

CHAPTER 9

Voices from the Altar

We have already seen, in chapter 6 of Revelation, the Lamb unsealing the scroll, and we watched as he broke the first four seals and released the horsemen of God's purposes. But let us read on a little further:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed (Revelation 6:9-11).

As the Lamb breaks one of the seals, we actually see some of those who have preceded us into glory, the martyrs. One of the things about the Book of Revelation is that everyone is presented as a martyr. The word martyr literally means witness. An ultimate act of witness, of course, is laying down your life, but everyone in the Book of Revelation who is faithful to Jesus is considered to be a witness and therefore is numbered among the martyrs. Because we overcome the evil one, because we do not love our lives even so much as to shrink from death, we are counted among the martyrs. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life," says the Lord (Rev. 2:10). So even those who do not die are numbered among those who are willing to lay down their lives.

The Altar of Incense

We are therefore the witnesses of the Lord, and as Jesus breaks this fifth seal, we get a glimpse, under the altar, of the souls of those who have been martyred and slain because of their faithfulness to Jesus and the word of the testimony that they bore.

Most commentaries tell you that this altar is the bronze altar of sacrifice that is in the courtyard of the temple. I do not want to sound arrogant, but I do want to differ with what they say. I don't believe it is the bronze altar. If it is, it is the only place in the Book of Revelation that it is mentioned. But there are two pieces of temple furniture that are continually mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The throne, of course, is the Ark, because God is enthroned above the cherubim that cover the Ark of the Covenant. It is His mobile throne. It is the Ark where He sits in majesty and authority. The only other continually mentioned piece of furniture is the altar, described as "the altar that is

before the throne." So the throne and the altar have a special relationship. The throne always represents the Ark, and the altar always represents the altar of incense. We will look at this in more detail later because it is a very important concept.

What is more, on two other occasions in the Book of Revelation we discover the altar of incense being vocal. A voice comes from the altar. It seems to me to be much more consistent to see those three times when the altar speaks as voices coming from the same altar. What is more, although these martyrs represent sacrifice because they have laid down their lives, this should not take us to the brazen altar, because that is the place where sacrifice was made to take away sin. My death will never take away sin. But there is another sacrifice of which Scripture speaks.

When God called Abraham to offer up his son Isaac, Abraham did it without hesitation. He did it without argument. He did it without any twinge of conscience because he had an unshakeable faith in the goodness of God. He had an unshakeable faith in the word of God's promise. God had promised him that through this son, through Isaac, all the families of the earth would be blessed. It was through Isaac, the son of the covenant, that God's promises would be fulfilled. So when Abraham went to Mount Moriah to offer up his son, he did not have a moral problem. He comes to the foot of the mountain and he says to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5). He really believes he is going to build an altar, and he does. He really believes he is going to lay the wood on the altar, and he does. He really believes he is going to bind his son and lay him on the altar, and

he does. He really believes he is going to plunge in the knife, set fire to the wood, and offer up his son as a burnt offering, and he believes that out of the ashes, out of the remains of his child of promise, God will bring resurrection. And the writer to the Hebrews says that he received him back as a type (Heb. 11:19). The typology is remarkable, for just as Isaac carried the wood upon his shoulders, so Jesus went up to His mountain carrying on His shoulders the cross that was going to be the means of His sacrifice. Now God saved Abraham's son and showed him a ram as a substitute. But, in Abraham's understanding, this whole event was an act of worship. This is the first time that the word worship is used in Scripture for a prepared and deliberate act, and Abraham's offering of Isaac helps us to understand what true worship is. The incense altar was an altar of worship, and we see in the demonstration of Abraham's faith that worship is about sacrifice.

True worship is not singing songs, clapping, and raising hands in the presence of God. True worship is not shouting and jumping. It may include all those things, but true worship is laying down your life for God. So these martyrs, if you like, have entered into ultimate worship as they have yielded their lives to the Lord. Paul writes to the Romans like this:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1).

Worship is giving myself utterly, totally, unconditionally to God. Therefore I am suggesting that those who are under the altar are those who have made the ultimate act of worship. They have given their lives for the Lord. And it has become pleasing and precious to Him. The psalmist believed this:

He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in His sight (Psalm 72:14).

The blood of the righteous is precious to God. The life is in the blood, and therefore their lives are precious to Him. When we bring sacrifice to God, we do not bring things that are not worth anything. We do not bring things that are the dog-ends of what is left, of what we have enjoyed for ourselves and spent upon our own pleasures. We bring to God that which is precious. We bring to God that which is of value. We bring to God that which is costly, we give it to Him that He might take pleasure in it. The Bible tells us that "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Ps. 116:15). There is preciousness about yielding your life to God.

The Fellowship of the Saints

So my conviction is that this altar, that we see here for the first time, is the altar of incense where ultimate sacrifice has been made by those willing to lay down their lives for Jesus. Now, the fascinating thing is that, having passed into His presence, they have not finished their ministry. When you and I go into the presence of the Lord, we do not go into some eternal slumber room. We do not go into some kind of beautifully proportioned and wonderfully furnished waiting room. We come into the presence of God, and we continue with ministry. I do not understand it all. The Bible is not clear about it all. There are those who have gone on before us, but, in some divine way in the eternal economies of God, they are still part of us. It is what the old Puritans used to call the fellowship of the saints. It is not that we speak to them. It is not that we pray to them. It is not that we invite them down to our séance. But there is a fellowship between us and those who have gone before us.

When we come together as the Church, when we gather as brothers and sisters, as co-workers, as friends together in the presence of Jesus, we ascend the mountain. It is a great revolution in our hearts when we understand that we are not here to invite Jesus to come to our meeting. Jesus invites us to come to His meeting. His meeting is up a hill. Every time we meet together we hear a voice that says, "Come up here." We ascend the hill of the Lord, and as we go up, we find ourselves coming into communion with the church of the firstborn, whose names are enrolled in Heaven.

We come to myriads and myriads, thousands and thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand angels who are gathered in festal assembly—that is, angels with their party clothes on. We come into the presence of God the Judge because the Church is the place where His judgments are pronounced. We come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. But there is another group to which we come, in the same exercise of faith, as we enter the presence of God. That group is described as the spirits of righteous men made perfect (Heb. 12:22-24). There is a sense, without getting too mystical, that when we come together we fellowship with all the saints who have ever walked the path of faith because there is one eternal Church. The Church cannot be divided by denominations; the Church cannot be divided by nations, and the Church cannot be divided by dispensations. It is one Church from the beginning until the end. So there is a communion of saints that is real and yet a mystery.

After telling us that we have ascended the mountain, the writer of Hebrews tells us that in our earthly ministry we are to

run the race that is set before us because we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. It would seem that not only do the spirits of righteous men find their rest in the Lord's Heavenly presence but they continue to be concerned for the purposes of God on earth. Observing the race of faith in which the Church is engaged, these righteous men eagerly await the final lap and the tape of ultimate victory. For this is when God's cosmic plan is finished and His Kingdom has come.

"How Long, O Lord?"

The concern of the Heavenly martyrs has caused some problems for modern Christians. It appears to be far too harsh and vengeful for current evangelical sensibilities. The Heavenly martyrs ask God in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10). Some people say that does not sound like a very Christian response. We should be more like Stephen, who, when he was being stoned, raises his eyes to Heaven, sees the Lord, and says, in effect, "God, don't judge them for this, don't hold it to their account" (see Acts 7:60). Shouldn't we be more like that? Well, as individuals, yes.

As individuals we turn the other cheek; as individuals we take the slander and the persecution of the world. As individuals who are persecuted for righteousness' sake we do not retaliate. But there is still an issue of justice, and the Church must be concerned not only with grace but also with justice. Those who have gone before us are concerned that God's justice be manifested in our world. We considered, in an earlier chapter, the throne coming down in judgment because it manifests the justice of God. Heaven is concerned that God's justice be manifested in the earth. Remember, these are pictures. They are symbols. It is

not actually recording real events. We always have to remind ourselves of this so that we realize that we are not seeing something that actually happens; it is John communicating to us, as best he can by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, attitudes and actions that are spiritual. What he is telling us here is that the saints who have gone before us are concerned with God's justice in the world. Although it is difficult for us to imagine and understand, there almost seems to be with them a sense of frustration. It almost seems as if they are losing patience.

"How long, O Lord?" is a familiar cry from the Scriptures. As you go through the Word of God, you will find again and again men, women, and nations crying to God, saying, "How long?" In fact, that should not surprise us because there are many of you reading this book now whose own hearts have cried at times and may be crying even today, "How long, O Lord? How long until You get me out of this problem? How long until You answer that prayer? How long until my loved one gets saved? How long until this disease is healed? How long until this prayer is answered?" There is a sense of longing in our hearts, almost a sense of desperation for God to do things that we have asked Him to do for a long, long time. We are not alone. It is all the way through the Scriptures. Listen to what the psalmist says:

*My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?
(Psalm 6:3)*

How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? How long will Your wrath burn like fire? (Psalm 89:46)

He is under the discipline of God. He is under the hand of the Lord. Have you been here? If you have, you will know that it is a

desperate prayer. But it is a biblical prayer. The church also has to learn to pray God's apparently delayed judgment on the wicked. How long? I am being persecuted. I am in anguish. I am not getting my prayers answered. How long, O Lord? How many of us can identify with Habakkuk:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but You do not listen?
(Habakkuk 1:2)

How long? This is a prophet of God. This is not the man who turns up occasionally to the cell group. This is a prophet of God. How long, O Lord, must I go on asking and You never answer? Here is an angel of the Lord speaking to God in Zechariah chapter 1:

Then the angel of the Lord said, "Lord Almighty, how long will You withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which You have been angry with these seventy years?" (Zechariah 1:12)

You thought you had waited a long time for the answer to your prayer. He has been waiting for seventy years. If we are honest, and I am sure we are, we will identify with that sense of frustration. We will identify with that sense of longing that says, "God, how long until we have breakthrough? How long until we have increase? How long until we have grace and growth? How long until we experience mercy and miracle?" It is a good prayer. It is a good prayer because it shows you mean business. It also helps us to understand that God's patience has greater endurance than ours. But there is this sense that pervades heaven and earth that is summed up with the cry, "How long?" We pray, "God, we want to see all Your purposes, all Your plans, Your power, and Your Kingdom; we want to see all of Your glory displayed and demonstrated

in our lives, in our fellowships, in our cities, in our nations, in our world—and we want to see it now!”

So, how long? There are a number of answers to this fundamental question. The first and most important one is this: “Until.” That is God’s answer to these people: until the number of your fellow servants and brothers who are to be killed as you have been is completed. This helps us to understand God’s timetable. For us time is a linear progression. Year follows year. It moves forward like a never-ending stream. God, of course, lives outside of time. Time came into being when God created the world. Until creation there was no time, there was just eternity.

Somebody once said that God created time just to stop everything from happening at once. But we live as captives of time; we live in a linear understanding of time. God has no such limitation. But because we are captives of linear time, it leads people to try to work out whereabouts down that line of time Jesus is going to come again. How many years is going to be? How many months? How many days? What feast is it going to correspond with? All this bizarre manipulation is to try to find the date on which He will come. Every date that has been predicted so far has not been fulfilled. I think that gives us confidence that the same will be true for every date they are going to predict in the future. God does not look at things in a linear way. They say “How long?” and God says, “Until the number has been fulfilled.” It has got nothing to do with how many years are going to pass. It has got to do with how many people are going to die.

There is a big difference here. When God spoke to Abraham, entering into covenant with Him, He said, “Abraham, I am going to give you this land, but before that happens your people are

going to go down into Egypt. They are going to be slaves, and then they are going to come back out after four hundred years." Now, God tells Abraham how many linear years it is going to take, but that is not how God judges it. God says they are going to come back in that number of years because the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure (Gen. 15:13-16). Because He is God, He knows that the full measure will be reached in three hundred years. He does not give this figure because that is the length of time He has determined, but because He knows that is how long it will take for the full measure to be reached. It is very important that we grasp this. We are not trying to work out dates. This is why Peter says that we not only look for the coming of Jesus but we can actually hasten it (2 Pet. 3:11-12). How? By living the kind of lives that God responds to, by seeking to get the Church to the place of fullness.

Jesus will come, not when the Church has been here a number of years, but when the Church comes to the fullness of the total measure of Christ (Eph. 4:13). That is why we can make a difference in our world. We are not slaves of cruel fate. We are the servants of a destiny planned by our loving Heavenly Father, and we can make a difference in our world. We can actually bring in the Kingdom and bring back the King.

The Blood that Speaks

God wants these martyrs first to be robed and clothed in white garments. Seven times we meet people in the Book of Revelation dressed in white, and every time it is a mark of their righteousness, of their holiness, of their sanctification. They are robed in white because they are God's pure people. They are told to wait a little while because they are God's patient people. We have need of patience in that after we have done the will of God, we will inherit

the promises (Heb. 10:36). God also wants them to know that, without us, they will not be made complete because there are others yet to come, other martyrs who will lay down their lives, others to submit totally to Jesus. There is a divine interaction between Heaven and Earth. There is a communion between those who are militants still on the earth and those who have ascended into the presence of God. We are part of the same company. We are members of the same wonderful Church, and while here on earth we are praying at this altar. Meanwhile, those who have ascended into the presence are also crying to God for the fulfilling of His purposes. The idea, of course, of the dead speaking, praying, and calling on God comes from the first mention of that kind of idea way back in Genesis when Cain killed his brother. God asked him what he had done, and he said nothing. Then God said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). We come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24), for Abel's blood, along with all the martyrs under the altar, is saying, "How long until You take vengeance?" but the blood of Jesus is saying, "Forgive. Reconcile. Redeem."

Charles Wesley wrote a great hymn about this, speaking of Jesus presenting His blood in the presence of the Father:

*Five bleeding wounds He bears,
 Received at Calvary.
 They pour effectual prayers,
 They strongly plead for me.
 Forgive, forgive I hear them cry,
 Nor let that ransomed sinner die.
 (from "Arise My Soul")*

There is blood that speaks in the presence. There is the blood of the Lamb that says "forgive." But there is blood that speaks in the presence that says, "Lord, judge," and the two are not contradictory. God wants all men to be redeemed, but God will not overlook the wicked, because He is the God of justice and of mercy. We have looked at Habakkuk, a very important Scripture: "In wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). Both things come together in God. The great thing for us in all the persecutions that come is that they might kill us, but they cannot shut us up—our blood will continue to speak: "By faith he still speaks, even though he is dead" (Heb. 11:4).

Just and True Judgments

The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury (Revelation 9:13-19).

Although I have said that God moves in measurements of quality rather than in lines of quantity, God always moves at exactly the right moment. It is when the fullness of time had come that God sent His Son into the world (Gal. 4:4). The Bible also tells us when Jesus will come again. It says, "At the right moment." He will always come at precisely the right moment, and now we see the exactness of God as He releases judgments through angels who had been kept for this very hour, day, month, and year. When God moves, it is always the right time. And notice that it is the altar that calls upon God to release His judgments into the world. We have another recapitulation here. Remember back in chapter 7 that the angel held back the four winds until there was a seal on the foreheads of the believers. Now, probably relating to the same moment, the worshipers in Heaven are saying to God, "Release the angels now. The time for judgment has come." We as the people of God and those who have gone before us into the presence of God are those who work with God to call His judgments down into our world.

There were two hundred million demon forces released into the world. If we look at them, we can discover at least something about them. They are horses and riders again. Horses and riders, we have already seen, in some places represent the angel messengers of God. These in chapter 9 are clearly violent and foul, and they have upon themselves the very marks of hell. We know this because later on in the Book of Revelation we are going to encounter a lake of burning sulfur and where there is burning sulfur, there is the glowing red of flame, the deep blue of smoke and the bright yellow of sulfur itself. So, these mounted troops have the color of hell upon them. They smell of the lake of fire. God has released hell on Earth. Not for you and me though,

because we have the seal of God upon us. Their breastplates are fiery red, like the flames of the lake, dark blue, like the smoke that rises from it forever, and sulfur yellow, like the stench of that which burns in order to consume all the enemies of God. What is more, out of their mouths comes fire, smoke, and sulfur. So, what covers their heart comes out of their mouth. The breastplate is that which covers the heart. It is fiery red, dark blue, and sulfur yellow. Therefore, it should not surprise us that flames and smoke and sulfur come out of their mouths, for out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. That is not only true of the saints who fill their hearts with the Word of God. That is true of evil men.

The evil man brings forth the evil things out of his heart. Now we are confronted with a multitude whose hearts are corrupt, and therefore out of their mouths comes all kinds of evil. The evil that comes out of their mouth is turned into a plague, as it affects and touches and influences the world upon which they come. The words that come out of mouths can be the most harmful weapons that you and I ever encounter. When we were children and other children bullied or made fun of us on the playground, we would say, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But we have grown up to understand that name-calling can do more lasting damage than any stick or stone. These evil men come out spewing fire and breathing smoke; they have got the worst smelling breath ever encountered! It stinks like rotten eggs as they spew out their sulfurous horror.

Now remember that the altar has called all this forth. Why? So that men, in their hurt, in their despair, in their agony, might find solace with the Lord. Just as Jesus calls Himself the first

and the last, the beginning and the end, so these warriors have death first and last, beginning and end. The horses have mouths like lions to devour and tails like snakes to torment. The very beginning of them and the end of them is all about death, just as the beginning and the end of Jesus is all about life. Let me refer you to one more Scripture:

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

*You are just in these judgments,
You who are and who were, the Holy One,
because You have so judged;
for they have shed the blood of Your saints
and prophets,
and You have given them blood to drink as they deserve.*

*And I heard the altar respond: "Yes, Lord God Almighty,
true and just are Your judgments" (Revelation 16:4-7).*

Isaiah had said, "When Your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness" (Isa. 26:9)—but sometimes not as swiftly as they should. Such is the case here. They continued to be unrepentant of their wicked deeds and demon worship (see Rev. 9:20-21).

Brothers and sisters, we must be convinced that true and just are His judgments. When God came down to destroy the cities of the plain, when He came down to cast burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah, when He came to turn them into an unquenchable fiery furnace, Abram stood before Him and said, "But what if there are some righteous?" God replied, "If there are a few righteous I will spare the city." Here, of course, was the

tragedy: none were righteous. But Abraham took his unwavering faith stance on this truth: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:23-25). This is our confidence. This is our security. Whatever God unleashes, the Judge of all the earth will always do right.

The prophet Malachi was a "preparer of the way." He was the man who descends the chapter on Old Covenant revelation. One of the great promises he makes is that:

"See, I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 3:1).

The word messenger is exactly the same word as angel. That is what an angel is: he is a messenger from God. Our subject for this chapter is "the angel of the Covenant" or "the messenger of the Covenant," the one who comes to reveal the purposes of God in all their fullness.