

December 27, 2009

Prayer and the End of the Age

Revelation 8:1-5

As one year ends and another looms on the horizon, my thoughts always turn it seems to the final end of this age. There has always been a fascination among people groups all over the world with end times stuff. The fancy word for that is eschatology – or the study of end times. Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, New Age, and indeed people from most all other belief systems share this fascination. It is almost as though it were coded into our DNA to wonder and speculate what the end of this world will be like. Strangely enough, they all seem to agree that this world will end someday – the only argument is how and through what means. The latest end times scenario is on in the theaters this winter and it is called '2012' and it really is just the embodiment of a phenomenon that accurately enough is called the '2012 Phenomenon'.

The 2012 phenomenon comprises a wide range of escatological beliefs which claim that cataclysmic or transformative events will occur on December 21 or December 23, 2012, which is said to be the end-date of a 5,125-year-long Mayan Long Count Calendar. These beliefs derive in part from archeoastronomical speculation, alternative interpretations of mythology, numerological constructions, or alleged prophecies from extraterrestrial beings. A New Age interpretation of this transition claims that, during this time, the planet and its inhabitants will undergo a positive physical or spiritual transformation and that 2012 may mark the beginning of a new era. On the other side some believe that the 2012 date marks the beginning of an apocalypse. Both ideas have been disseminated in numerous books and TV documentaries, and have spread around the world through websites and discussion groups.

I'm not here this morning to talk about any of these current ideas of the end of all things, however, because quite frankly it would be a waste of time. We have in our hands the Master Plan of eschatology and it would be foolish to talk about the counterfeit when we have the real McCoy to look at. It is my intention to let the word of God speak to you about the end of the age and the part that prayer plays in the consummation of the plan and purpose of God. I want to do this for three reasons: First – to give you an unshakeable confidence in the providence and wisdom of God. Secondly I hope to encourage your hearts to pray as never before. And finally because **I believe that we as a people and a church will never grow beyond the limits of our prayer life.** I believe that prayer, corporate and private, undergirds everything we do and the more we pray, the more we see the hand of God move in our lives and in the world. We are going to spend the month of January of 2010 speaking on prayer and its place in the purpose of God, and we are going to link our times of praying with times of fasting as a church.

Remember back in November when we called the church to a week of prayer and fasting, and we said that fasting is a ***voluntary abstinence from legitimate temporal gifts for eternal purposes?*** And it is almost always linked with praying – which is also for eternal purposes. Remember the way Christ taught the disciples to pray? *'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'*. Legitimate prayer always has in view the plan and purpose of God – because that is why He gave us prayer. Prayer is never about personal, private ends – it may have personal, private impact, but the goal of prayer is the purpose of God. Our prayers for the well-being of others, for the success of a mission or trip, our prayers for safety and blessing, our meal time prayers and our bedtime prayers, our prayers for deliverance and salvation – all of our praying ought to have the great goal of God in view. God did not design prayer to ease our way through this world, nor did He have in mind that we would call the heavenly Bellhop from time to time for room service. **The design of prayer I believe is the working out of God's great purpose and plan.**

I want your hearts to be stirred toward the culmination of the plan of God – to pray for it – to fast for it – if by some means, as Peter says 'to hasten it'. *'...looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat.* 2 Peter 3:12 **Because I believe that prayer is the means by which God ushers in the end of this age and the new age begins.** I think that is what this text is speaking about. It shows the prayers of the saints piling up on the altar of God, year after year, century after century – all the times the saints of God have wept, and cried, rejoiced and praised, in prayer and fasting, crying out, *'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'*. And it must be that God is waiting until there is no more room on the altar and then He will command His angel to take the censor, fill it with fire from the altar where the prayers have been burning before God and pour it out on the earth to bring all of God's purpose and plan to completion. The implication here is that **the consummation of the age is directly related to the prayers of the saints throughout all these years.**

The scene in chapter 8 opens with a half-hour of silence. *When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.* Revelation 8:1 This fact alone tells us that what is about to happen is hugely momentous. Heaven has never been silent before that we know about. There is at the very least the 24-7, three hundred and sixty five days a year chorus of the four living creatures who are around the throne crying, *'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come'*. Revelation 4:8b So a half-hour of silence is significant.

But I think to understand the significance, we need to back up a little, at least to chapter 5. There John says, *'Then I saw in the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals.'* Revelation 5:1 This is one scroll, with seven seals on it. We don't use them anymore, but important letters or books or scrolls used to have seals – usually wax seals, that needed to be broken open so that you could read the letter or scroll. What this scroll represents is the unfolding of the end of the age, and what the seals signify is that the scroll can only be opened by an authorized person. That is what one of the angels cry in verse 2: *'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?'* Revelation 5:2

The answer that came back was *'... no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it'* And John, who was looking on, despaired: *I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals."* Revelation 5:3-5 Jesus Christ's conquering of sin and death qualifies Him and only Him to open the seals of history and oversee its conclusion. What happened at the cross is the key to all of human history and the plan and purpose of God.

In chapter 6, the Lamb starts breaking open the seals, and with each opening, John gets a picture of increasing intensity of what Jesus called in Matthew chapter 24, the beginning of birth pangs. That is the beginning signs of the end. The first seal unleashes the white horse – which could be representative of the spread of the gospel from then until now. The second seal unleashes the red horse that probably represents wars and rumors of war. The third seal reveals a black horse that we understand represents famine. The fourth seal unleashes a pale horse representing death by sword and famine and pestilence and wild beasts.

The breaking of the fifth seal shows John a scene of those martyred for the faith, under the altar crying out: *'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'* And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also'. Revelation 6:10-11 And the breaking of the sixth seal delivers terror in the form of a great earthquake; the sun going black, the moon becoming like blood, stars falling from heaven, the skies splitting apart, mountains and islands moving out of their places, and the enemies of God trying to hide themselves from Him.

Then in chapter seven we get a parenthesis of sorts as John gets a vision of the destiny of God's people in all of this, with the sealing of the one hundred and forty-four thousand and the triumphant scene in heaven where people from every tribe, and nation, people and tongue are standing before the Lamb in white robes waving palm branches crying out: *'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb'*. Revelation 7:10b And finally we see those who have gone through the great tribulation occupying a special place before the throne.

Now we get to chapter 8 and the half-hour of silence in heaven. This is big, this is momentous. I think this half-hour represents at the very least, the awe and majesty of the moment – the end of the age is at hand – a new heaven and new earth is on the horizon – the old heaven and the old earth are passing away – spectacularly. And that much about the movie '2012' might be fairly close to accurate – cataclysmic destruction. This is how Peter describes that event: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.* 2 Peter 3:10 This is definitely not the positive spiritual transformation New Agers are looking for. This is creation reborn in the holy fire of God that burns away all the sin and sickness of the old creation and in its place a new heaven and a new earth full of light and life and the presence of God.

But I believe that this half-hour of silence represents something more as well. It is as if all the hosts of heaven fall silent to make way for all the the prayers of the saints to be heard throughout the universe. It is the exclamation point on the end of the prayer, '*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!*' I believe that God wanted John to know, and us, that the consummation of the ages will come through the prayers of the saints – that all the prayers of all the saints throughout all the years that have piled up on the altar of God will one day shake the very foundations of earth and heaven and usher in the judgments of God bring about a new heaven and new earth.

And we should also note that none of these prayers prayed throughout the years have been lost or ignored. None of them are pointless or ineffectual. If God stores even our tears in a bottle as it says in Psalm 56, how much more care do you think He will take of our prayers of faith to Him? And when the time is ripe, He sends an angel to the altar with a golden bowl of incense to mix with the prayers of the saints that on on that altar.

But first we see seven angels with seven trumpets and we see heaven prepare to make a final proclamation: *Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.* Revelation 8:2 In Leviticus we read about the Festival of Trumpets, which was celebrated on the first day of the New moon of the seventh month. It was a day set apart as a solemn rest – a memorial of blowing of trumpets. It was a celebration of a holy convocation which included abstinence from work and an offering made by fire. The significance of this feast lay in the fact that it marked the beginning of the New Year according to the older calendar. The Jews call this 'Roshoshanah'. I believe we can conclude here that this is the reality in heaven which the shadow on earth pointed to. The shadow was the Feast of Trumpets celebrating the coming of the New Year that pointed to the real New Year of the New Age. And now the angels are ready to announce that.

But before they can blow their trumpets, something else needs to happen, and that something has to do with the prayers of the saints. *And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.* Revelation 8:3-4 Figuratively, in the Bible, incense was symbolic of ascending prayer. And here we have incense given to the angel to add with the prayers of the saints. I can only conclude that all of heaven is praying even as we are praying on earth – '*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done*' and it is that incense that mingles with the prayers of the saints in the angel's golden bowl.

And the answer to that mingled prayer comes in a spectacular fashion: *Then 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, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.* Revelation 8:5 I believe that what we are to understand from this is that our prayers that are an echo of heaven's own cry, work to accomplish the purpose of God. When we pray, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' that is not just a catch-phrase, that is not a Christian mantra – that is the cry of heaven and the prayer of God's people that gets mingled together and mixed with fire from the altar and thrown back to earth with the answer.

Thomas Torrance, writing on this passage says: '*What are the real master-powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayers of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth.*' Thomas Torrance

Listen to how King David described prayer and the answer to prayer in Psalm 18: *In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From His temple He heard my voice, and my cry to Him reached His ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because He was angry. Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from Him. He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under His feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness His covering, His canopy around Him, thick clouds dark with water. Out of the brightness before Him hailstones and coals of fire broke through His clouds. The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered His voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And He sent out his arrows and scattered them; He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at Your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.* That sounds suspiciously like the scene in Revelation 8 where the end of the age is ushered in on the wings of the prayers of God's people. Psalm 18:6-19

David wasn't talking about the end of the age here, but the results of his prayer seem to have great consequences in the heavenly realms that we on earth cannot see or comprehend fully. The apparent result of David's prayer was that the Lord rescued Him – but the reality of the power of his prayer for rescue was something seen only fully in heaven.

What we ought to take away from this I believe is that **our prayers here on earth have eternal consequence**. All of our faith-filled, God-honoring prayers ascend to heaven to the altar of God where they are mixed with the incense of heaven and the fire of God and return to earth as answers to the will of God and the carrying out of His great purpose and plan. I believe that our prayers are piled up on the altar until they reach a God-apportioned number and then they are poured back in the best God-determined answers according to His will and plan. **So our prayers are never in vain** – none of them are lost – they all have great and eternal consequence.

And we should know that **our prayers are an integral part of bringing this age to a close and ushering in the judgments of God**. The *peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake* that result from our prayers mingled with the incense of heaven and the fire of God represent the action of God as the final seal is removed from the scroll and the seven trumpets blow and the seven bowls are poured out and all things are concluded in the plan of God.

Finally, I think we should take away what Peter Kreeft so eloquently summarizes about the incredible importance of prayer: ***'I strongly suspect that if we saw all the difference even the tiniest of our prayers make, and all the people whose little prayers were destined to affect, and all the consequences of those prayers down through the centuries – we would be so paralyzed with awe at the power of prayer that we would be unable to get up off our knees for the rest of our lives'***. Peter Kreeft

Our gracious God and eternal Father,

Grant that we would see with the eyes of our hearts enlightened the great place of prayer in Your purpose and plan. Pour out a spirit of prayer and supplication on Your people to pray as never before and ignite a fire in our souls to pray with confidence and certainty of Your triumph in the world, knowing that none of our prayers go unheeded in heaven. Forgive us Lord for our apathy in prayer and our often neglect of it. Help us to cherish and jealously guard our times of prayer knowing that the Creator and Sustainer of all things gives heed to our prayers and advances His kingdom through our petitions. Make us watchful and persistent and thankful in prayer. Move our hearts to pray God-sized, Scripture saturated prayers that bring fire from the altar of God to earth. Fill our mouths with prayer to You and the gospel to the nations we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.