

# Judgment on Covenant Breakers in Response to the Church's Prayers

## Revelation 8

This is the second sermon on Revelation 8, a chapter that begins enumerating the severe judgments that were soon to befall the Jews who rejected Christ. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:11).

What a tragedy! The covenant people, who for millennia had been expecting the Messiah, rejected him when he came. They said, “We will not have this man to rule over us. Give us Barabbas.” When the question was posed to them, “What shall I do to Jesus, who is called Christ?” they shot back, “Let him be crucified!”

The Jews did not like the kind of Messiah God sent them. They wanted a political leader who could throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. God sent his eternal Son, the second Person of the blessed Trinity, begotten by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a woman, at once both human and divine, a chosen vessel to bear our sins in his own body on the tree to satisfy the wrath of God, so that we could have eternal life with him forever—the Lord Jesus Christ. But the Jews, under their corrupt leadership, would have none of it! They didn’t want to give up their positions of power. They didn’t want to step aside and welcome God’s chosen Messiah. He came to his own, and his own rejected him. This was worse than simple unbelief. This was a deliberate breaking of the covenant. It was knowing to do good and doing it not. It was a deliberate spitting in the face of the God of heaven, saying in effect, “We hate you, we despise your wisdom, we do not want your salvation, we would rather burn in hell for all eternity than accept your Christ, we want nothing to do with you anymore; God, may you be damned forevermore!”

Make no mistake. When God speaks, man’s responsibility is to listen. We cannot have God on our own terms. He is infinitely wise and far above us. We must take God as he is, for he is perfect. There is no negotiating with God. To demand that he make concessions to our demands is idolatry. Man utterly lacks wisdom. No mortal man ever could have designed the plan of salvation. We might have designer shoes, designer purses, but we cannot have a designer God. We cannot remake God in our own image. We can try—but the result will not be a God who can save us. God is a package deal. Either we receive him as he is, or we burn in hell for eternity. Thankfully, by the Spirit’s power he makes us willing to receive him. As the text in John continues, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.” Those who believe on the name of Christ—the name which is above every name—are saved eternally. Amen!

Please note the difference. It is one thing to be lost in the darkness of paganism, not knowing the light, worshipping the forces of darkness. But to *have* the light, to

know God’s truth, to be part of the chosen people, to whom pertained the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen,” and then to reject God’s chosen Messiah, is many magnitudes greater. It is deliberately sinning against the light, saying in effect, “God, to hell with you. We want nothing more to do with you. Goodbye.”

To reject the Son of God, when he had come among you, when he had done such notable miracles among you, proving his Messiahship, when he had raised Lazarus, who had been in a tomb four days, when the Jewish leadership plotted not only to kill Jesus, but to put *Lazarus* to death as well, “because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus”<sup>1</sup>—such is the heightened guilt of covenant breakers.

So once again we come to Revelation chapter 8, where we see the beginning of the trumpet judgments that were to soon take place—judgments on the covenant-breaking Jews. Here begins several chapters detailing the specifics of God’s judgments on the mutinous, apostate nation during the Great Tribulation that was to soon take place. As we will see, this severe judgment will take place in response to the church’s prayers.

I have three points this afternoon: (1) Mercy to those who trust; (2) Judgment to those who rebel; (3) Our obedience is imperfect—our only hope is Christ. First,

### **1. Mercy to those who trust**

Our chapter begins: “When He 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. Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with *the prayers of all the saints* upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the *earth*. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.”

The word translated “earth” (γῆ, the root of our word *geology*) can mean the *soil* that receives seed, the *ground* (“he commanded the people to sit down on the *ground*”), *land* (Jesus taught by the seaside, and all the people sat on *land*), *earth* (“in the beginning God laid the foundations of the *earth*”). Clearly, the word has a wide range of meanings that must be determined by the context. So, what does it mean in verse 4 (“the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:10

threw it to the *earth*”? In context, it doesn’t mean the whole world—the whole globe. Rather, it is a reference to the “holy Land,” Israel, specifically the land of Judea that surrounds Jerusalem, the territory inhabited by the covenant breakers.

Here, then, is a vision of judgment upon apostate religion in response to the prayers of all the saints.

Wow! The power of prayer.

The church stands, surrounded by enemies on every side. We read the news, such as the recent beheadings of seventy Christian men in Nigeria at the hands of militant Muslim terrorists (something totally ignored by the mainstream media). When we hear of such things, we get angry. The injustice of it all! Premeditated murderers who get away with their crimes. Lawlessness! Something inside us rises up in righteous indignation. Something ought to be done about it. What should we do? Obviously, we live very far from Nigeria. We cannot simply march over there as a mob and deliver vigilante justice. Nor should we! We live in a world where God is in control. Our God has promised to avenge every wrong, to restore perfect justice at the final judgment, when every rebellious knee will bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Notice, the incense in our text is symbolic of the prayers of the saints, rising up in the smoke from the altar of incense. Here is a reference to the tabernacle, where a special formulation of incense was burned night and day, symbolic of the fact that our Father in heaven, through the mediation of Christ, takes note of the church’s prayers in real time. Our first petition always must be, “Hallowed be thy name.” Our prayer should be God-centered. What the church desires most of all is the glory of God.

But prayers have consequences! When we pray, it is not just a futile act of piety. Prayers uttered in conformity with Scripture *will* be answered. Chilton remarks in his commentary, “When the worshiping assembly calls upon the Lord of the Covenant, the world experiences His judgments. *History is managed and directed from the altar of incense, which has received the prayers of the Church.*”

How easily we lose sight of this, but we should not!

What should be our response to evil? To cry to the Lord in prayer! Say it again: to cry out to the Lord in prayer. To do such is *not* to do nothing! Church of Jesus Christ, we worship a sovereign God who performs his will in the armies of heaven. Our prayers are powerful! Let us not shrink back from using them.

Read with me Psalm 18:6–15,

“In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears. Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken, because He was angry. Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and

came down with darkness under His feet. And He rode upon a cherub, and flew; He flew upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness His secret place; His canopy around Him was dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. From the brightness before Him, His thick clouds passed with hailstones and coals of fire. The LORD thundered from heaven, and the Most High uttered His voice, hailstones and coals of fire. He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe, lightnings in abundance, and He vanquished them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, the foundations of the world were uncovered at Your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.”

Isn't that powerful?

Church of Jesus Christ, your prayers are *powerful!* As we gather, we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is a mercy to those who trust. It is also a

## **2. Judgment to those who rebel**

Here were the covenant-breaking Jews. They convinced the people to demand that Christ be crucified.

“Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’ They said, ‘Barabbas!’ Pilate said to them, ‘What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said to him, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ Then the governor said, ‘Why, what evil has He done?’ But they cried out all the more, saying, ‘Let Him be crucified!’”

Here is the perfect picture of mob-justice. This is like the gruesome beheadings of the seventy Christian men in Nigeria. This is like the Black Lives Matter riots a few years ago, where rioters destroyed property in many cities across our country, and nothing was done about it. There was no justice. Keepers of the peace did nothing. Some politicians—even in our own state—promoted it. Promoted lawlessness!

But in the years leading up to AD 70, as the church prayed, their prayers were answered in a dramatic way: God unleashed his wrath upon the covenant-breaking Jews in what is called the Great Tribulation.

Just as in the book of Acts [4:24ff.], when Peter and John were arrested and thrown into prison. In response, the church “raised their voice to God with one accord and said: ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: ‘Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.’ For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness

they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

The divine response: “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”

Chilton, citing J. Massyngberde Ford, notes that there are four striking “reversals” in the text:

1. From the Throne and altar, the “mercy seat,” comes wrath;
2. Incense, the “soothing aroma to the LORD” (Lev. 1:13), becomes an agent of death (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14–16);
3. The trumpets, which called Israel to worship, now become heralds of her destruction;
4. The heavenly liturgy itself, appointed for Israel’s sanctification, becomes the means of her overthrow and dissolution.

Church of Jesus Christ, let us not grow weary, but let us continue to offer up effectual, fervent prayer to our merciful Father. Let us pray for mercy to those who trust, according to his will; and judgment to those who rebel.

Thirdly, note that

### **3. Our obedience is imperfect—our only hope is Christ**

“For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them.’”

We can be saved by works—if we obey perfectly! The problem is, we don’t! Our obedience is imperfect, but Christ’s is perfect. We read in Hebrews 10,

“Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: ‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God’”” (Heb 10:5–7).

Here is our glorious Savior. He came to do the will of God—and he did it perfectly.

Our obedience is imperfect. We continue daily to fall short of God’s standard of absolute perfection.

But Christ is perfect. There is no one else like him. He is the only Savior—our only hope of salvation.

Do you want to be saved? Do you want to live forever with Christ in heaven? There is only one way of salvation, and that is Christ.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” All of us have sinned (past tense; sinned in Adam) and “come short” (present tense: continue to come short of God’s standard of absolute perfection).

But the good news of the gospel is that Christ has perfectly done what we failed to do, and if we put our trust in him, it is accounted to us as righteousness. Let us look to him in faith and be saved. Amen.

(1) Mercy to those who trust; (2) Judgment to those who rebel; (3) Our obedience is imperfect—our only hope is Christ.