

## Revelation 8:1-5 – “The Calm Before the Storm”

Revelation 8 opens with the Lamb breaking the seventh seal of the scroll He received from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne [read 5:1]. I.e., He finished opening it. The predictions under the first six seals show us predictions that match history with supernatural precision, taking readers through a 300 years until the Roman government officially embraced Christianity. The rest of Revelation will bring us right up to the present time. But the first seal foretold the era of prosperity in Rome just after John’s lifetime, the second seal an era of civil war, the third an era of economic crisis, the fourth of disease and death, the fifth of an era of many Christians martyred for the sake of Christ, and the sixth of the complete overthrow of paganism and the sudden ascension of Christianity to a position of status and power in Rome. It’s amazing how the predictions match what happened, and in the right order! Bible prophecy is history written ahead of time. Yes, but what does this tell us about God? Should we fear the One sitting on the throne? What about the Lamb who clearly has authority to judge nations and decree the rise and fall of entire civilizations? Has it occurred to you that if you only picture Jesus as gentle and meek, or as still hanging on a cross, your picture of Jesus is unbiblical? The Bible tells us what to think about Jesus: He is the Lamb who died for our sins. And He is Lord of all. *All* the nations; all time. Yet many reject Jesus because they see His own people don’t obey Him. Too many of His own people doubt His love for them. And that insecurity produces insecure behaviours in Christians. Even if they really are Christians! But let me say that if you don’t fear the awesome power and authority of Jesus, while moved in your heart by the assurances of His love for you, then you might still be one of those Christians-in-name only. I pray this morning that Revelation 8 will help you take another look at Jesus.

### Be still and know the Lamb is God

[read v1] After the intense action of the first six seals, this silence is deafening. It’s a clear dramatic reference to other times of silence just before a display of God’s power. It’s dramatic when even the birds stop singing, when nature is hushed as if something is about to happen. It’s dramatic when the judge pauses before the gavel drops. It’s dramatic when everything is still and quiet just before a hurricane. That drama here is very deliberate so that the reader will get the point. The pregnant silence is in order to intensify the importance of what John saw just before he heard the thunder and lightning of God’s judgement shake the earth: verse 5 breaks the silence: [read v5b]. John’s readers are reminded of other times of silence in Scripture:

- Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling. (Zech. 2:13)
- But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Hab. 2:20)
- Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. (Zeph. 1:7)
- "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Ps. 46:10)

When the Lamb opens the seventh seal upon the so-called Christian Roman Empire, it is the beginning of the end--the rest of the judgements in Revelation begin to happen, the whole book is now opened. With the introduction out of the way, the stage is now set for John’s prophecy to carry on from Daniel’s prophecy, to unveil the enemy who impersonates Christ and corrupts the church bearing His name.

### A city is about to fall

[read v2] The seven trumpets signify the conquests of the Lamb, and the first four fell upon the empire that claimed to be Christian, but where really the visible church has become corrupted by power. However trumpets in the Bible don't merely announce battle, they also call God's people to worship. An appropriate double significance to trumpets in a time of rampant nominal religion! [read Num 10:8-10] One *NIV* study Bible says, "This scene [with 7 trumpets] recalls Josh 6..., where seven priests blow trumpets before Jericho's destruction."<sup>i</sup> In Joshua 6, the fortress-city of Jericho was overthrown supernaturally by God's decree: [read Josh 6:2-4, 6, 16-17]. These seven angels are given seven symbolic trumpets signifying that like the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6, the fall of Rome is now assured. So I'm reminded that for Christians, history must never be boring. When we read the record of how God has ruled in and through world events, we must see in that record the testimony of the Lamb's sovereign rule. But we must also answer the call to worship!

### Christ our High Priest saves His people

The Lamb's people are guaranteed to emerge through these judgements to everlasting life. We see that in chapter 7 (with the sealing of the 144,000) and in chapter 8. [read v3] The symbol here is drawn from the Old Testament office of the High Priest. These things this angel is doing in verses 3-5 were only done by the High Priest. Just to be clear, verse 3 says very clearly that this is "another angel". It is not the Lord Jesus Christ. In these symbols, Jesus is the Lamb in verse 1. Yet Christ is the *ultimate* fulfillment of the whole office of the High Priest. This helps us to see that here the focus is not on the person serving as High Priest, but on the ministry of the High Priesthood that Jesus fulfilled. We need to remember that because in chapter 1, Jesus was already shown as the final High Priest, present with His churches, taking care of us (Rev 1:12-20). So again, this High Priest in Rev 7:3 is not Jesus, but is symbolic of the High Priesthood which Jesus fulfilled. Using the symbols of the priesthood from the Old Testament, what John sees in verses 3-5 point Christ's followers to remember what Christ our High Priest has already given us: the forgiveness of our sins forever, and the right to come to God personally in prayer. Let me show you how I get that from these verses:

### The significance of an altar without a sacrifice

It's worth observing that the ritual this angelic high priest performs, going from the bronze altar of burnt sacrifice with the censer and incense into the Holy place to the golden altar of incense, is a part of the ritual for the Day of Atonement. And that's the focus here: atonement for the sins of God's people. But if that's the case, where is the sacrifice? [read Lev 16:1-3, 6] Listen to what God instructed Moses, and notice what's missing in Revelation 8! [read Lev 16:12-14, 16-17] The animal sacrifice is missing; the blood is missing—because the sins of Christ's people have already been forgiven and removed by the blood of Christ, who gave His own body to be our offering! The Day of Atonement has already come and will never be repeated! In a way, what we see in Revelation 8 is what the High Priest Jesus now does since there is no more need for an offering for sin ever again. The Lamb Himself was our offering and He is our eternal High Priest. But what about the incense and the smoke in verse 4?

### The significance of smoke without the curtain

[read v4] Let me read part of Lev 16 for you again so that you can see what Christ has changed for us: [read Lev 16:12-13] The High Priest in the Old Testament was supposed to bring the censer of incense inside the veil, the curtain separating the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies from the outer room of the Temple where the golden incense altar stood. Nobody could pass through the curtain unless God

commanded it, or else they would die. Nobody could look at God's glory above the Ark without dying, so God instructed that in order for the High Priest to enter there, he had to make such a thick cloud of smoke from the censer that he could not even see the Ark. The smoke symbolically represented the prayers of the people of Israel, which he was able to bring to God once their sins were atoned for. In Revelation 8, there is no more curtain separating us from God, there is no more sin separating us from God, in fact, because Jesus has opened the way for us to come to God: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:16)

We have access to God in prayer because of Jesus! Our prayers are already made holy and acceptable to God through Jesus! There is no more need for the curtain to separate us from God's presence: John has already seen the throne of God and the incense is no longer required as a cloud to hide God from his sight. The symbolic High Priest does not fall down dead; John does not fall down dead. Christ our High Priest has opened the way for us to come right into God's presence, to the throne of grace!

### The sin of the city that rejected the Saviour

[read v5] This last action of the symbolic High Priest in verse 5 is not part of the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus. Instead, it comes from Ezekiel 10:2, 6-7. Let me explain the imagery first: In Ezekiel 1, God appeared to the prophet Ezekiel in a vision of His glory, sitting on His throne (normally symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem), but the shocking part was that now instead of golden cherubim on the lid of the Ark, Ezekiel sees God's glory on the move, like a supernatural chariot for a King, and the wheels are four mighty cherubim underneath God's throne—it's a bewildering picture! The most confusing part, from Ezekiel's point of view, was that in the vision he saw that God was no longer with His Temple in Jerusalem, but in Babylon. How could God leave His holy city? And that's the significance of what Ezekiel sees in chapter 10: [read Eze 10:2]. God judged the city of Jerusalem, His holy city, the place of His Temple, because the people who called themselves by His name had become corrupt, wicked, and had betrayed Him. The next chapter shows that when Jerusalem was destroyed, only a small remnant of faithful believers were left, and sent away into exile in Babylon. That's the source of the symbolic act of taking fire and throwing it as an act of judgement in verse 5. But in Revelation 8:5, this scene, already highlighted in dramatic silence before the thunder and lightning, is made even more dramatic by the detail in verse 5: [read v5a] the fire was "from the altar".

This is the same altar in front of which the angel stood at first in verse 3—it's the altar of burnt sacrifice. In that symbolic picture, whose life was offered on that altar on the ultimate Day of Atonement? Christ's: The same Lamb who is the Judge opening the seven seals and calling forth the seven trumpets! The fire is taken from the remains of the atoning sacrifice on the altar. The very fire that burns the earth in judgement is the result of the sacrifice of Christ for His people. This is a haunting picture of why God is righteous and fair in the way He judges the souls of mankind. They receive the judgement they deserve for turning their backs on the offering of God's Son:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. (Jn. 3:17-19 ESV)

That's why the fire of judgement that is thrown down on the Roman Empire, unleashing the trumpet judgements of the Lamb, is not just some fire from heaven, but fire taken from the symbolic altar where Jesus died. The accuracy of this prediction is incredible to see in history: the guilt of the so-called Christian Church of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was guilt exacerbated by the rejection of Jesus Christ. In the Arian heresy, the Church rejected the deity of Jesus. With the emergence of a system of priests, the Church rejected the One mediator believers have in our High Priest, Jesus. With the development of superstitions around the bones of dead saints, prayers to the saints, making communion and baptism into rituals that save people, and other pagan practices that found their way into Christian worship services,<sup>ii</sup> the Church showed disdain for the very heart of the Christian faith, the Gospel of salvation by grace alone. So it was that the rejection of these--Christ's people, Christ's sacrifice, and Christ's divine nature--that brought down the wrath of God upon the so-called Christian Roman Empire beginning in the 5th century, immediately after the events of the sixth seal.

The corruption of Christianity happened because love for Jesus grew cold and nominal and Christianity grew popular. But nominal Christianity is not Christianity. John 13 says "when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1). True Christians aren't merely satisfied if they get through life without denying Jesus. True followers of Jesus love Him enough to deny themselves. They are willing to give up everything for the sake of Jesus. And very often, that's exactly what they do. So as we get ready to dive into the rest of the book of Revelation, to see Jesus Christ made known, ask yourself what is your motive for serving Jesus? Revelation 8 is a scene in between prophetic events that were fulfilled in the fourth and fifth centuries. But the truths it teaches about the ministry of Jesus on behalf of sinners like you and me is as timeless as it is urgent. What would you be willing to lose if you knew you would gain Jesus?

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<sup>i</sup> (NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible) Revelation 8:6

<sup>ii</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, (Prince Press, 2001) pp 124-135, etc.