

Text: Rev. 8:1-6

Title: "What Heaven Knows about God's Judgment"

Time: 9/3/2017 am

Place: NBBC

Intro: We all have that part of our job that is necessary but not really what caused us to jump into the profession we are in. We might say that it is a somewhat strange part of doing what God has called us to do. As the pastor of this church, it has been my responsibility to take the church's garbage to the dump each week, which I am happy to do for the glory of Christ. It is part of the benefit of our living in the parsonage that the Lord has provided for us, and I am truly thankful for all of that. But it is one of those parts of being a pastor that I did not think much about while in seminary preparing for this work. You might say it is the unusual or exceptional or strange part of my pastoral work.

You may remember from Sunday school that biblical theologians identify five major works of God: creation, providence, revelation, salvation, and judgment. Of these five works of God, the Bible tells us that judgment is His strange work (Isa. 28:21). Creation, providence, revelation, and salvation are never called God's strange work like this.

Judgment is God's strange work, in part, because it is the work of God that He must do which is foreign to His original design. It is that work of God that He must do because of the perversion of that original design caused by our sin. Even during the Great Tribulation, that work of judgment ramps up slowly over time – the seventh seal is the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet is the seven bowls of wrath. In the slowness of that crescendo, we see that this work is a strange work for God. It is a work that is necessary, but also somewhat foreign to Him.

So God's judgment is certainly strange in relation to God in that biblical sense. It is also strange to us for other reasons. Our perspective tells us that God's judgment is too harsh or somehow unjust. We think this way because we are sinful. There is no such confusion in heaven when it comes to understanding the nature of God's work of judgment. Viewing it from heaven's perspective helps us understand its true nature, and that understanding is especially important to us now, prior to its coming, so that we can avoid it.

Although His strange work, God's work of judgment is a work that He will not leave incomplete. In heaven's preparations for the trumpet judgments of the Great Tribulation, we learn some things we need to know ahead of time about God's work of judgment. Notice with me 4 things.

I. Heaven knows God's work of judgment will produce silence (v. 1).

Ill: Today we live in a culture of public protest. Everyone voices their opinion about just about everything. News reports tell us that many of these vocal demonstrations are turning violent. My mother-in-law was with us for Brandon and Carrie's wedding last month, but then had to go back to Charlottesville, VA, where a young lady, who was a demonstrator, had died after being rammed by the car of another demonstrator, causing the National Guard to be called up. We were a bit worried about sending Mom back home to a town experiencing that kind of civil unrest.

Appl: There is no worry in heaven about the outcry of public protest when it comes to God's work of judgment. When God prepares to judge sin, heaven stands silent. They do so because they know the truth about the justice of God's judgment of sin. Paul expresses that truth in Rom. 3:19-20,

“Now we know that whatsoever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore, by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Heaven remains silent before God’s judgment because they understand the perfections of God’s law and the horror of the guilt of violating that law. Our text in Revelation tells us that this silence lasted for about a half-an-hour. Perhaps when the lost sinner stands before God someday, and he stands silent before the condemnation of God’s law, it will take about a half-an-hour or so before the books that were opened in judgment against him are again closed.

What is Paul’s takeaway in view of this silence before God’s judgment? “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight.” We all need another way to be justified. Paul will go on to explain that God commended His love to the sinner when Christ died for his sin to justify him before God’s law. Have you been justified by Christ before God’s law? You will have no other argument and no other plea to get you through your half-hour of silence.

II. Heaven knows God’s work of judgment will be prepared (vv. 2, 6).

III: I was amazed at how many preparations went into the planning of my son’s wedding. When we think of the need to plan for an event, we are often overwhelmed by the need to plan for it and prepare for it.

Appl: Our passage this morning is really about God’s preparation for the seven-trumpets Great Tribulation judgment.

We read of angels that have stood, evidently for some time, before God's throne for this purpose. We read that their number is seven – the number of completion. There will not be anything left unjudged when their work is finished. They are given seven trumpets and they will be prepared to sound those trumpets. You get the sense that there is no way that this plan to judge sin is not going to be executed flawlessly. It is coming. It will do its work. It is absolutely certain because it is a work that God has prepared to do.

But I want us to stop and think about the fact that God is telling His churches in this book what that plan is far ahead of time. Someday there will be a trumpet blast to announce this coming event, but then it will be too late. Today, the coming event is announced by Scripture to local churches. These descriptions of God's judgment should cause us as a church to understand that now is the time to help people avoid those judgments. Who will avoid these things because of our ministry to them today?

III. Heaven knows God's work of judgment answers prayer (vv. 3-5).

Ill: As I read this passage this past week, I thought about what it is like to hear my brothers and sisters of this church in prayer. I have had the great joy and privilege of hearing the prayers of many of you. As I have thought of those times in the light of this passage, I realized the truth that you are the most like a child of heaven when you pray. I imagine you might conclude the same thing about me. Perhaps we could say that man on earth is never more heavenly than when he prays.

Appl: I believe that heaven understands the importance of the prayers of the saints in a way that we do not. Our glimpse into this scene of the angel before the heavenly

golden altar of incense with his censer and his offering of the prayers of the saints before heaven's holy of holies holds much mystery for us, which I think is much clearer to those in heaven.

One of the things that is clear to us on earth in this regard is that the passage indicates that God's work of judgment is an answer to the prayers of the saints. The Jewish tabernacle had two altars, one golden and one brazen. The golden altar was the altar of incense before the holy of holies, and the heavenly antitype of that altar is the one we read about here. We saw it in the fifth-seal judgment in 6:9 as the place where martyrs cry out for justice. God's judgment answers their prayers, and the prayers of every saint who has ever asked God to make the wrong right again, and the crooked straight again. God's work of judgement is an answer to the prayers of the saints.

But I think we learn at least three other wonderful things about the prayers of saints from this glimpse into heaven.

1. Whenever a saint prays, he never prays alone. Sometimes we may feel that we are the only ones concerned about our particular prayer need and that we are praying alone. Sometimes we are the only one to show up to a prayer meeting, and we feel that we pray alone. Sometimes we think we live in an age in which no one prays anymore, so we pray alone. But I believe the passage here indicates that it is never the case that we pray alone.

Verse 3 tells us, "there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of *all the saints*." The word *incense* in this passage is plural. The angel is given many kinds of incense, which he puts into a single censer, and combined in this way the smoke from that censer ascends before God. Our prayers in the will of the Lord are

always a part of that combined smoke. When I pray, my prayer is joined with the prayers of the great prayer warriors of the ages, and together the prayers of the saints are heard by the Lord of heaven. When I pray for the salvation of New Boston, that prayer is combined somehow in the ears of God with the prayers of Abraham for Lot's Sodom. Whenever we pray, we never pray alone. We pray aided by God's Spirit, we pray invited to the throne of God's Son, and we pray in chorus with the prayers of all the saints.

2. Whenever a saint prays, he always brings God great delight. We sometimes speak of prayer as our prayer-burden. God describes our prayer as His prayer-perfume. Its smoke smells wonderful to Him. He delights in our prayers. Prov. 15:8, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: but the prayer of the upright is his delight." Our prayers bring Him great joy and pleasure and glory. God would never say we have prayed too much. He is always desirous of hearing us pray more.

The pictures of Revelation teach us that tragically few believers understand this in practice. Remember that it is the 24 elders that had golden vials full of their prayers (5:8). The innumerable multitude had no such tool of worship in chapter 7. So when this angel gets the saints' prayers for the smoke of his censer, it is the smaller group of saints, the 24 elders, who provide the contents required. Are you and I one of the few praying saints? Whenever we pray, we always bring God great delight. For that reason alone, you and I need to pray more.

Joseph Seiss's prayer poem (p. 187):

"There is an eye that never sleeps beneath the wing of
night;

There is an ear that never shuts when sink the beams of
light.

“There is an arm that never tires when human strength
gives way;
There is a love that never fails when earthly loves decay.

“That eye is fixed on seraph throngs; that arm upholds the
sky;
That ear is filled with angel songs; that love is throned on
high.

“But there’s a power which man can wield, when mortal
aid is vain,
That eye, that ear, that love to reach, that listening ear to
gain.

“That power is prayer, which soars on high, through Jesus,
to the throne;
And moves the hand which moves the world, to bring sal-
vation down!”

3. Whenever a saint prays, his prayers are delivered by a Great High Priest to the ears of God. Many Bible students have seen Christ represented by the angel of this censer and altar. Only the high priest could do what the angel here does. Whenever we pray, we do so at the throne of the grace of our Savior. We find grace from our High Priest to help in need. He opens the seventh seal; He presents the prayers of the saints; and He throws the fire on the earth.

Conclusion: The fire that caused the smoke of the perfume of prayer to arise before the throne of God in this passage is the same fire that is thrown to earth in judgment causing thunder, lightning, and earthquake. The Judge who opens

the seventh seal is the Lamb of 7:17. One commentator put these somewhat ironic truths this way: "It is one of the fearful characteristics of God's gracious operations, that they breed and heighten the damnation of the disobedient and unbelieving." Neutral we cannot be. The sacrifice of the Lamb and the fire of His priestly altar of incense will either save you by faith this morning, or further damn you in unbelief, but they will have their way with each of us.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching