seen one of these? Maybe if you attended a Catholic or Orthodox church? It's a censer. You burn incense in it. The priest brings this down the aisle, swinging it from side to side, so the smoky fragrance spreads throughout the church. Do you know why a church would use incense? Well, today I'm going to take you to an amazing picture in the Bible, and a censer is part of it (though a censer that is more of a bowl than this).
- B. What happens when we pray? What actually transpires when we pray for our friends on their trip to Africa or when we pray for sick or endangered loved ones? When we pray the Lord's Prayer—"your kingdom come, your will be done"—what happens?
- C. George Herbert was a "country parson" in England in the 1600s. He was also a great poet. Perhaps his most famous poem, entitled "Prayer (I)," is simply a series of metaphorical phrases describing prayer. Like...

Prayer is the church's banquet... The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage. One of his metaphors for prayer is "reversed thunder." Can you imagine why he'd describe prayer with that phrase? Turn to Rev 8:1-5 which gives us a unique and vivid picture of prayer and what it does.

- D. Let me set the stage. In the preceding chapters John has described the opening of seven seals on God's great scroll setting his final judgment in motion. The first four seals released the terrifying Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse thundering out of heaven to earth. The fifth revealed the constant cries of the martyrs for God to bring justice and the sixth unleashed a worldwide earthquake and a *heaven-quake*, shaking loose the very stars of the heavens, so that people cried out for the mountains to fall on them. "For the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it." Then in **ch.7** there was the glorious scene of all the saints gathered before God's throne who "cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb." **So much sound! So loud!** Then, as we turn to **ch.8, everything stops.**

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

In the Old Testament trumpets were the harbingers of God's judgment but also were sounded to begin the Year of Jubilee. Here, the seven angelic trumpeters stand at the ready, but silent. Why?

V.3: *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 God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne.* Why the waiting trumpets and silence? **Apparently so the accumulated prayers of God's people can be brought to God.** This picture from the end of time it makes clear something we might forget:

I. OUR PRAYERS GET HEAVEN'S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION (8:1)

- A. The silence is a reminder of the rapt attention God gives to prayer. It is difficult to create a timeline from this book but this little interlude seems to be a pivot—a fulcrum—in the

account of the end of all things. It appears that **all that happens after this comes in answer to our prayers.**

- B. **V.3** speaks of *“the prayers of all the saints,”* so *our prayers* are here also! Our prayers are among those that silence heaven. **R. H. Charles** wrote, *“The needs of the saints are more to God than all the psalmody of heaven.”* **William Barclay** said, *“Even the music of heaven and even the thunder of revelation are stilled so that God’s ear may catch the whispered prayer of the humblest of his trusting people.”*

Vv.3-4: *“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 God’s people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up before God from the angel’s hand.”*

II. OUR PRAYERS, IGNITED FROM THE ALTAR OF CHRIST’S SACRIFICE, BECOME THE INCENSE OF HEAVEN

- A. The biblical symbol for prayer is incense. In the holy place of the OT tabernacle—what I like to call the living room of God—there was a lamp stand (the symbol of God’s truth), a table of bread (the symbol of fellowship with God), and an altar of incense. In **Ex. 30:34-37** God gave Israel a very specific **recipe for incense:**

*Then the LORD said to Moses, “Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the ark of the covenant law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. **Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD.**”*

Morning and evening incense was burned there in God’s presence, plus being added to various sacrifices.

- B. Now we learn that what God prescribed for Israel so long ago in the wilderness was a kind of re-enactment of what was always happening in heaven. **Rev. 5:8** says *“the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.”* Do you ever think of your prayers that way?!
- C. The thing about incense is that it requires fire to release its fragrance. It’s different from perfume. With incense, hot coals or fire is necessary to release its beautiful aroma. So where does the fire come from that ignites *this* incense?
- D. In the OT tabernacle there were two altars, the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard outside and the golden altar of incense in the Holy Place. Fire from the altar of sacrifice was carried into the Holy Place to ignite the incense on the golden altar right in front of the Holy of Holies where God’s presence resided; all this displays how prayer works.
- E. The altar of sacrifice in heaven is where the blood of Jesus is set before God as the sacrifice for our sins. **The fire is the signal that God accepts the sacrifice.** So do you see the imagery here? Our prayers find their fragrance when ignited by the fire from the sacrifice of Christ. **Without that fire our prayers are only warm wishes or the faintly scented potpourri of positive thinking.**

Almost all people pray, and I don’t doubt that God hears all prayers for he hears everything. What’s more, he answers some of those prayers. But the prayers of his

people—those whom Jesus has redeemed from their sins—are holy incense made of a sacred recipe of forgiveness, faith and fervency brought to the heavenly altar where they are ignited from the fire of Jesus’ sacrifice.

- F. Our prayers, once ignited, fill heaven with a holy fragrance (v.4). The point of incense, of course, is the fragrance, and in this case, it is God who delights in this aroma. Think of that! Revelation tells us about the stupendous sights and sounds of heaven, things which we cannot even imagine. **But the fragrance of heaven is our prayers! Our prayers!**

Have you heard our prayers?!? They usually seem so... ordinary, so unimpressive. But when our prayers are biblically shaped like the Lord’s Prayer, honoring God’s holy name, praying for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, when they are prayers for our Father’s provision and help, prayers confessing our sin and confronting Satan’s evil, all lifted in the name of Jesus Christ, no matter how halting or plain or fragile they may seem, God breathes in their aroma with a smile of delight upon his face. **Prayer is the fragrance heaven!**

Many years ago I preached a sermon from this text on the radio in the Pittsburgh area. A few days later I got a letter from a lady named **Isabelle Fisher**. I loved this comment: *“I had it in my heart that the only man-made thing in Heaven was the scars in [Christ’s] hands and feet and side---but [this passage] has made me know that—our prayers will be there too. Praise the Lord!”*

Now in v.5 there is a startling change in the picture: *“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.”* When I think of incense in a censer I think of that priest walking down the aisle of a big quiet church swinging a golden ball, heavy with fragrance. It is solemn, dignified, passive. But imagine if the priest suddenly gathers the chain and smoking ball into his hands, hikes up his robes, goes into a full windup and pitches that censer, grenade-like, out the temple door into the street, where it explodes on impact!

III. THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS, AFIRE FROM CHRIST’S SACRIFICE, INVADE EARTH WITH GOD’S JUDGMENT AND SALVATION (8:5)

- A. When the incense of our prayers is hurled earthward it becomes incendiary. In heaven, prayer is a holy fragrance; turned to earth, it becomes a **bombshell!**
- B. Does that description of what happens when the flaming censer hits earth sound familiar? When God descended to meet his people in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai, after he delivered them from Egypt. **Ex. 19:16-19**, *“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. ... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.”*

Rev. 4:5, gave us a description of God upon his throne, including this: *“From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.”* This description, *“thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake,”* are the manifestations of the presence of God. **When the censer of prayers set aflame in heaven crashes into earth it is God who has invaded.**

- C. Do you remember when the early believers prayed in Acts 4 for God to stretch out his hand to demonstrate the power of the Gospel? *“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”* The room doesn’t have to shake for God to invade in answer to our prayers.
- D. Prayers rarely *seems* powerful when we’re doing it. In fact, they’re not—they’re *not* fragrant, they’re *not* powerful, *before* they’re ignited in heaven. Prayer gets its potency—its fragrance and fire—only when it reaches the presence of God. So never be put off when prayers seem unimpressive. Lift up Jesus’ name, pray for our church, for our nation and other nations, for persecuted believers and for our own brothers and sisters in need and distress of every kind. Pray against evil, and pray for grace outpoured. We must pray for lost people and lost causes. Pray alone and pray together, whenever we can. Pray expansive prayers, prayers fed by Scripture, grounded in God’s will. **Prayer is not the last resort of the hopeless. It is the fragrant and flaming confidence of the faithful.**
- E. A couple in my former church sent me a story about his parents, **Jairo and Blanca Robertts**, a pastor and wife in Columbia. In 1975 a Communist guerilla group named M19, squeezed by the government troops *“would pillage the church for money and supplies. Many times holding hostage the missionaries and churchgoers (sometimes during an actual church service). They often threatened to burn down the church and the homes of Christians in the community. One time the guerillas locked everyone (in the middle of a service) into the church and told them that they were going to set the church on fire. They were never able to start the fire and eventually left. **Every time the church was held up or threatened, the church would gather together and pray.** God would always answer their prayers by binding the guerillas from destroying the church and village. Jairo and Blanca described it as God literally stopping the flames from being able to spread and from guns jamming and not being able to fire, and so on. Not one missionary or congregant was ever harmed.”*
- F. Prayer releases the holy presence of God on earthly places. **Prayer really is “reversed thunder.”** We may need patience as God collects prayers and waits for his divine timetable, (this passage is ultimately describing something yet to happen), but **the prayers of the saints, raised in faith in Jesus’ name and for his glory, are transformed from incense to high explosives**, hurled back to earth with pin-point accuracy by the angel at God’s right hand. And wherever our prayers collide with sin, wherever our prayers crash into the terrible darkness, wherever our prayers target the Enemy, whenever we plead for God to go before us, God Almighty himself invades with all his rumbling, flashing, rolling holiness, riding on the flaming missiles of our prayers. **And things can no more stay the same than if lightning struck or an earthquake shrugged its mighty shoulders!**