

Sermon: What Happens to Our Prayers? 10:30am Cherry Street Worship
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First Presbyterian Church

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Lancaster, PA

Opening Questions:

- *What have you been praying for this week?*
- *What is an answered prayer you have experience lately?*

Read and imagine this text: Revelation 5:6-10; 8:3-4

*⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding **golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.** ⁹*

And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

*³ 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 God's people**, on the golden altar in front of the throne. ⁴ The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵ 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.*

Introduction

Where do my prayers go? That is a mystery that no astronomer, digital communications expert, or clever nanny has ever really answered. Where do my prayers go? I know where my mail goes. I have a good idea where my garbage goes. I have even figured out where some of my lost socks have ended up. But when I stop and kneel to pray, where do my prayers go?

Today we are to find the answer to that question. The book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. In this book, the apostle John gives us vivid picture of what is

happening in the spiritual realm. He pulls back the curtain and allows us to get a glimpse of immense heavenly activity. There is plenty confusion around this piece of inspired literature. There are scores of books, blog sites, and prophetic conferences trying to unpack the relevance to us today. To understand what we are about to read it is helpful to remember the context.

The Apostle John

John was writing this collection of letters towards the end of his life. He had been a faithful disciple of Jesus. He was so trusted by Jesus that he was charged with caring for Mary, the mother of Jesus, as Jesus hung from the cross. As we know from the book of Acts, some of the followers of Jesus like John stayed in Jerusalem while others spread the good news all over the known world. Tensions between the Jewish people and Rome kept growing until rebellion broke out in A.D. 66. Eventually, the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Obviously, these conflicts sent people fleeing. Around AD 85 (about fifty years after the death of Christ), John wrote the gospel of John to encourage the scattered, yet growing communities of Jesus.

Martyrs in the Community of Christ

Ten years later in AD 95 the situation had not gotten any better. Persecution of Christians was widespread and would continue. John, himself, was exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of modern day Turkey. People were discouraged. Where was Jesus? Was he not supposed to come back and save all his people and set up a new kingdom? People were beginning to doubt and some were leaving the faith. In response to this serious pastoral issue, John was given this vision of the glorified Christ. He records what he experienced in a familiar first century type of Jewish literary form called “apocalyptic” which seeks to deal with the meaning of suffering and God’s purposes in history. The word “apocalypse” is the Greek word for revelation, an unveiling of things not previously known.

Heavenly Worship

What does John want us to know in these passages? What does he want us to know specifically about our prayers? In Revelation 5 we enter into a worship event in heaven. We see a lamb that appears to be slain in the center of this worship. This is a symbolic image of Jesus. At the same chapter we see that Jesus is also the Lion of Judah, symbolizing power and authority.

Surrounding Jesus are angels, elders, and magnificent creatures all bowing down to the lamb. Thousands upon ten thousands were gathered. This is a glorious wild celebration scene. Remember what is in each of the hands of those nearest to Jesus. A harp and a golden bowl full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Where do our prayers go? Right to the feet of Jesus! As we pray our prayers do not hit the ceiling or bounce off the wall. Your prayers and my prayers become mixed with wonderful, pleasing incense and are bought right to the judge and ruler of the whole universe! Our prayers matter to God and they make a difference.

Why do our prayers make a difference? Our prayers make a big difference because you and I are the beloved of God. We were saved at great cost to God. ⁹ *And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.* This passage is referring to you and me!

We are deeply loved and valued by Jesus. He loves to hear our voices. Jesus, our Lord and friend, is eager to hear and respond to the prayers of our lips and the yearnings of our hearts. Like a caring parent or trusted friend, you and I have the ear of God. In Revelation 8:1 it says that there was a half hour of silence. All the loud worship stopped so the prayers of the saints were given fully focus. Let us pause right now and thank God for the gift of God’s attention and care.

Prayer is one our key tools in fulfilling our purpose on earth. We are called and equipped to serve God and others. Prayer tunes us into what God is about and opens us up to receive the power, wisdom, strength, and love we need to do our work. Prayer can be so confusing at times. We pray in one situation and we see God’s hand and we pray in another situation and God seems to be absent, uncaring, or powerless. What do our prayers really accomplish?

Angel at the Altar

In Revelation 8 we read, “*The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up before God from the angel’s hand.*” **This imagery comes right from the temple in Jerusalem.** In the Holy Place was an altar of incense which held hot coals. Incense was sprinkled on top of the coals and a great cloud of smoke would go up and be a sign for the people to pray. This is what Zechariah was doing when he was met by the Angel Gabriel in Luke 1. God was answering Zechariah’s prayer for a child, John the Baptist.

Revelation 8 continues, “*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.*” **In this passage the angel fills censer** or fire pot with prayers and like a weapon and hurls them to the earth. The result is a powerful impact of thunder, lightning, and earthquakes. Our prayers go to heaven, are mixed and transformed

by the mighty power and purposes of God, and are directed right to the place they can have the most impact. Your prayers and mine do make a difference in our world. Keep praying!

Questions for Personal Application (check off and fill out as appropriate)

Where have you seen your prayers have a powerful impact?

When do you tend to pray?

- When I first wake up
- At meals
- During a time alone to read the Bible and pray
- As I drive and go through the day
- With someone else
- As I _____

Why is prayer important for you and me?

- It connects me to God
- Prayer changes me and the situation
- Prayer seems to accomplish good
- Prayer _____

What is one prayer practice that you will try this week?

- Prayer of commitment at the beginning of the day
- Set your watch/phone alarm to remind you to pray for a specific person or need at least twice a day
- _____