

Prayers from the Other Side of Silence

Revelation 5:8 and 8:1-6

June 3, 2001

Peter Hiett

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense (“thumiana”) which are the prayers of the saints . . . (Revelation 5:8).

In The Revelation God is absolutely sovereign over mountains, sky, stars; the kings of the earth and the Great Dragon; the demons from the pit. None of those things change history or move God. They are pawns in His hand. Yet right before He opens the scroll, the Lamb upon the throne smells something
— your prayers.

In John 14 Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son . . .” In Matthew when Jesus is going into Jerusalem, up Mount Zion, He says, “If you have faith and never doubt, you will be able to say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer you will receive, if you have faith.”

In Revelation 1:6 John writes that Christ has made us kings and priests. We reign on earth through prayer. And I’ve seen it in places like Romania, where the dictator was toppled by the prayers of the saints, who prayed in silence and in prison cells. I believe it. I think we’ve seen it in the Soviet Union . . . Eastern Europe.

I’m so grateful for the prayer teams praying for us pastors. I *know* it makes a difference. Sometimes I can tell the difference, just having people in the service who I know are praying for me.

Our prayers are far more powerful than any of us know. But if you are like me, you may be saying, “Okay, that’s great. But I have tried it, and it doesn’t work. I pray, and it’s like Heaven is silent. *Nothing.*” Well, maybe you need to pray *more*. Just think about what we could do with more prayers and more people praying!

Jack Lou was a pastor at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. One time he told me about a fellow who came up to him after the Sunday morning service. He was all excited and energized about a new discovery in his prayer life, and he said to Jack . . .

Jack! *Speed prayer* has revolutionized my life! I’m planning to open an academy and teach it to others, and I want you to be a part. With speed prayer, no longer do you have to rise early in the morning to make all your requests and petitions known to God. *So much more* can be said in the same amount of time!

I have developed a system of designating requests with symbols. For instance, family concerns are designated “F.” Arguments with my wife are category “3.” That’s an “F-3.” A workplace argument is a “W-3”; African missionaries are “A-7.” So you petition God saying, “A-7, W-3, F-3. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” What do you think, Jack?

Jack stared at him a while and realized the guy was *serious*. So he said, “Wow! That’s really great. While you’re at it, why don’t you develop *speed fasting*. That way you could fast between breakfast and lunch, and you’d never have to miss a meal!”

The guy just looked at Jack and then said, “You’re not taking me seriously, are you?”

I think that sometimes we *do* take the speed guy seriously. Have you received Internet prayer requests recently? It does seem like we take him seriously with requests like these: “Pray for six-year-old Jimmy Spencer in Trout City, Idaho. If you love God, and if you believe in prayer, you *will* pass this on to six other prayer warriors and not delete this message.”

More people praying;
More words;
Many, many more words.

If God is leading you to pray for somebody on the Internet, *do it*. But will we be heard for our many words? Jesus said in Matthew 6:7, “The Gentiles think that they will be heard for their many words.”

Maybe it’s not about *many words*. Maybe it’s about the *right words*, like reciting “The Prayer of Jabez” or saying, “In Jesus’ name” at the end of every one of our prayers. But if it’s simply a matter of saying the *right words*, I think the Bible calls that witchcraft, divination, magic.

Not *prayers*, but *incantations*.

Then people silently reject Jesus saying, “These incantations don’t work!” Worse yet, if they *think* they work, they begin playing the harlot with God or whoever *is* listening to those prayers.

Does prayer *work*?

That is a little bit like asking, “Peter, did your date work?” It’s like one of my children asking another one of my children, “Has your conversation with Dad worked recently?”

Usually when my children are trying to get something with many words and slick words (“Please, please, please, Dad! *Mom* said. *She* got me a pop. In the name of Mom, get me a pop!”), when they’re trying to *make* it work, odds are it won’t. Yet I do long to hear them speak my name and speak their hearts.

One night when my daughter Elizabeth was little, she ended a long, bed-time prayer, involved with lots of requests, with this phrase: “But I guess You know all that, because You can read my brain. Amen.”

He *can* read her brain,
But He still wants to hear her
Speak His name
And share her heart.

In Matthew 6 Jesus continues. “Don’t be like those Gentiles who think they will be heard for their many words. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” When my kids were little, I knew what they wanted. I could read their brains in the candy aisle. But I still wanted to hear them call my name and share their hearts. “Daddy.”

Jesus goes on. “So then when you pray, pray like this: ‘Our Abba—Father—Daddy—in heaven’” He said “pray *like* this” not “pray *exactly* this.” It’s not magic words or even *many* words. That’s not the key.

In the Gospel of John on the night that Jesus was betrayed, before he was crucified, having spoken of his death and resurrection, Jesus repeats His promise with a little bit of a twist, now talking of the Father: “Truly, truly I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto (heretofore; up till now) you have asked nothing in my name. Ask that you’re joy might be full.”

Did you get that? For three years they have been hanging out with Jesus, the man Himself. He had even taught them the Lord’s Prayer, and then He says, “So far you have not asked *one thing* in my name.” Maybe “in the name of Jesus” is more than five, little, magic words. It requires something like a journey *with* Jesus all the way to Mount Calvary.

I know that many of you, like me, get frustrated. You pray, and it’s not that you don’t get a new car or pearls or something, but God seems silent. So not only do you wonder if prayer works, but you also wonder if you matter. “Does God care? Am I an orphan?” Heaven is silent.

Back to The Revelation . . .

The slaughtered Lamb on the throne smells those prayers and begins opening the seals. He opens the first six seals, and we see conquest, warfare, famine, and death. We see martyrs, and we see the sky roll up and the stars fall. Finally, in chapter 8, the Lamb on the throne opens the seventh and final seal.

When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Silence after *all that noise!* The heavenly worship, the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders that *never stop singing*, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” After

all that noise and the noise of creation and futility, suddenly . . . silence . . . for about half an hour.

We get so frustrated by the silence. And we get so anxious with silence. Some of you are frustrated because other people pray and hear voices, and *you* pray and there is silence. You try many words; you try better words. And Heaven is silent.

What makes it worse is you've heard people like me say things like this:

“If God seems distant, guess who moved?”

“God is talking all the time. All you have to do is tune in. He's a chatterbox.”

Is God a chatterbox?

John is the beloved disciple. He is even *in* the Spirit *on* the Lord's Day, and all of Heaven is silent! Yet John wrote, “Those around the throne never stop singing, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.’”

Silent, yet all reality is upheld by the word of His power. Heaven is silent, but maybe God is still somehow speaking in the silence. Maybe the silence is part of the heavenly song.

So for those of you who are frustrated by the silence in your ears and the voices in other people's ears, I want to remind you that there are different ways of hearing. Some have gifts that others don't have, and that's by design. But if you come to Jesus and proclaim Jesus as your Lord, Jesus Himself says in John 10, “You have heard my voice. My sheep hear my voice.”

So stop stressing about “if you hear,”
but love, trust, and obey Jesus,
and you *do* hear.

Yes, sometimes sin gets in the way and blocks us from hearing. So if you know of sin, confess it and get it out of the way. But *sometimes* Heaven *is* silent. And sometimes silence *says* more than words and *does* more than words. Silence cleanses us of . . . *us*. It prepares us to hear.

Moses spoke to God face to face, like a man talking with a friend, the Scripture says. But before that he was exiled forty years in the back-side of the wilderness! God was preparing him in the silence for the day he would hear this: “Moses, Moses, I am.”

Jesus was without sin. Yet immediately after He was baptized in the Jordan in the Spirit (baptized in the Spirit! Yahoo!), the Holy Spirit led Him into the desert for forty days and forty nights. After that “He came preaching the kingdom.”

David, the man after God's own heart, writes, "For God alone my soul waits in silence." "God is silent." The mystics sometimes called this "the dark night of the soul."

Sometimes Heaven is silent, yet silence is part of the song. Revelation is like a great anthem. It builds and builds, one theme on top of another theme, through the seals, until the seventh seal is opened. Then all at once! . . . *silence*. Our hearts anticipate the crescendo. Good music is structured that way. Silence makes us long for God's crescendo; faith, hope, and love for God's crescendo. All of Heaven is silent with anticipation.

Or *maybe* . . . *God* is silent with anticipation.

When you are silent in a conversation, you are anticipating and inviting the other person to speak. For seven chapters God has been speaking to John, and for thousands of years God has been speaking through creation and fertility, and now *silence*.

Maybe *He* is inviting;
Maybe *He* is anticipating;
Maybe *He* is longing for someone else to speak.

Like a father anticipates the day his newborn baby, out of the silence and babbling, says a word—a "logos": "Abba" — "Dada." When that happens, the daddy screams to everybody else in the room, "Shut up! Quiet! Listen! Jonathan just said 'Dada!'" He holds his breath, and everybody quiets down and listens. Maybe he says it; maybe he doesn't; but they listen for the word "Dada." In Aramaic — "Abba."

Jesus said, "Henceforth you have asked nothing in my name." A lot of babbling that doesn't make much sense, but not word—"logos." "You have not asked in my name." Then comes the cross, and then they *do* ask "in His name."

Paul writes, "When we cry 'Abba Father,' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children of God, then heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

. . . when we cry "Abba Father."

When my children first spoke "Dada" out of the silence, out of the babble, I communed with them. My flesh and blood was speaking to me. And I would move mountains in order to hear it.

"Pray this way," says Jesus. "Abba—Dada—Father who art in heaven"

Do you remember what Aslan first said to Shasta in *The Horse and His Boy* when he showed up to unwrap his scroll in the dark silence? Shasta whispered, "Who are you?" The Great Lion replied, "One who has waited long for you to speak."

Perhaps the Lion of Judah, the Lamb on the throne, has been speaking to you all of your life. Now He has unwrapped your scroll, and with silence He calls to you: “Speak to me.”

Deep calling to deep,
“Abba Father”;
“God save me.”

“God save” in Hebrew is “Yeshua.” In Greek it is “Jesus.” Silence is an invitation to speak. And the word spoken out of the silence is the best.

This last week when we were in Chicago for my sister’s wedding, we met all kinds of great, new relatives. There was a lot of socializing, a lot of noise, and a lot of words — words used as tools and even as weapons.

But on the last night, our anniversary, just Susan and I took the rental car and went on a date. We drove into Chicago and found a little Italian restaurant. We ordered some dinner . . . sat there on the sidewalk . . . they brought us some bread and wine . . . and we just talked. We talked about whatever was on our minds. We talked about eighteen years of marriage. Then we were silent. We sat in silence looking at each other.

We are silent with the people we trust most, because we don’t need words as weapons. And that silence is a sweet communion which speaks volumes. Then sometimes in moments like that, out of that silence, Susan will look at me and say, “I love you.” And those few words mean more to me than all the other words in the English language. And I’ll move mountains in order to hear them.

Revelation 8:1: When the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the slain Lamb upon the throne . . . *opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.*

I think the seven angels are the seven eyes of the Lamb, who are the seven lamps on the seven lampstands, the seven spirits who are the Holy Spirit sent out into all the world speaking in the seven churches and our hearts, even speaking through the seven trumpet blasts. Trumpets proclaim things, like the Day of Atonement in the temple once a year—
”Yom Kippur.”

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

This other angel, and what he does, breaks the series of seven trumpets, which is part of the series of seven seals, as if this is another glimpse into eternity which produces the series of sevens or is the *goal* of the series of sevens. (Seven is the number of creation.)

Everything in this picture is connected with “and also”—“Kai” in the Greek—as if it’s all-contiguous or eternal. I think it’s another picture of the heart of God: the one on the throne, the Spirit before the throne, and this other angel.

People argue about who this angel is, but it’s really clear what he’s doing. He’s a priest offering incense on the altar in the temple. Every day in the temple the priests would anoint themselves with an oil made of myrrh and other spices. Then they would go in and offer incense of frankincense and spices at the morning and evening slaughter of the sacrificial lamb. (You can even get the recipe for it in Exodus 30.)

In Leviticus 16, however, God commands Aaron to offer incense *in* the Holy of Holies. *Within* it, before the Ark—the Mercy Seat—the throne of God, he was commanded to take a censer full of coals from the altar and two handfuls of incense and go *behind* the curtain and put the incense on the fire of the golden altar, which was right before the Lord. And the smoke from that incense was said to protect Aaron lest he die, as he threw the blood of sacrifice upon the Mercy Seat—the throne of God—the Ark of the Covenant.

And somewhere along the line,
The trumpets sounded,
Proclaiming Yom Kippur,
The Day of Atonement.

Only the High Priest was to go behind the curtain and make this offering of incense and sacrifice before the throne. And scholars think that it was probably the custom that this incense offering was made in silence. I read somewhere that it probably took about . . . half an hour.

This angel is the High Priest. The angel mediates the covenant; the angel mixes our prayers with incense he is given, and they ascend before God. Then the angel takes the golden censer and casts it upon the earth.

Who is this *angel* messing with our prayers?!

“Angel” means messenger. So not all angels are angels like we think of them in our English culture. In the Old Testament, the angel of Yahweh, the angel of the Lord, is clearly not an angel like other angels.

He is addressed as God Himself.
He appears as a man.
He wrestles with Jacob and calls him “Israel.”
He stops the hand of Abraham on Mount Carmel

so Abraham doesn't sacrifice his son Isaac.
He speaks to Moses out of the burning bush on
Mount Sinai.
He shows up all over the Old Testament.

And if you saw Him, I believe you'd call him "Jesus."

Well, who's this angel in the picture mediating our prayers? Paul writes this: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom to all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time" (I Timothy 2:5-6). *One mediator*.

Hebrews 7 and 8 spells it out: Jesus is our High Priest, and He Himself is the sacrifice. It's His very own blood that is spread on the altar. The most natural way to translate the prepositional phrase in verse 3 is not "stood at the altar," but "stood on the altar." Jesus is the bleeding Lamb on the throne, and He made sacrifice once and for all.

Then the author of Hebrews writes, "But he always lives to make intercession for them that draw near to God through him." That's *us*. Jesus takes your prayers and mixes them with His incense ("thumiama") — it means "fragrant odors," like myrrh used by the priests in the anointing and frankincense which was put in the censers for incense.

Where does Jesus get this fragrance? It is given to Him. When He was an infant king, kings show up from the East giving Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What a weird gift for a baby! Then John is sure to point out that Mary anoints Jesus with costly, aromatic oil on his way to Jerusalem to die. And Jesus says, "It was intended that she should keep this for the day of my burial."

On the cross Jesus smelled of that fragrance. John points out that they took His dead body and covered it in fragrance, as was the custom of the Jews. Jesus mediates our prayers through His sacrificial death on the cross, and "He is always making intercession for us" — on the cross.

I was thinking about when He was on the cross in His body in this world. I realized that people prayed. A thief prayed. I'll bet a Roman centurion prayed something like this: "Oh God, who *is* this man?" People in the crowd must have prayed, "God, where *are* you?" And even though they crucified Him, and Roman centurions themselves pounded the nails, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

His prayer fragrancd their prayers and purified their prayers. And then the censer was cast upon the earth. And the centurion dropped to his knees saying, "Surely this was the Son of God." And the thief said, "Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom."

And the earth shook,
And the rocks split,

And the tombs were opened,
And He lives to make intercession for you.

“For we don’t know how to pray as we ought,” writes Paul. So, for instance, you pray this: “Oh God, I just really want a Cadillac and some pearls.” And Jesus mixes your prayers with His incense from His sacrifice. Then maybe He prays something like this:

Oh Father, forgive her for her small, little heart. But, Lord, what she really means when she prays for that Cadillac is that she wants security, God. Cadillacs grow old after a week, but she wants security. Father, she wants to know that she’s more valuable to you than all the pearls in the world.

He intercedes *for* us, and through His Spirit He causes us to intercede. He uses His silence to purify our hearts and entice us to speak. And with His Spirit He enters our silence and enables us to speak “*Word*” - “*Abba Father.*”

Even when we are dead in our sin, and *where* we’re dead in our sin, He exposes our silence with His silence. He exposes our dead silence, because we don’t see it. We cover it with noise. He enters our silence through the power of His Holy Spirit, causing us even in the death we live in, to make a right confession before God . . . an honest word. Brennan Manning tells of a minister friend of his who bottomed out. He gave up on the ministry, resigned his job, left his church, abandoned his family, and fled north to Canada where he lived in a logging camp in a little, aluminum trailer.

One winter day he was sitting in silence, alone in his aluminum trailer, when his electric heater gave out. One more evidence of a God-forsaken world! Having had enough, he finally just cried out, out of the silence, “God, I *hate* you!” Then he dropped to his knees weeping.

Manning writes, “There in the bright darkness of faith he heard Christ say, ‘I know. It’s okay.’ Then this shattered man heard Jesus weeping within him. Then the minister stood up and started home.”

As Jesus hung on the cross from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, the sky grew dark. Then at the ninth hour Jesus lifted His head and cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” — the first line of Psalm 22. You see, *that’s our line!* It’s *our* prayer to be prayed from the depths of Hell in silence and death. In a cursed world He speaks our curse to God. He prays *our* prayer to God.

Psalm 22 is a cry for salvation. Then Jesus says, “Into your hands I commit my spirit. It is finished.” And the curtain in the temple rips from the top to the bottom, the earth shakes, the rocks are split, and the tombs are opened. He enters our silence, our deadness, and He speaks where we cannot even speak — out of the silence, a right confession.

We are seeing here more than we can begin to comprehend. But at least I hope you get this: When you pray, be silent before Him, before His cross, before His body broken and blood shed. Be *silent*; then speak.

I hope you see the problem here. How do we get silent? We are addicted to words! We use words out of fear as weapons and tools. How can we surrender to God's silence?

Well, take time. Get rid of all the other words. Share all your words and requests with Him (pink Cadillacs, pearls, A-7, F-3, W-4 . . .). Don't worry about it. He takes all your prayers, mixes them with incense, and purifies them. Speak all your words, and *then . . . don't stop!* That's where we mess up. Don't stop. You are only beginning to speak. Speak all your words, then be silent before Him. Then if words come to your heart, speak those.

If you're praying for Aram, say all your words about Aram! And then sit with Aram in your mind before the throne of grace, before body broken and blood shed, in silence. *Then* speak. For the words that come to your heart out of that silence are probably not your words.

"We need prayers of words, yes," writes Madeleine L'Engle, "the words are the path to contemplation; but the deepest communion with God is beyond words, on the other side of silence."

How *can* I be silent enough
to ever speak or pray God's words?

I want to leave you with a picture. It's the only time I ever saw Jarek Conelly sit still in perfect silence:

Jarek was four years old, and I was performing the marriage ceremony of his mother Janielle to Andy Conelly. (Many of you may have known them. They were part of our church five years ago before they got married and moved to Oklahoma.) Both had recently come to Christ.

Jarek was Janielle's son from a former relationship. Jarek really didn't know who his father was . . . really didn't have a daddy. Jarek's skin was much, much darker than Andy's, so people could tell he was not Andy's boy.

I think Jarek *knew* it. Out of his fear and anxiety he was always restless and running about, never sitting still. During the ceremony he did the ring bearer thing, and then he was all over the place and wouldn't sit still. By the time we got to the vows he was quarantined in the front row with relatives on either side holding him down.

As I began to lead Janielle and Andy, bride and bridegroom, in the ring ceremony, with Jarek there squirming and making noises, all at once Andy stopped me. He said, "Peter, I have to say something."

He turned around with everybody watching. Jarek was still squirming in his seat. Andy said, “Jarek,” and Jarek froze! “Jarek, I love you with all my heart. And I will always be your daddy. And you will always be my son.” And Jarek did not move the rest of the service.

I don’t know the next word Jarek spoke, because he was silent for the rest of the service, but I pray that it was this, when he saw Andy: “Daddy.”

So behold, children of God,
He loves you with all His heart.

God the Father is silent, waiting for you to speak; God the Son died in order that you could speak; God the Spirit enters our dead, silent hearts enticing and enabling us and giving us the word to speak.

Habakkuk 2:20: “The Lord is in his holy temple,” that’s *you*, children of God, “let all the earth keep silent before him.” He is about to speak from His temple: “Abba, Father, holy is your name. You are different. Forgive us. Bless, heal, protect. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth like it is in heaven. . . .” *And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it on the earth and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

At the second trumpet a great mountain blazing with fire is cast into the sea. Our prayers really *do* move mountains. But more than that, children of God, your prayers move God from Mount Zion, Mount Sinai, and the Mount of Transfiguration all the way to Mount Calvary, the Hill of the Skull. He goes there in the hopes that He will hear His children speak, “Abba, I no longer hate You; I love You.”

And on the night Jesus was betrayed He took the bread and broke it saying, “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.

So He says to you, children of God, “Come . . . taste and see . . . eat my body and drink my blood . . . commune at my table.” And may your heart be silent before Him. If words should happen to arise in your heart, speak them. They probably didn’t come from you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Do you see to what extent God has gone just to hear you call His name and share your heart? Pretty awesome! So take some time this week to be silent before Him. Call His name and share your heart.

In Jesus’ name, amen.