

DEVOTE YOURSELF TO PRAYER FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

8 When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and there were given to them seven trumpets. 3Then another angel, one who had a golden censer, came and stood by the altar. He was given much incense that he was to mix with the prayers of all the saints, [and offer it] on the golden altar that was before the throne. 4The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, ascended to the presence of God from the angel's hand. 5Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it to the earth; there followed peals of thunder and rumblings and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. 6The seven angels who had the seven trumpets [now] prepared to sound them. (Rev. 8:1-6)

Introduction

"I don't ordinarily interfere with God's weather," writes a worker for the Salvation Army named Lyell. "When He sends rain, then rain's my choice. But on one occasion, God stirred my faith with a change in the weather."

Lyell goes on to recount that occasion:

A few years ago, when the Salvation Army had a big congress in New York City, we were to have a march of witness through Washington Park—a "hippie" stronghold in those days.

The radio predicted heavy rain all day. We certainly had it all morning. After the morning meeting, we all went to 13th Street, where we were to assemble at noon for the march, but the rain was coming down in torrents as we huddled under the eaves.

I thought, "Lord, if You could have one more person agree with me on Matthew 18:19, I believe I could have faith for You to hold up that rain until our march is over." Jesus said in that verse, *"If two of you shall agree on earth concerning anything they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven."*

I had no sooner prayed that brief prayer than Bill (director of the youth center in our corps) rushed up to me. He put out his hand and in a challenging voice, said, "Matthew 18:19."

I barked back, "I'll go get the flags."

I searched backstage and found no flags, so I took the big silk flags from the podium with another prayer in "shorthand," "Lord, You just can't let it rain now, or these flags will be ruined."

When I returned to 13th Street a few minutes later, Bill was waiting for me in the street and our people were forming behind him. There wasn't a drop of rain!

We had a great march and gave out many tracts. But no more than 10 or 15 minutes after we were sheltered inside, unrelenting rain fell for the rest of the day.

That word "agree" in the verse Bill blurted to me is vitally important. It is, "*symphoneo*," in the Greek, from which our word "symphony" comes. It not only means harmony but *many tones harmonizing*—everything clicks. (*POWER* 12/9/90, pp. 4-5)

Lyell's experience is an example of how the Lord acts upon the prayers of His people, especially as those prayers are united and focused upon the work of His kingdom.

In the opening verses of Revelation chapter eight our attention is focused on prayer; in particular, prayer that is focused on the cause of God's kingdom and its final coming. (Note that Lyell was not praying for clear skies so he and his friends could have a picnic; his prayers were focused on the purposes of God and His kingdom.) We are encouraged to devote ourselves to prayer, especially prayer that focuses on the accomplishment of God's purposes in the world and the coming of God's kingdom.

As Christians, we must appreciate the power and the privilege of prayer: God has ordained that the prayers of His people should play a vital part in the accomplishing of His kingdom purposes. Let us devote ourselves to prayer for God's kingdom, because God has ordained for our prayers to play a vital role in the coming of His heavenly kingdom.

I. Devote Yourself to Prayer for God's Kingdom, ...Because God Pays Special Attention to Such Prayers

John informs us that when Christ opened the seventh seal, "*there was silence in heaven for about half an hour*" (vs. 1.)

The opening of the seventh seal concludes the previous vision of the Breaking of the Seven Seals. The breaking of the seventh and final seal ushers in the eternal rest of God, it is **the silence of rest**, much like the rest into which God entered following His works of creation: "*And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because in it he rested from all his work that God had created and made*" (Gen. 2:3.) Just as God rested upon the completion of His work of creation, so He, together with His people, shall enter into His eternal rest upon the completion of His work of redemption and judgment at the end of this present age.

At the same time, the opening of the seventh seal introduces us to the next vision: the Sounding of the Seven Trumpets. Thus, the “silence” in heaven is not only the silence of rest, it is also **the silence of preparation and anticipation**, it is the silence of God that precedes His mighty acts of redemption and judgment. The silence “*for about half an hour*” is a dramatic pause, a striking contrast to the seven piercing trumpet blasts that are about to sound.

Furthermore, the momentary silence emphasizes the fact that God gives His full attention to the prayers of His people. Thus, this silence is also **the silence of attentiveness** on the part of God; the Lord is attentive to the prayers of His people, He is waiting for those prayers so that He may act upon them. From a consideration of Exodus 2:23-25, it becomes evident that it was when the people of Israel called upon the LORD that He responded to them and provided divine deliverance for them

In the course of [that long period of] time, the king of Egypt died. The children of Israel groaned because of their bondage and they cried out, and their cry for help because of their bondage went up to God. ²⁴And God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵So God looked upon the children of Israel and God was concerned [about them.] (Ex. 2:23-25)

Note, too, what the LORD says to the Old Testament prophet Samuel: *"About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him leader over my people Israel; he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked upon my people, for their cry has reached me"* (1 Sam. 9:16.)

Here is a spiritual principle: God acts in response to the prayers of His people; and when He is about to act, God moves His people to prayer. This second part of the principle becomes evident from the example of Daniel. When Daniel realized that the appointed time for deliverance from the Babylonian Captivity was at hand (the seventy years foretold by Jeremiah,) he was moved to pray to the LORD for the restoration of the covenant people in the Promised Land of Canaan. Daniel testifies,

I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. ³So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Dan. 9:2-3)

The vision presented in verses 3-5 vividly depicts the prayers of God's people being offered up to the Lord their God. Here we find "**all the saints**" (vs. 3,) that is to say, the entire church of the Lord Jesus Christ, united in prayer. It is implied that that they are praying for the accomplishment of their redemption and the coming of their Lord and His kingdom in glory; this seems to be a valid assumption based on such passages as:

When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw beneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain on account of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Master, [you who are] holy and true, will you refrain from judging those who dwell on the earth and avenging our blood?" (Rev. 6:9-10)

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" ... ²⁰He who bears witness about these things says, "Yes, indeed, I am coming soon!" Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:17a, 20)

This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt. 6:9-10)

We are told, *"the smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, ascended to the presence of God"* (vs. 4.) That is to say, the accompanying smoke of the incense is the visible assurance that the prayers of God's people are, indeed, ascending into the presence of God and are being received by Him.

Let us devote ourselves to prayer for God's kingdom. Let us pray for the accomplishment of God's purposes on the earth, the redemption of His church, and the final coming of His kingdom. Let us devote ourselves to prayer for God's kingdom, with the assurance that the Lord pays special attention to such prayers: *"The sacrifice [offered] by the wicked is detestable to Jehovah; but the prayer of the upright is his delight"* (Prov. 15:8.)

II. Devote Yourself to Prayer for God's Kingdom, ...Because God will Act upon Such Prayers

In verse 3 John sees an angel come and stand beside the altar, in his hand he has *"a golden censer."* There is now given to this angel *"much incense,"* which he mixes with *"the prayers of the saints."* The offering of this incense upon the altar and the resultant aromatic smoke ascending from the altar unto God is vividly depicting the prayers of God's people and the fact that they are, indeed, precious to the LORD.

In verse 3 the angel is seen filling his censer with incense, (representing the prayers of the saints.) In verse 4 the smoke of the incense, (i.e.; the prayers of the church,) ascends into the presence of God. In verse 5 the angel fills his censer with *"fire from the altar"* and hurls it to the earth.

What is the result of the angel's action? We are told that there followed *"peals of thunder and rumblings and flashes of lightning and an earthquake."* That is to say, the LORD is asserting Himself in awesome power and majesty in response to the prayers of His church, as the worldwide body of believers prays for the

accomplishment of God's purposes, the spread of the gospel, and the coming of God's kingdom.

Let us devote ourselves to prayer for God's kingdom, because God will act upon such prayers. We need to appreciate the "accumulative weight" of prayer: much prayer over much time finally resulting in a dramatic act of God. Consider our Lord's parable on prayer recorded in Luke 18:1-8,

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor had regard for men. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' ⁴"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor regard men, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she will not eventually wear me out with her coming!'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and swiftly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:1-8)

In the parable, the widow's persistent plea finally resulted in the rendering of a just verdict by the unrighteous judge. Jesus asks, "How much more will not the Lord, the righteous Judge of all the earth, hear and answer the prayers of His children when they call upon Him to act on behalf of His cause and His kingdom?" By way of example: The dramatic collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980's and early 1990's was in answer to the many prayers of God's people who persisted in prayer for a prolonged period of time, so reports Brother Andrew and the Slavic Gospel Mission.

III. Devote Yourself to Prayer for God's Kingdom, ...Because God will Use Such Prayers

As the dramatic silence of expectation fills heaven (vs. 1,) John observes "*the seven angels who stand before God*" (vs. 2.) These angels are perfect in number, (seven being the biblical number of perfection,) and they occupy the position of supreme honor and importance—they are seen to be standing before God. Their appearance indicates that a great and marvelous work of God is about to occur. This is all the more emphasized by the fact that to each of these angels is given a trumpet: they are to herald the coming of the Lord and His mighty acts.

In verse 6 John observes these seven angels as each one raises his trumpet to his lips and proceeds to sound a blast. Note carefully that between the initial appearance of the seven angels (vs. 2) and the sounding of their trumpets (vs. 6,) there occurs the vision depicting the prayers of the church (vs. 3-5.) The message is this: the Lord uses the prayers of His people to accomplish His work.

One aspect of prayer is that it is the gracious gift of participating with God in the accomplishment of His plans. We may pose the question, “Why pray, since God has assured us that He is going to sovereignly accomplish His will?” The reason we are nevertheless to pray lies in the fact that part of God’s method for accomplishing His will is graciously employing the prayers of His people as a means of accomplishing His divine and sovereign plan. By way of illustration: When he is working on repairing the family car, Dad may graciously allow his little son to “assist” him. Dad does not need the little boy’s “help;” but out of love, Dad has determined that the boy shall have a part to play in the work of repairing the car.

Prayer that “works with God” in the accomplishing of His eternal purposes is one present aspect of what it means to share with Christ in His sovereign rule. We are told that even now we in some sense are sharing with Christ in His heavenly reign: “[God] raised us with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms—in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6.) Note the use of the past tense—we are presently seated with Christ in the heavenly realms—indicating that our being seated with Christ is not only something that shall occur in the future age. In eternity we shall fully participate with Christ in the accomplishing of His plans and His dominion. At present, one way we share in the accomplishing of His purposes is by means of prayer—prayer that is attune to His plans and purposes as they are revealed to us in Scripture, the greatest being the coming of His kingdom.

Let us devote ourselves to prayer for God’s kingdom, because God has graciously ordained to use such prayers, making them an integral part of the accomplishing of His work.

Conclusion

Some time ago a survey was taken on the subject of prayer. The survey indicated that 4 out of 5 Christians pray at least once a day. The general content of their prayers—compared to the prayers of those who are not Christians—are as follows:

- 90% thank God for what they have, (as do 73% of non-Christians)
- 74% pray for people whom they know personally, (as do 58% of non-Christians)
- 71% pray for their own spiritual growth, (as do 52% of non-Christians)
- 66% pray for their health, (as do 61% of non-Christians)
- 31% pray about the events happening in the world, (as do 31% of non-Christians)
- 28% ask the Lord to give guidance to public leaders, (as do 19% of non-Christians)
- 7% ask for material things that they want or need, (as do 17% of non-Christians)

One observation the researchers made was that the content of the Christian's prayer is strikingly similar to that of the non-Christian (*Vital Signs*, George Barna and William Paul McKay, Crossway Books, Westchester IL, 1984, pp. 111-112.)

Another observation that can be made from a consideration of the Christian's prayers is the startling omission of any petition for the kingdom of God—no prayer is noted for the progress of God's kingdom, the increase of that kingdom via conversions to Christ, or the final coming of that kingdom. If the survey is a true indication of the prayer life of the average American Christian, it appears that many contemporary Christians have lost sight of the first great petition that should be the primary focus of our prayers: The final coming of God's kingdom.

Because of the instruction given by our Lord Himself in His model of prayer (the Lord's Prayer,) and because of the incentives provided in Revelation chapter eight, let us make prayer for God's kingdom the primary concern of our prayers—may we place it as #1 on our prayer list!