***The Incense of Prayer

RV98-01***

I'd like to continue with Revelation 5:8 on the executor of the scroll. This is section number five. The various communication media today, you perhaps have become aware, are hammering away at the thesis that the authoritative knowledge about God and any authoritative knowledge about His demands are non-existent for human guidance. It is not unusual, through a variety of communication media, to have this thesis pressed upon us: you can't really know what God thinks or what God demands. So, the idea is presented that all religious viewpoints are equally valid, for there is no way, supposedly, to know who is right.

Biblical ideas, furthermore, are specifically attacked as being wrong. Whatever other ideas may be right, it is clear, in the various media discussions on the Bible today, that what the Bible says is most suspect, and it is too unreasonable for anybody to grant validity to what the Bible says. This is the old Satan / Eve syndrome you will recognize, which was summarized by Satan's question to Eve: "Yea, has God said?" This cast doubt upon whether God has really spoken, and whether we can hear what He said, and understand it. Satan's game, of course, in fighting God, is always to discredit the doctrines of Scripture, and to dignify the doctrines of demons. To this end, Satan causes the wicked to prosper, and he causes the godly to be attacked; to be undermined; to be belittled; and, to be frustrated.

In the scene that we've been viewing with John here in the Heavenly Throne Room, when Jesus Christ takes the title deed scroll from the Father's hand, the moment for resolving centuries of evil abuse of God's truth has arrived. That's very important that we understand that this is the reason for the explosion of the Anthem of praise, which follows here after Christ takes that scroll into His hand. The time has come for resolving centuries of abuse of the truth of God. Christians today are easily intimidated by the wicked of this world who have the ear of our society, and their viewpoints as evil people are dignified. Their human viewpoint illusions are exalted as wisdom. These are the people in our society which are called the "in people" or the "beautiful people." They are neither in with God nor are they beautiful with God in their human viewpoint delusions.

**Christians are Ostracized**

Christians today fear being ostracized by the world so that they would be deprived of certain favors that the world has to extend to them. We want to be accepted. We want to be "in." The Christian recoils from the lonely walk of godliness through Satan's world – a walk which separates him from the evil consensus of society. So, Christians lean over backwards to see how they can cooperate and acclimate themselves to the evil consensus of our society.

When divine viewpoint-oriented people, who know better, stand silent in the face of human viewpoint ignorance in our society, then Satan and evil men prosper; people flock mindlessly into hell; and, Christians muddle through their lives, and are denied the great rewards that could be theirs if someone directed them in the proper understanding of what God thinks, and of what God expects.

Christians today fear being hurt by their families; being rejected by their families; and, being dismissed by them. They fear that more than they fear standing for the heavenly Father's truth, and receiving His condemnation. To them, it is more worthwhile to have the commendation of their families rather than the commendation of the heavenly Father. Bible doctrine truth, in short, separates all levels of society into negative and positive categories. We are all in one or the other, and the consequences are enormous. Those who really know what God thinks and demands of man are today made out to be demented fools, while the spiritually ignorant are exalted; they're listened to; and, they're prospered. But I just want to remind you again: just wait for scroll day, and all of this is going to be resolved. All of this is going to be put into perspective and changed.

**We are Christian Soldiers**

So, I remind you that we as Christians have a duty and we have a glory. Our duty is that of a soldier. We are Christian soldiers, and we have a mission. To that end, it is important, if we are going to be effective on the field of combat in the spiritual conflict (the spiritual warfare – the angelic warfare), it is necessary for us to know the ground upon which we stand, and the battle equipment with which we deal. So, that is why these times together in the study of the Word of God are the most crucial times in our lives. It is important for us to know the Word of God in such accuracy that we will someday be vindicated in heaven rather than being discredited. There are a lot of Christians who are going to be in heaven, and they're going to be (as Paul says) terribly ashamed when they discover how ignorant they have been of God's ways and God's thinking, as revealed in the Scriptures.

Therefore, in 2 Corinthians 13:5, the apostle Paul says, "Examine yourselves whether you are in the faith." That does not mean whether you're born-again, but examine yourselves whether you are in the context of sound Bible doctrine: "Prove yourselves. Don't you know that Jesus Christ is in you – unless you fail the test? But I trust that you shall know that we do not fail the test. Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do that which is honest, though we appear as discredited." Paul is speaking of himself as their spiritual teacher: "For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth."

In other words, the truth is going to stand. What we do of value is going to be that which is compatible with the truth. So, Paul says, "Learn your ground. Don't go around pretending you know something about the Bible. Don't go around aimlessly, blindly, mindlessly talking about what the Bible teaches when you don't really know what it says." All of you have had that experience of listening to people talk about the Bible. It really is pathetic. How often have we had to shake our heads and say, "I can't believe that people are really this ignorant about what the Word of God is saying?" It is up to us to stand by Jesus Christ, and not to be crawling to the world to seek its favors, because we who stand by the Lord are someday going to be rewarded with a royal dignity.

In 2 Timothy 2:12, the apostle Paul stresses that. Paul says, "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him." If we stand by him and we are treated as the garbage of the world, don't let it disturb you. If you know your ground of truth and you stand by it, you are someday going to be rewarded with royal dignity. You will be reigning over the very people who are making fun of you, and who are making you out to be an unmitigated fool. But 2 Timothy 2:12 also says, "If we deny Him, He also will deny us." If we compromise; if we back off; or, if we refuse to stand by the truth of our Lord, then He too must treat us accordingly in loss of reward to ourselves. He too must deny us riches and the blessings that He would provide us in eternity. The goal of the positive volition believer is simply this: to finish life as a soldier who has done his duty in a world that has nothing but contempt for sound, solid, active, participating, combat-ready Christian soldiers.

In 2 Timothy 4:7, the apostle Paul knew as he wrote this book that this was the end of the line; that he was about to enter the Lord's presence; and, that that great experience of passing through death into the presence of the living God was just over the horizon for him. So, he said, "I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith." Again, he means there, "I have kept sound doctrine. I didn't compromise it. I taught it as God had taught it to me."

**The Angelic Warfare**

The job of Christian witnessing is indeed a battleground in the angelic warfare, and the Christian does fight. He does do battle for divine viewpoint truth, and he does it in all areas of life, and in all the areas of our human institutions. It is the cowardly Christian who retreats from this kind of battle. It is that kind of believer, who has retreated from standing up to the world with the truth of the Word of God, who has permitted the enemies of the Lord to come into positions of influence in our society today, like a flood out of hell itself. It is because we have not sounded off and said that the most important thing in the life of a believer is to know doctrinal truth, and then proceed to explain it to him and to teach it to him.

I'll guarantee you that the churches that are filled with people, and the ones that have all the money in the world, and all the respect and prestige in the world, are not the churches that are doing it. It is here and there that you find islands of doctrinal enlightenment, because this is the one thing that Satan places under spiritual darkness, so that many preachers themselves do not have the courage to say, "I'll stand by the truth of the Lord, and I'm not going to seek all the pleasant things that can come to a pastorate with many people and much prestige and a lot of acceptance within our society.

The work of a Christian is to do battle, and one of the things that frightens us from that is that we are called "fighting fundamentalists." This is a contemptuous term. We are made, again, to appear to be something that is weird and unnatural because we want to stand up and do battle. People are horrified, especially if you want to do battle on the basis of moral grounds, and if you want to do battle on the basis of what the Bible says. Nobody in his right mind does battle on the basis of what the Bible says. Why? Because we're given the impression that you can't understand the Bible; the Bible doesn't say anything to our day; the Bible doesn't speak to us specifically; and, that there is no black and white ground in the Bible. Don't you kid yourself. That's the only kind of ground there is in Scripture.

In a recent issue of "Faith" magazine, published by Bob Jones University, there's an editorial by Bob Jones, president of the university. I'd like to read it to you: "Frequently people come up with the question: do fundamentalists have to fight? The Scripture answers the question so clearly; so explicitly; and, so frequently that to even ask the question in such a fashion as to suggest that a fundamentalist can avoid controversy and escape a fight is deceitful, and smacks of an attack upon the authority of the Scripture itself. The writer of Romans, while warning against the strife that results from envy and division, urges us to put on the armor of light (Romans 13:12). In his second letter to the Corinthians church, Paul makes clear the importance of being arrayed in the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left if we are to be approved as the ministers of God. In the sixth chapter of Ephesians, he twice commands that the Christian be arrayed in the whole armor of God, pointing out that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities; against powers; against the rulers of the darkness of this world; and, against spiritual wickedness in high places. It is clearly indicated here that without this armor, we cannot stand in the evil day.

"We do not put on armor to go to bed and sleep. Armor is a part of the accoutrement of war. The Bible is referred to as the sword of the spirit; that is, it is a weapon of spiritual warfare. How much is said in the Scripture about contending for the faith for the truth of God? A faithful Christian must be a warrior. A worthy Christian must constantly contend. Those who speak slightly of fighting fundamentalists show exactly the same spirit in regard to the warfare of the faith as do those silly sentimentalists and communist agents who say we should cut back on nuclear armaments; limit our defenses; and, to work out an accord with the Soviets who have threatened to bury us.

"You cannot pet a wild beast to whom you are a tasty morsel. You cannot placate a ruthless enemy who covets your prosperity and seeks to enslave you. Just as certainly, you cannot reach an accord with the enemies of God if you believe His Word; love His truth; and, serve His Son.

"Of course, a fundamentalist has to fight, and when he ceases to fight, he ceases to be a fundamentalist. When scriptural truth is attacked, he must come to its defense. He who stands with scriptural truth will make himself the object of the enemy's attack, because of his identification with the book. When men smite us on one cheek, we turn to the other. When men lift their hands against God's Word in the kingdom of His Blessed Son, we turn upon them with the sword of the Spirit.

"No man loves the Word of God who does not fight to defend it when it is under attack. That means today a true fundamentalist is engaged in a constant battle, for the Word is under attack on every side. Someone has said, "All that is necessary for falsehood to prevail is for good men to remain silent." The pseudo fundamentalist is a religious fifth-columnist who, while proclaiming his loyalty to the Bible, urges appeasement to those who question and deny the Bible. He is one of those who causes divisions among us concerning the truth (Romans 16:17). We should mark him well, and warn the gullible against him."

Indeed, the Christian is called to be a warrior. He is called to put on the armor of God, and he is called to do battle. You need to awaken to the fact that every moment of your life you are in the angelic conflict. You are surrounded by the angelic warfare of the angels of God against the angels of Satan. We are the target of that angelic conflict because the hatred is against Jesus Christ, and He is out of their reach. He's in the reserve rear areas beyond their grasp, but we are on the front line. We represent Him; we are His body; and, we are the object of attack. If you haven't awakened to that, then you don't know what's going on.

That is the significance (on that background) of this scene in heaven where the scroll is taken from the Father's hand. After centuries of taking the world's physical abuse; seeing evil rewarded; and, being treated as ignorant fools, the moment of truth has finally arrived as Jesus Christ takes the scroll. It is no wonder, therefore, that the living creatures and the elders fall down before the Lord in adoration and worship. It is no wonder that John stops crying because the truth of Bible doctrine is going to be vindicated in this world. That's part of what distressed him. He had taken enough guff in his own life to be put in a position of the disappointment, as it seemed for a moment that there would be nobody to turn loose what was in that book, and to bring Satan and his human agents to heal.

John isn't weeping any more. There is someone who is authorized, qualified, and ready to do it. It is no wonder that all heaven explodes in an anthem of praise and rejoicing as the underdogs of God are finally elevated above Satan's "in" people. This is the moment, as we have told you before, when Psalm 110:1 is fulfilled, which refers to project footstool: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstools. "God the Father declares His plan to make all the enemies of His Son a footstool – a place of the conquered under the feet of the Son.

This is the same objective which is described in 1 Corinthians 15:22-25: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive, but every man in his own order, Christ the firstfruits afterward, they that are Christ's that is coming. Then comes the end, when He shall have delivered up the Kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet." That's the same reference that Paul is making to project footstool, when all the enemies of God are going to be under the foot of Jesus Christ. He's going to put His foot on their necks.

The opening of the scroll will set in motion the events which bring Satan and his demons into subjection to this resurrected man, Jesus Christ. God the Father tells God the Son, in the meantime, to share His throne in heaven until the time arrives for the scroll to be opened, and for the Son to come to this earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and project footstool is to be fully executed.

The psalmist is very clear on the role of victory that is to come to the Christian – the Christian who is intimidated by the fact that the wicked prosper, and that things seem to go good for evil men, but they go so poorly for those who are trusting in the Lord. I'd almost like to take time to read three Psalms, but let me just call these to your attention, and you would do yourself a great personal benefit and a great personal encouragement to your soul to read them: Psalm 37; Psalm 73; and, Psalm 94. Each of them are thrilling, exciting declarations of the fact that, "Yes, it seems that the wicked are getting away with murder. They're riding high on the hog now." But again and again, the psalmist says, "Don't lose your perspective. The time is going to come when God is going to bring them down, and He's going to bring them down in such a definitive way that they won't have the slightest notion of what happened to them. The whole roof will collapse on them, and you can count on it.

So, read those Psalms. They sum up the pain that believers have had over the centuries. Perhaps you've experienced, that it seems that the more you seek to invest yourself for God, and the more you seek to pursue that which is righteousness, the more people put you down; the harder your lot is; and, the tougher things are for you. It might lead you to think foolishly that somehow the other side is getting the better of it, but that is not true.

**Lutes**

So, coming back then to Revelation 5:8, we read, "When He had taken the scroll (that is, when Jesus Christ had taken the scroll), the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb," in an act of worship and homage because of what was about to take place. Then we read, "Having every one of them harps." The word "having" is the Greek word "echo." This is the word for possessing something. It is in the present tense. It means a continual possession. It is active. It means that the elders themselves here have these harps. It is indicative. It is a statement of fact. It says "every one of them." This is the Greek word "hekastos." "Hekastos" is an adjective. Grammatically, we observe that it is in the masculine gender. "The living creatures" is in the neuter gender. For that reason, we are inclined to say that this word "hekastos" ("each one of them") does not refer to the four living creatures. It would not exactly follow grammatically, but it rather refers specifically to the 24 elders who are seated upon the throne. It could include the living creatures, but the picture here is relative to the church, and it is relative to priestly service. That's what we're coming to – acts of priestly service on the part of these 24 elders. Angels do not act as priests, but people do act as priests. So, on both accounts, it's better to look at each one of these as meaning each of the elders individually.

What they each have is a "harp" (a "kithara"). A "kithara" actually describes what we would call a "lute" rather than what we normally think about as a harp. A lute in those days was a triangular-shaped instrument that had a handle on it, and it had strings. We are told in New Testament times specifically, and in Old Testament times also, that it had ten strings. These strings attached to pegs by which they were tuned. So, what this triangular-shaped piece formed was a sounding board, and the strings resounded through that box. It is played with a plectrum, which is simply a little object with which to pluck the strings (a pick). A harp, as you know, is played with the fingers – the strings are plucked directly. But what we're talking about here is a "kithara" (a lute) which was actually plucked with this plectrum. It is from this word "kithara" (you may have already suspected) that we get our English word "guitar." It is shaped and structured in the same way. That's exactly where the word "guitar" comes from because it is describing this Old Testament biblical lute.

This word is also used other places in the New Testament, just to look at a couple. 1 Corinthians 14:7 has it: "And even things without life, giving sound, whether flute or harp ('kithara'), except they give a distinction in the sound, how shall it be known?"

In Revelation 14:2, this guitar-like instrument comes into the picture again: "I heard a voice from heaven like the voice of many waters and like the voice of a great thunder. I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps." Although it doesn't sound right, it's really: "of luters luting with their lutes." That is actually taking place because they're playing upon this lute (the "kithara"). We also have this in Revelation 15:2: "And I saw, as it were, a sea of glass mingled with fire, and from them that had gotten the victory over the beast and over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name standing on the sea of glass, having the harps of God" (the "kithara" of God).

This instrument keeps coming in at points where people are joyful over some victory that God has brought them; over some accomplishment; or, over some conquest. This, of course, also was an instrument in the Old Testament, and it was the basic instrument for singing the Old Testament Psalms. As you know, the Psalms were the Old Testament songbook of the Jewish people. We have this indicated in Psalm 33:2, where we read, "Praise the Lord with the harp. Sing out to him with the psaltery and the instrument of ten strings." This is referring to this Greek instrument described by the word "kithara."

In Psalm 98:5, this is referred to again: "Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm." The harp (the lute) was used to accompany the singing of the Psalms.

You can add to that Psalm 147:7: "Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving. Sing praise upon the harp unto our God."

So, from the Old and New Testament usage, it is obvious that this guitar-like instrument was used to sing praise; to worship; and, to express joy over something that God had accomplished in behalf of believers who had suffered by being under the heel of wicked oppressors.

The picture that we have here (the implication) is that the elders play the harp to accompany the joyful anthem of praise that breaks out when Jesus Christ takes the scroll. So, you can sort of picture this in your mind's eye. The scene is somewhat like a rock group on stage at a concert. The 24 elders are sitting there with their guitars ready to play. I'm surprised that some musical group hasn't called itself "The Elders." It would be a very fitting name, but for all I know, perhaps somebody has.

In any case, the harp here represents an instrument for praise by church-age saints. The earliest reference to this instrument in the Bible is in Genesis 4:21, where Jubal is described as being an artist upon this instrument as part of Nimrod's culture.

In times of national apostasy, when people were sad, and when there wasn't a time for joy, it is interesting that the musicians of Israel would hang their harps on a willow tree to symbolize the departure of God's blessing and God's glory. We have that expression musically to this day: "I hang my harp on the willow tree." Psalm 137:1-4 say, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea, we wept when we remembered Zion." They're singing in this psalm about their status of captivity in Babylon, thinking back upon the freedom they once enjoyed when they were back in the land of Palestine: "We hung our harps upon the willows, in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive required of us a song, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, 'See us, one of the songs of Zion.' How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" And here the implication was that the condition of sadness required them to hang up their lutes, and they hung them up on the willow tree. Or that word might be translated as "poplar tree").

Isaiah 24:8 also gives us that idea: "The mirth of tabrets cease; the noise of those who rejoice ends; and, the joy of the harp ceases." When people are in apostasy, and when they are in sadness because of their compromise with the truth of God, then the lute is no longer an instrument to express joy.

This instrument accompanied the songs of joy when Israel was again in its own land. For example, in Psalm 43:4, we have this expression of using the lute to express joy: "Then I will go unto the altar of God; unto God my exceeding joy; yea, upon the harp I will praise You, O God, my God." So, when things got better, they took the lutes off the willow trees and proceeded to express their joy again.

The Bible does not indicate that the angels use harps. We conclude that only the elders have the harps. We do read in Job 38:4-7: "As the angels watched God in His creative work, they burst out in a song of praise." They were moved to celebrate what God was doing, and we are told that the angels sang. However, it is interesting to note that since the fall of man and since the gem of the universe, the planet earth, the only kind that there is in all the universe specially designed by God for this special creature man, whom He made to resolve the angelic conflict and the angelic attack upon the integrity of God, to show through this man that God could treat a sinner with complete justice, and that God does not compromise His Holiness, this earth became the coveted prize of Satan. When Satan led Adam and Eve into sin, they fell, and they lost control of the earth. And we have no further descriptions in the Bible of the angels singing again.

In Luke 2:13-14, you have the description of the angelic hosts praising God upon the announcement of the coming birth of Jesus Christ. But it doesn't say that they are singing. It simply says that they are making this proclamation and saying these things.

**A Golden Bowl**

So, the picture that John sees of the elders as they sit upon the throne, as he sees them in obeisance and worship, is that they have these musical instruments in their hands. Furthermore, he says that he sees something else, and that is "a golden bowl." The word "golden" is the Greek word "chruseos." It is an adjective, and because it's gold, it expresses the worth. What he is describing is "a golden bowl," The word "bowl" is "phiale." A "phiale" is a bowl. It is something shaped like a bowl. It is flat, and it has high sides. It represents another item of priestly service which is in the hands of the elders.

**The Bowl is Full of Incense**

We are told that this bowl "is full." The word "full" is the Greek word "gemo." The word means "heavily laden." The word means "full to the brim." It is present tense (constantly to the brim). It's active. That's the status of the bowl. It's participle – a spiritual principle. The bowl is filled to the brim, and we are told that it is filled to the brim with incense ("thumiama"). "Thumiama" refers to a fragrant material used for burning. As you run over what you know about the Bible in your mind, thinking about relating symbols to other parts of the Bible, you will run over in your mind where the Bible uses incense. Immediately, we think of the tabernacle, and we think of the holy place. As you remember, the tabernacle was divided: two-thirds was the holy place; and, one-third was the holy of holies. Right in front of the veil was the altar of incense.

We have this described in Exodus 30:1-38. The procedure for burning this incense was burning it at certain specific times, with new incense made according to a special prescription. Nobody was to reproduce this incense (this particular perfumed odor) for their personal use. It was designed particularly for this act of service in the tabernacle. We are told that it symbolized the prayers of believers.

In Psalm 141:2, we have that connection made: "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." So, the Old Testament very clearly described how this incense was to be used. It had a specific meaning. It represented prayers arising as the smoke of the incense arose to God. Of course, there is no place for the burning of incense in the church today. Liturgical churches and ritualistic churches like to burn incense. Only pagans burn incense in worship service today. This whole procedure is utter nonsense.

I heard about a pastor at one time who wanted to add some dignity to his church, so he decided that as the choir came in, they would have an incense pot that they would wave, and that would be exuding the fragrant odor and the smoke as they walked down the aisle to the choir loft. So, the first Sunday, they put this into motion, and they were chanting, and suddenly, the pastor looked around and noticed that the incense pot was gone, but he didn't want to interrupt the procedure. He just worked the words into his chanting to the incense pot carrier, so he sang, "Oh, where is the incense pot?" And the fellow who was supposed to be carrying the incense pot sang, "Oh, it got too hot, and I dropped it in the aisle." So, you can get into a lot of trouble trying to bring this kind of nonsense into the worship service today. In the Old Testament, it was a beautiful symbol, and it had great meaning – that fragrant odor, that smoke rising to God, representing the prayers of God's people. We have no place for that today.

**Prayer is Asking**

We are very specifically told that the incense is the prayers of the saints. We're told that here in our revelation passage. They are prayers. It is the word "proseuche." That refers to the specific general word for "prayer" that is found in the Scriptures. So, we're told that incense is to be offered to God in the form of prayer, in effect. This was part of the early church service in Acts 2:42. We're told that when the saints gathered together, one of the things they did was offered up prayers, and thus fulfilling the picture of the Old Testament ritual system. The word "prayer" ("proseuche") means "requesting something from God." Don't ever forget that prayer means asking.

This is demonstrated in Romans 1:10. Paul says, "Making requests." There is the same word "proseuche." That is a good translation: "Making requests, if by any means, now at length, I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you." Paul says. "I'm making a request. I'm asking God for something. I'm putting a specific appeal to Him, and I am doing it in Jesus' name here." Here he says "in Jesus' name" by saying, "in the will of God." That's the same thing. So, it is to be done specifically on that basis. Incense prayer is asking God for specifics.

Furthermore, it is a priestly act. That's the picture that we have of these elders. They have these incense bowls in their hands, and they are performing a priestly function in behalf of others. 1 Timothy 2:1: "I thought, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers (requests – here is the same word), intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men." We offer up the instance of prayer for all men.

This is the prayers of the saints. The word is "hagios." These are believers. These are born-again people – those who are in the family of God. Therefore, they have a right to ask their Heavenly Father for their desires. God does not listen to the prayers of those who are not in His family. If you are not born-again spiritually, and if you are approaching God by some cultist or some denominational works program of salvation, God does not hear your prayers. If you are in the Jewish community, and reject Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and the fulfiller of the Davidic Covenant, I don't care how many prayers you utter – God does not listen to you.

I stood at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem one time, and watched these Jews coming and going to that wall; praying; and, sticking their little pieces of paper in the cracks with their requests written upon them. And there they are, bowing back and forth before the wall, as they are praying and praying and praying, and all they are praying to is that dumb wall, because God does not hear them. Jesus Christ says, "No man comes unto the Father, but by Me." But if you are in the family of God, then you're home free. You have a right to offer up the instance of prayer. You have to be careful, though, to stay inside the confines of temporal fellowship.

That's what 1 Peter 3:7 means when Peter says, "In like manner, you husbands dwell with them (that is, your wives) according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life." While there are lines of authority, you have an equal ground of togetherness as heirs of the grace of God, not one ahead of the other: "That your prayers be not hindered." The incense offered to God can be undermined. It can be squelched by being in a condition within marriage, which is an easy place to have conflicts and to be out of fellowship, so that you are doing no more than that poor Jew who stands at the Wailing Wall, and he talks to that dumb rock wall thinking that he's talking to God. You have to be in temporal fellowship. You have to be born again. You have to approach on the basis of the name of Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes it all possible.

So, we have here a specific reference to the prayers of saints, in our passage in Revelation, and an interesting question of what they're praying about, and the fulfillment of that prayer. The incense in the golden bowl is specifically declared to be the prayers of believers.

In Revelation. 8:3-4 we read, "Another angel came, and stood at the altar, having a golden censer (or a bowl – that's another word for the same thing). And there was given unto him much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar, which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand." Such prayers, offered on the authority of the name of Jesus, by one who is born again, and by one who is in temporal fellowship, ascends as a sweet odor (a sweet fragrance) in the nostrils of God, and He delights to receive it. Don't ever think that He is not interested in your asking Him. But if you come to Him with false incense and false fire, it's a stench in His nostrils. As the Old Testament priest in the tabernacle offered incense in the holy place, so the New Testament priest offers up the sweet incense to God when he brings himself and others before God in prayer.

The prayer of Cornelius is, interestingly enough, described in this image of incense arising to God. In Acts 10:1-4, Cornelius was the first gentile into the body of Christ: "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band; a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always. He saw in the vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming into him, and saying unto him, 'Cornelius.'" And notice how he describes it: "And when he looked on him, he was afraid and said, 'What is it, Lord?' And He said unto him, 'Your prayers and your alms are come up for a memorial before God." The very description here connotes before our eyes, prayer as incense smoke rising up before God.

The specific prayer that this probably has in mind is the one that has been enunciated in Luke 11:2. The bowl is probably filled primarily, at this point in the heavenly scene, with this particular request. We have here the record of Jesus Christ teaching His disciples how to pray in the kingdom age – not in the church age, but in the kingdom age: "And He said unto them, 'When you pray, say, 'Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done as in heaven so in earth." At that particular junction in time, that is the primary prayer request waiting to be fulfilled – that finally, as God's will has been executed in heaven, Jesus Christ is going to break the seals on that scroll, and the will of God is going to be executed on earth. As God's kingdom is predominant in heaven, it is now going to be established upon planet earth as well. That probably is the primary item which is in that bowl as prayer at that time.

**The Lord's Prayer**

This, of course, is not a prayer for us to recite in our day. I won't take the time to read John 14:13-14, John 15:16, and John 16:23-24, all of which explain to us that we Christians are to approach God on the basis of the name of Jesus. You will notice that the prayer which is called the Lord's Prayer does not approach God on the name of Jesus. It is a prayer which is a fitting prayer for the kingdom, which does not approach God on that basis.

Well, the elders are, of course, not personally the human intermediaries between the believers and their prayers to God. This is no Roman Catholic system of making prayers to St. Mary so that she will take your prayers to God. They are there representing the body of Christ as a whole.

However, I do want to remind you that the prayers for God's kingdom on earth have been asked a long time ago, prior to this time in heaven. And I think that that is a crucially important point for you to observe: "Thy kingdom come" has been asked for a long time. Many people are asking it who don't understand how this prayer is to be used. But nevertheless, the request (the idea) is one that we can all sympathetically enter into. We are not looking for the coming of the kingdom. We're looking for the return of our Lord in the rapture. But for this earth, that is a legitimate prayer. It has been asked again and again, but it is only fulfilled finally at that point in God's timing when Jesus takes that scroll.

So, I would remind you that church-age saints today who ask this – what we are doing is putting a request upon the divine agenda, and then we wait for God's execution. The results may not come for a long time, or they may come long after we cease to pray, or at the point where we cease to pray. That is very significant. I think perhaps, in part, God does that to constantly remind us that it is not by flesh; not by blood; and, not by the might of man, but, "'By My Spirits,' says the Lord."

For example, God made it very clear to Gideon that whatever military victory he was going to enjoy, it could not be attributed to the courage of his men; to their military genius; or, to the cleverness of their plan. It could only be attributed to the fact that God gave it to them. Sometimes God does not give us our requests until we are washed out, and until we are quite aware of the fact that all of our putting it together is going nowhere. Finally, we step back and we put it on the agenda, and that then becomes the proper time in God's judgment, and about that time, He comes in and fulfills what we've been asking for. It's not because you quit praying, but because now you're ready to be quite aware of the fact that you haven't been able to pull it off. It is clearly a grace of God to give you what you asked for.

In other words, we don't pray to harangue our Father and to wear Him out so that He finally gives in to do what we want to do. The prayer of spiritual Christians today rises as a sweet incense (an odor) which the Father never forgets, which He puts on the agenda, and which, in His good time and by His good judgment, at the appropriate time when we're ready to receive it without being injured by the things that we have asked, He gives it to us. And it may come, as it will with this prayer, "Thy kingdom come," long after it has been asked, before it is fully executed. And there's not going to be any question that what happens in the tribulation era and the kingdom that does come, has been brought about by God and not by man.

In the Old Testament, the altar of incense had to be offered fresh daily. Leviticus 16:12-13 and Psalm 141:2 tell us that. So, it is legitimate that we daily offer our requests to the Lord. And we may repeat the request, but we're not haranguing God – we're waiting for His time.

Also, only properly-made incense is acceptable to God, and so with prayer. 2 Chronicles 26:16-21 tell you what happened to one gentleman who made his own incense for that altar, and the dire circumstances to which he came. The incense of prayer has to be on the biblical basis, and compatible with God's direction like anything else that He does. But what a beautiful thing it is to realize that God is standing there, waiting for you to offer up this odor that He delights to receive and that He likes to act upon. I hope you will take advantage of it.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1982

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