

Horatius Bonar:

"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 the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. 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."—Revelation 8:3-5.

The first verse here speaks of the seventh seal and its opening. At its opening 'there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.' As if, in the prospect of some great event about to happen, all heaven was silenced—only for a brief space—but still silenced. Its praise ceased; its service was suspended; and all its worshipers were fixing eye and ear upon something which God was about to do. The hush of heaven's perpetual music, its everlasting song, was something awful. The 65th Psalm illustrates this—'Praise waits (is silent) for You, O God, in Zion;' the songs of the sanctuary cease for a season; all is still; no voice is heard of priest or people. Then prayer goes up—'Unto You shall the vow be performed'—just as in our text, when the much incense goes up with the prayers of all saints. After that all flesh fall down before Him (Psalm 65:2); they confess sin; the chosen ones go in and approach to God. Then by terrible things in righteousness, God answers, as in our text (verse 5). Such seems to be the meaning of the 'silence in heaven;' as Eliphaz says (Job 4:16), 'There was silence, and (then) I heard a voice.'

The second verse intimates the great event, or events, for which heaven was silent. God was 'coming out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the world for their iniquity' (Isaiah 26:20). His people had gone into their chambers (their 'closets,' Matthew 6:6), and shut their doors about them, and God was coming forth for vengeance. The seven angels who stand before God (nearest to God) receive their trumpets, the sounding of which is to bring woe upon woe on an impenitent earth.

What follows, from the third verse to the fifth, is the first part of the great trumpet scene, or rather the preface to it; the intimation of the terrors in store for earth; the pledge of what is coming; a few drops of the fiery shower; the shower of divine wrath, long pent up, but poured out at last.

I. The angel and the altar. It is the altar that stood in the holy place which is here referred to in the third verse, not the brazen altar; it is the golden altar, the altar of incense; the altar of prayer and praise; the altar at which the priests ministered, and where also blood was sprinkled. In what respects it differed from the mercy seat (as the place of prayer) does not quite appear. At this altar all who are God's priests, all His royal priesthood, officiate. Here specially they stand, as pleaders with God, as intercessors on behalf of His own or against His enemies. To this altar the angel comes (not one of the seven), and here he takes his stand for a special purpose. Who he is, and what is his name, we know not. Only once is the name of an angel (Michael) mentioned in this book (12:7). All other angels are without name to us, though not without name to God. Strange that so many angels should be spoken of, and no names given! Why he comes to the altar appears from what follows. It is priestly work that he has to perform.

II. The angel and the censer. He comes to act as priest; and priestly messenger from God. As once an angel was seen over Jerusalem with a sword, so here he is seen with a censer. God puts into the hands of one a sword, and of another a censer, as the occasion calls for. The angel is one of those who minister in heavenly places, among heavenly things, which were the pattern of the earthly; and he stands at the incense altar with a golden (symbol of what is divine and heavenly) censer in his hands. He has a special errand to discharge. His fellows are about to sound their trumpets of judgment, and, like Aaron and Hur of old, he goes to prepare the way for the avenging of God's people upon the Amaleks of the last days. He goes to awake the slumbering cry of the Church, 'How long will you not judge?' 'Avenge me of my adversary.' God has sent him on his errand, and given him the golden censer. That censer is the link or connecting link between the throne of God and the judgments upon the earth. The vengeance is that of the anointed King on Zion (Psalm 2:6); but the introduction of that vengeance is the interposition of the Priest above.

III. The angel and the incense. It is no empty censer that he holds; it is not for show that he waves it. Incense is there; incense not his, but supplied by another—'There was given him.' It is much incense, or, literally, 'many incenses,' out of which were to come innumerable wreaths of fragrant smoke. This incense was to be 'offered with' or 'laid upon' so as to cover or envelop the 'prayers of all saints'—yes, all saints, from Able downwards; for this seems to be the gathering into one of all prayers from the beginning, that at length they may be answered (Luke 18:3,7). Upon the golden altar in front of the throne the prayers of the saints of all ages have been laid; there they have accumulated; the unanswered 'How long?' not forgotten.

At length upon this wondrous heap is poured the heavenly incense; and the whole contents, thus mingled together upon the golden altar, rise up to God in one fragrant cloud—the evil odor of what was earthly, and fleshly, and sinful, and unbelieving in these prayers being so absorbed in the divine fragrance as utterly to disappear, and leave nothing behind but the 'sweet savor' of that heavenly incense, which, like the precious spikenard in Bethany, fills the chambers above, and, going up in its sweetness to the throne, and to Him who sits thereon, prevails to draw down at length, the long-deferred answers to the prayers of ages.

IV. The angel and the fire. The angel having emptied the censer of its incense, fills it with fire; the pouring out of the one from the censer being the signal for the coming in of the other into that vessel from which the incense had been poured out. The fire that follows the incense, and which is the effect of that incense, is not to remain in the censer. The half an hour's silence is all the time allowed for this transaction—this giving of the incense, this pouring out of the incense upon the altar, this filling of the censer with the devouring fire of judgment. Half an hour for this symbolic prayer! Half an hour for this imparting of power and excellence to the prayers that had been lying on the altar! The long pent-up judgments are the answer; 'terrible things in righteousness;' first, the 'voices, and thunderings, and earthquake,' the prelude and pledge of something more terrible—the seven trumpets, with all their fullness of devastation and woe. The fire of the altar did the terrible work of vengeance; but the prayers of the saints were the true and irresistible cause. They prevailed. Hitherto they have lain dormant on the altar; now they awake, and forthwith the mighty works of God's judgment and mercy show themselves in the earth; the arm of the Lord is revealed.

The unanswered prayers get a more abundant answer; and God is now seen doing 'exceeding abundantly, above all we have asked or thought'. The whole machinery or instrumentality of judgment is now set in motion. There is delay no longer. 'The seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.' They had stood in silence before God (verse 2), waiting for the signal. They had received the trumpets, but until the incense is poured on the altar, and the fire shaken out from the censer, they must not use them. Now their successive blasts fill the air, and the effects are stupendous. Many LESSONS are here.

(1.) Prayer remains often long unanswered. Days, months, and ages it may lie unanswered, yet not one petition shall fall to the ground. The reasons for the long delay are often far beyond our reach; but in the end they will be found infinitely wise and gracious. 'He answered her not a word' (Matthew 15:23) is a sentence which the saints of God have often pondered, and which the history of the Church has in all ages illustrated. Many delays there have been, until hope deferred made the heartsick. But the Hearer of prayer well knows what He is doing.

(2.) Prayer is not lost. It lies on 'the golden altar which is before the throne.' We lay each petition there, as we say, 'for Christ's sake.' We have entered the tabernacle. We have passed the brazen altar, and, accepting the sacrifice there, we have been accepted. We go in to the inner altar, and lay our prayers upon its gold, where there lie heaps upon heaps of prayers waiting for their answer. Not one petition, even the poorest or feeblest, has dropped from that altar, or been swept away, or lost in the process of time. All, all are there. In themselves they are poor, having no fragrance; but their intrinsic imperfection cannot change the nature of that altar on which they are laid. There they are preserved—each sigh, each tear, each cry, from child or aged man, from the chief of sinners, from the thief upon the cross, from the chamber of weakness and sorrow, from the crushed spirit and the broken heart—there they are—the groanings that cannot be uttered.

The 'God be merciful to me, a sinner;' the 'How long?' of the tortured martyrs; the moan of the suffering saint upon his tossing sick-bed—there they are—the father's prayer, 'Lord, save my child;' the child's prayer, 'Lord, save my father'—there they are—the pleadings for the church of God, for the overthrow of Antichrist, for the binding of Satan, for the deliverance of earth, for the consummation of the eternal purpose! Not one cry lost—not one petition gone astray. All there!

(3.) Prayer will be answered. Sooner or later every petition will receive its true and proper answer—an answer that will satisfy the petitioner to the full; an answer from Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. Delay will only add to the fullness of the answer, and increase our joy when it comes. And it will come. He is faithful who promised. He cannot deny Himself.

(4.) The answer will come in connection with Christ's surpassing excellence. His fragrance is to be cast upon these long-lying prayers, that seem without life or motion, and they shall arise. 'Lazarus, come forth,' will be heard again, and the prayers of ages shall have life poured into them. It is written, 'Your dead men shall live; my dead body shall they arise'—so may it be said of our prayers laid upon the altar.

His divine perfection cast upon them and pervading them, absorbs and extracts all their imperfection, and they

ascend, as odors of divine sweetness, perfect and irresistible, before the throne of God! That which was lacking in them is far more than supplied. Their lack of faith, and earnestness, and coherence, disappears. The simple cry which they contained—the core or kernel within—thus stripped of its vile accompaniments, goes up in melody and power, bringing down at length the full and glorious answer. Christ is magnified in such answers; out of our infirmities there comes honor to Him.

(5.) Prayer is often answered in ways we little thought of. We know not what we ask, though we think we know it well. We pray for the hastening of the King and the kingdom. Have we considered the judgments which that arrival is to bring? We looked for peace, and behold trouble; yet out of that trouble peace is to come; for light, and darkness has come; yet out of that darkness shall light arise. We ask for faith and holiness; we get sickness, or bereavement, or earthly disaster. Yet out of these the longed-for purity and faith shall come. We plead for the reign of the Prince of peace, and lo, wars and rumors of wars! for the removal of creations curse, and lo, famines, earthquakes, and pestilences in diverse places! Yet out of these are to come the new heavens and earth, wherein dwells righteousness. We shall one day get all we prayed for, and much more. Let us pray always, and not faint. This is the day of prayer; the day of the answer is coming. Glorious shall that answer be, though perhaps unexpected; blessed shall it be, yet perhaps terrible in the events which it brings.

Our prayers offered long ago—the prayers of all saints—are lying now on the altar—in much weakness, and imperfection, and unbelief. They are waiting for a fresh application of the divine fragrance, which will make them irresistible. That fragrance is on its way—it is at hand.

The church is on her knees. The burden of her cry is, 'How long?' For earth is not improved, and its guilt is accumulating. Human evil, in spite of science, and literature, and art, is growing too great and too hopeless for man to contend with, either for removal or punishment. The unrenewed heart works out its plans of progress and elevation, in defiance of God's sentence against sin, and in contempt of the two divine remedies for the maladies of the human heart—the cross of the Substitute, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It refines and polishes, and thinks thereby to turn iron into silver, and silver into gold. It charms the adder, and imagines that its sting is gone. It fertilizes the soil, and boasts that the curse is removed. It reforms states and parliaments; it diplomacizes, and musters its armies, and prepares new weapons of war, blind to the will of Him by whom kings reign and princes decree judgment; heedless of the eternal purpose, or of the one bright outcome of all earth's confusion, and gloom, and anguish—the arrival of the righteous King, to break His enemies in pieces with His iron rod, and to sway His holy scepter over an earth which, having passed through the fires of judgment, shall be fit for the habitation of the just!