

"IMAGES OF JUDGMENT"

I. Introduction

- A. A number of years ago, Jonelle and I attended a memorable performance of Brahms's German Requiem.
1. The concert was not held in a typical venue but in a beautiful gothic sanctuary.
 2. As the audience took their seats before the music began, there was virtually no talking at all.
 3. And, if I recall correctly, there was little to no applause when the concert ended.
 4. It is not that those in attendance were not appreciative of the performance.
 5. On the contrary, we were deeply moved by it.
 6. It was simply that both the setting for the concert and the solemnity of that sublime piece of music produced a subdued and reflective response rather than an exultant celebration.
- B. We see something like this in the verses that we are considering in tonight's sermon.
1. John says that when the seventh seal was opened in his vision, there was silence in heaven.
 2. This silence, along with the other main elements of this passage, are symbols of the judgment that will fall upon this world at the last day.

II. Silence in Heaven

- A. After the intermission that followed the opening of the sixth seal, an intermission during which God's servants were sealed to ensure that they were spiritually protected from the judgments coming upon the earth, the seventh seal is finally opened.
1. As this happens, we expect John to describe something climactic and final, such as the return of Christ and the scene of all mankind standing before the throne of judgment.
 2. Instead, John says this: "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."
 3. While this is a bit surprising, it is not without precedent.
 4. In the Old Testament, silence is sometimes associated with the theme of God's impending judgment.
 5. In Habakkuk 2, the Lord concludes his pronouncement of judgment upon Babylon by saying, "But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Hab. 2:20)
 6. In Zephaniah 1, the prophet announces judgment upon Judah by saying, "Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near." (Zeph. 1:7)
 7. And in Zechariah 2, where the Lord declares that he will judge the enemies of his people, he says, "Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling." (Zech. 2:13)
 8. The silence that is described in those passages is a response of amazement and awe when confronted by the glorious presence of God coming in his wrath.
 9. The silence in Revelation 8:1 is of the same nature.
 10. Those present in the heavenly sanctuary are so awestruck that they cannot even make a sound.

- B. The silence at the opening of the seventh seal also serves a literary purpose in John's apocalypse.
1. The fact that Revelation was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit should not cause us to overlook its artistry.
 2. This book truly is a literary masterpiece.
 3. The verses that we are studying today serve as a transition from the visionary cycle of the seven seals to the visionary cycle of the seven trumpets.
 4. This text is an example of the interlocking feature that John uses to connect his visions.
 5. Instead of moving from one visionary sequence right into the next one, he overlaps them.
 6. In our text the next visionary sequence is introduced in verse 2, where the seven angels are given the seven trumpets.
 7. But the sequence of the seven trumpets is not resumed until verse 6.
 8. This calls our attention to the things that are conveyed in the intervening verses, verses 3 through 5.
 9. These interlocking verses focus on the prayers of the saints, which was a key element in the visionary cycle of the seven seals.
 10. The prayers of the saints were first mentioned in chapter 5:8 and then again in chapter 6:10.
 11. Before John moves on to the new cycle of the seven trumpets, he calls our attention to how the prayers of the saints relate to the judgments that are being described in these visions.

- C. This is a good time to reiterate that Revelation's visionary cycles are not to be taken as describing a chronological sequence.
1. We should not think that the seven seals are symbolic of a series of events that will happen at one point in time and the seven trumpets are symbolic of a subsequent series of events.
 2. If we interpret the visions that way, we will make them contradict each other.
 3. For example, Revelation 8:10 says that when the third angel sounds his trumpet, a great star falls from heaven to earth.
 4. This cannot be describing something that takes place after the opening of the seven seals, because back in chapter 6:13 we were told that the stars of the sky fell to the earth at the opening of the sixth seal.
 5. If Revelation's visions were a chronological sequence, there would not be any stars left by the time we get to chapter 8.
- D. The visions in Revelation are arranged in a format that has been described as "progressive parallelism."
1. The visionary cycles are parallel to one another in the sense that they all provide a picture of the unfolding of God's plan for history, culminating in the final judgment.
 2. And the visionary cycles are progressive in the sense that more and more emphasis is placed on the final judgment as the cycles progress.
 3. Each cycle covers the same ground, but it does so from a unique angle.
 4. The vision of the seven seals highlights the restraint of God's judgment for the sake of the church's salvation.

5. This is emphasized by the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals in chapter 7.
 6. The vision of the seven trumpets highlights the triumph of God's judgment over all that stands opposed to him.
 7. When the seventh trumpet is sounded, loud voices in heaven say, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (11:15)
 8. And the vision of the seven bowls highlights the finality of God's judgment upon this wicked world.
 9. When the seventh bowl is poured out, a voice from God's throne thunders, "It is done." (16:17)
- E. We will explore the meaning of the seven trumpets in greater detail in next week's sermon, but since they are introduced in verse 2, I want to offer a brief explanation of their basic significance.
1. Once again, we need to turn to the Old Testament to understand what is being conveyed by this symbol.
 2. In the Old Testament, trumpets are used to summon God's people to battle, to sound an alarm, and to herald the day of judgment.
 3. Trumpets played a key role at the battle of Jericho in Joshua 6, where the blowing of the trumpets caused the walls of the city to come tumbling down.
 4. And in Zephaniah 1, the great day of the Lord is described as "a day of trumpet blast and battle cry." (Zeph. 1:16)
 5. It is that same reality that is being depicted in John's vision of the seven trumpets.
 6. The trumpets announce God's judgments upon the earth.

III. Prayers before the Throne

- A. This brings us to the second image of judgment in our passage: the prayers of the saints ascending before the heavenly throne.
1. While it might seem strange to speak of prayer as an image of judgment, there is no doubt that the judgments that are depicted in verse 5 are brought about in response to the prayers of God's people.
 2. As we noted earlier, this is the third time that prayer has been mentioned in Revelation.
 3. In the vision of the Lamb of God in chapter 5, John said that when the Lamb 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." (Rev. 5:8)
 4. And at the opening of the fifth seal in chapter 6, the martyrs "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?'" (Rev. 6:10)
 5. Here we see the answer to that prayer.
 6. God is vindicating his people and avenging their blood.
- B. We don't typically offer petitions that call for God's judgment to come upon the earth.
1. When we pray for the unbelieving world, we usually pray for the salvation of the lost.
 2. It is right and good for us to pray this way.
 3. But we have to remember that God answers our prayers in accordance with the ultimate end that is in view in pure prayer, which is the glory of his name.

4. That being the case, whenever we pray for the advance of God's kingdom, we are ultimately praying for vengeance on all who persist in their opposition to it.
- C. This text calls our attention to the great blessing that we enjoy in having access to God in prayer.
1. Joel Beeke introduces his comments on this part of chapter 8 by relating a conversation he had with his father when he was a boy.
 2. His dad said to him, "Son, do you know what a child of God always possesses that the unconverted person doesn't have?... A child of God always has a place to go." [251-252]
 3. That is true.
 4. No matter what kind of situation we find ourselves in, through Christ we always have access to the throne of grace.
 5. There is nothing in all the world that is more valuable than that.
- D. Another thing that this passage teaches us about prayer is that the prayers of the saints are effective.
1. God uses the prayers of his people to accomplish his purposes.
 2. Consider these thoughts from James Ramsay: "God teaches us here that true prayer is not a mere exercise of holy affection, and an expression of dependence, and a means of preparation for receiving a blessing, as some would teach, but is a real and a mighty power of the world. It is made so by Him who bestows on all means, and agencies, and creatures, whatever of power they may possess. [Prayer] is mighty, not only to bring down the gentle rains and dews of the Spirit's gracious influences, and the daily blessings of our Father's providence, but equally so in calling down the judgments of heaven. It is in answer to prayer that the nations are desolated by war and pestilence, that the foundations of society are shaken, and the proudest monuments of human pride and wisdom

laid prostrate. Though the angels stand waiting before the throne, though their trumpets are given to them, though an omnipotent God has ready prepared all needful agencies and instruments for His work; yet before a single angel can summon to the work of judgment a single agency of wrath, the incense of the church's prayers must ascend before God." [359]

3. Our prayers really do matter.
 4. This should make us all the more diligent in prayer.
- E. This passage also points us to what it is that makes the prayers of the saints effective.
1. We see this in the fact that the angel is given incense to offer with the prayers of the saints.
 2. Under the old covenant, the offering of incense was part of the ministry of the priests in the sanctuary.
 3. That being the case, this incense represents Christ's priestly intercession on our behalf in heaven.
 4. It is a picture of how Christ sanctifies our prayers.
 5. Our prayers are imperfect.
 6. They need to be purified in order to be pleasing to God.
 7. This passage tells us that they need to be perfumed with "much incense."
 8. As our great high priest, Christ performs this service for us.
 9. Imperfect though your prayers are, they rise up to God as sweet smelling incense.

IV. Fire upon the Earth

- A. The third image of judgment in this text is found in verse 5, where John tells us that the angel took his censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it upon the earth.
1. This has the effect of producing “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”
 2. We have seen this sort of thing before in Revelation, and we will see it again.
 3. In chapter 6:12-14, the opening of the sixth seal results in an earthquake and other phenomena of cosmic dissolution. (vv. 12-14)
 4. In chapter 11, the sounding of the seventh trumpet produces flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, a great earthquake, and heavy hail. (v. 19)
 5. And in chapter 16, when the seventh bowl of wrath is poured out, the same phenomena occur again as Babylon the great is made to drain the cup of the wine of the fury of God’s wrath.
 6. The fact that this imagery is repeated again and again in Revelation further confirms that the visions are not sequential.
 7. They are providing us with varied snapshots of the judgment that lies in store this world.
- B. The key Old Testament background for Revelation’s cosmic dissolution imagery is what took place when God came down on Mount Sinai to deliver his law to Moses.
1. God descended upon Sinai in a manner that underscored his terrifying holiness and transcendence.
 2. He came down in fire and thick smoke.
 3. The entire mountain trembled, as if it were undergoing an earthquake.

4. There were thunders and lightnings and a trumpet blast that kept getting louder and louder.
 5. God descended on Sinai in a storm theophany that temporarily transformed the mountain into a sanctuary of the divine glory.
 6. God gave his people his law in that manner for a reason.
 7. He wanted to impress upon them that the law reveals his perfect standard of righteousness.
 8. Because of this, it exposes our sin and places us under divine judgment.
 9. As John Calvin puts it, the terrifying signs at Sinai “were added as seals to the promulgation of the Law, because the Law was given to cite slumbering consciences to the judgment-seat, that, through fear of death, they might flee for refuge to God’s mercy.”
- C. This helps us to understand why the coming of the final judgment is repeatedly depicted in Revelation by using the imagery of an earthquake and thunder and lightning.
1. On the last day, when God comes to judge the earth, he will measure the works of all people against the uncompromisingly holy righteous standard of his law.
 2. On that day, there will be no further opportunity to seek shelter from the storm of God’s wrath.
 3. Those who have not taken refuge in Christ the mediator will be without hope when that day comes.
 4. So let us make sure that we are found in Christ when that day arrives.
 5. And let us pray and bear witness that God would grant his grace to others, that they too might wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.