



Conversation with God – Part 12
Revelation 5:8
GCSP – 02/21/2009

Throughout the pages of Scripture we have spectacular scenes that I would love to have been present for. Imagine being an eyewitness to the creation account in Genesis, or being with Noah on the ark. Imagine being with Moses and Aaron as each of the miraculous plagues took place on the land of Egypt or as the Red Sea parted and revealed dry ground.

I would like to have been present when the walls of the great city of Jericho fell straight down into the ground, or to have been with Elijah as he single-handedly stood against all the prophets of Baal and fire from heaven came down and consumed the water-soaked sacrifice. I would have like to have seen the mountainside filled with angels and chariots of fire as God opened the eyes of Elisha's servant.

What a privilege it must have been to witness the birth of Christ, or to have been present during His ministry on earth and seen blind eyes receiving their sight, deaf ears being able to hear again, leprous skin becoming smooth like a baby's, crippled men walking, and the dead sitting up and talking. Or to have seen a multitude of people fed with a few biscuits and small fish, or to have been on the boat as Jesus instantly calmed the raging sea.

I would have like to have been present when Jesus entered the Temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers and sellers of sacrificial animals, or even to be able to sit at His feet while He taught.

I'm not sure if I would have liked to have been present during the crucifixion but I definitely would like to have been at the empty tomb three days later. I would have like to have been present in the room on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit blew through the room and lighted on each of the disciples like tongues of fire.

And there are obviously many other scenes of Scripture that would thrill my soul and yours if we were able to place ourselves there.

Turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of **Revelation**.

Revelation 4-5

Let's pray.

Our focus will simply be on **5:8**, but I wanted you to picture the entire scene in your mind so you could grasp the weightiness of what it says: "**When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.**"

While these two chapters depict a specific future worship service in heaven, it also represents a general idea of what the worship is like continually in heaven. Apart from

the book with seven seals being presented to Jesus for Him to open, there is every indication that this worship is ongoing in heaven even now.

Picture the awesome scene in your mind: The throne of God in all of its glory is the centerpiece. The splendor and majesty is beyond anything you have ever seen. Pure light shines through the precious stones creating an atmosphere like no other. An emerald rainbow arches over the throne room casting down the brilliance of its light. Twenty-four other thrones surround the throne of God. In each throne sits elders dressed in brilliant white robes and crowned with golden crowns.

Suddenly the entire magnificent throne room is lit up with blinding flashes of lightning and the deafening peals of thunder. Seven burning lamps, representing the seven Spirits of God, are before the throne on a crystal sea of glass.

Four magnificent and indescribable creatures surround the throne. Each creature had eyes everywhere on the front and the back of their frames. One was like a lion, one was like a calf, one had a face like a man, and the other was flying like an eagle. They all had six wings which were also full of eyes. Day and night these awesome creatures never cease to praise the Lord as they give glory and honor and thanks to the One who sits on the throne continually.

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was, and who is and who is to come" (*Congregation sing - "Holy, Holy, Holy"*).

Next the twenty-four elders rise from their thrones and bow down before the Lord. They remove the crowns from their heads and cast them at the feet of the Lord and worship:

"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created" (*Congregation sing - "Thou Art Worthy"*).

In this specific scene God is holding a book that is sealed seven times. It is a book that only a perfect man is worthy to open. That perfect man is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, and the Sacrifice Lamb that was slain for the sins of the world; that man is the Lord Jesus Christ in all of His brilliance and splendor and majesty and glory.

"When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."

The myriads and myriads of angels now join in as they cry out:

"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

Then the entire crowd, far too numerous to count, of elders, creatures, angels and saints join in the chorus with loud voices to shout:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (*Connie sing – "Worthy is the Lamb"*).

And the praise and worship continues as all join together again to proclaim:

"To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever" (*Congregation sings – "To Him Who Sits on the Throne"*).

What an awesome and glorious scene of worship in heaven. It is a scene that we have a part in, for the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders present our prayers to the Lord Jesus Christ in golden bowls of incense. We are part of the ongoing worship in heaven right now when we pray.

Our prayers are sweet incense in the nostrils of God. These prayers are sweet incense to God regardless of how eloquent or refined they may be. For we are sinners saved by grace and no prayer we offer is ever completely free from our human frailties and sinful hearts. But our prayers are first presented to the blameless, sinless, spotless Lamb of God who stands ready to intercede on our behalf. And through our Lord Jesus Christ our prayers are made perfect and sweet before God.

The early church father, Ambrose, uses the following illustration to help us envision the work of Jesus Christ in our prayers. Our prayers are like little children who run through the fields picking flowers to please their mother and father. The children are ignorant as to what they pluck from the ground and along with fragrant flowers they also pluck weeds and other plants that are actually noxious. The children bring the strange mixture and put them into their mother's hands. The mother then separates out the weeds and the noxious plants, replacing them with flowers that are even more fragrant than the children found before presenting the bouquet to the father.

Beloved, if you could see your prayers after Jesus has amended them, they would hardly be recognizable to you. Jesus purifies our prayers. Jesus makes them beautiful and fragrant. After you pray your prayers, the Lord re-prays them to the Father. He adds what needs to be added and He subtracts what needs to be subtracted.

So let me ask you a question: Should you ever be proud of how you have prayed? It is great to have that communion with the Lord but understand that apart from Jesus Christ we cannot approach God. Apart from the blood of Jesus, God could not and would not hear our prayers for we are still weighed down by our sinful nature. No matter how holy you may be at any given moment and no matter how eloquent and pleasant the words of your prayer may be it is nothing until Jesus intercedes and takes His version of our prayer to God the Father. Any pride you take in your prayers is an abomination for it does not become a sweet smelling incense until the Lord Jesus has His way with it.

Notice these acceptable, sweet smelling intercessions are **"the prayers of the saints."** It is not the prayers of the pastors, or elders, or deacons, or other leaders of the church, but the prayers of the saints. One of the reasons we gather together in a circle for

public prayer before we begin our service is because all members of the church are to have opportunity to pray; the prayers of the saints are what is gathered in the golden bowls and presented to the Lamb of God, not just the prayers of the leaders. You don't have to fear that your words may not be as smooth as someone else's. You should never be embarrassed that you may not use the right words. In the Lord's eyes your prayers are not compared to any other prayers but are combined together in a divine mixture that becomes a sweet aroma to God.

If God would be adored by glittering colors, the greatest of artists cannot capture the brilliance of creation; the blues of the sky and seas, the greens of the forest and fields, the array of colors in the rainbow and sunrises and sunsets. If God would be adored by the light, we cannot replicate the sun and stars. If God would be adored by music, the symphonies of the birds and the sound that resonates in the thunder and in the rest of God's creation cannot be duplicated. Instead God chooses to be adored by the prayers of the saints – by your prayers.

And just so there is absolutely no confusion, the saints are those whom the Lord has made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit, whose nature has been purified, whom He has washed in the precious blood of Jesus and so sanctified unto Himself, whom He has filled with the Holy Spirit and set apart for worship. These are the ones who love Him, praise Him, bow down before Him, and lift their whole souls and entire beings up to Him. Their thoughts, desires, longings, confessions, pleadings, and praises are sweet to God; this is music to His ears, perfume to His heart, delight to His mind, and pleasant to His spirit. These are the saints and it is the prayers of the saints that become the sweet aroma to God.

This does not mean that we can live our lives in a manner that is not pleasing to the Lord and still expect our prayers to be accepted and transformed into sweet incense. You cannot speak the words, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name" when nothing in your life hallows His name. You can't pray, "Thy will be done" when you constantly fight against His will in your own life. Such prayers are an insult to God when your life is being lived contrary to His Word. The golden bowls are filled with the prayers of the saints, not the prayers of the disobedient and rebellious.

In **Exodus 37:29** and other passages, there is an exact recipe and formula for the making of incense. Specific ingredients were commanded and these ingredients were mixed in exacting proportions before it could be offered by the priests. In the Old Covenant only the priest were allowed to approach God, and it was their responsibility to ensure the incense was properly prepared.

In the New Covenant under which all Christians live today, thanks to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are all priests (**1 Peter 2:9**, **Revelation 5:10**). And even though our ultimate high priest is responsible to do the final mixture of the incense of our prayers, and even though the Lord will accept any prayer from a sincere heart, we still must take care to use the proper ingredients.

Obviously, as we have already studied in this series, there must be a generous portion of faith mixed in. We have read on several occasions the passage in **Hebrews 11:6** which states, "**without faith it is impossible to please Him.**" **James 5:15** tells us

"the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick." James 1:6 says we **"must ask in faith without any doubting"** when we pray. Jesus says in Mark 11:24, **"All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted unto you."** And I could obviously keep reciting verse after verse which teaches this same aspect of our prayer life.

When I hear someone pray, I can't tell if they are praying in faith or not, but God knows if it is present or absent, and thus whether the prayer will be accepted or rejected. Be sure to add a heaping dose of faith to your mixture.

Love must also be an ingredient of your prayers. If your heart is cold toward God instead of hot with love your mixture will be one of those frozen supplications we have already talked about.

Humility is also an important ingredient. Luke 18:13 teaches us this very vividly in the account of the tax collector and the Pharisee. Much humility should be added to our mixture.

There are other ingredients such as repentance and confession, praise and worship, thanksgiving and contentment, among others; but just as the mixture for the Tabernacle and the Temple were combined **"according to the art of the apothecary"** (Exodus 37:29 – KJV), let us thank God that He has given us His Holy Spirit as our divine apothecary to bring all these ingredients to our memory as we come before Him in prayer.

God looks on the heart and He will honor the prayer of the pure in heart because the Holy Spirit and Jesus will add the necessary ingredients to the prayers of the saints when the heart is pure.

We must also remember that incense burns. The incense in itself was not what caused a sweet aroma to rise, but only after it was set ablaze. The passion and earnestness of our prayers is what sets our prayers on fire. And by passion and earnestness I am not talking about how loud or animated you get, but in the level of desire you have to see your prayers reach the ears of God and for those prayers to be answered swiftly. Many have the ability to pray with eloquence but the living fire has never touched them; the incense remains in the censor of no use because the smoke and the fragrance are still trapped inside for a lack of fire.

Others pray with broken words, disjointed sentences, incomplete thoughts, in hushed tones and at times barely audible for those around to hear, but the man or woman who is offering the prayer is full of holy fire, and the smoke of the incense rises to the nostrils of God.

Why are the prayers of the saints so sweet to God? - Partly because they are the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Jesus the Son. The Spirit of God inspires us as we sincerely pray, and because we are the Body of Christ, Jesus pleads with us when we sincerely pray. When we pray and remind God of His promises or recount what His Son accomplished for us, He never grows weary of it. We can ring that bell as long and as

often as we want. Everything about Christ and about the Scripture is sweet to God, so the prayers that are full of Christ and full of His Word will also be sweet to Him.

The prayers of the saints are also sweet to God because they honor Him; first by acknowledging His existence. The verse in Hebrews I referred to earlier tells us our faith must begin with believing that God is. By praying to God we acknowledge that He is indeed God. Secondly, our prayers glory in God and His attributes. Asking for blessing acknowledges God's power to supply that blessing. Asking for forgiveness acknowledges His mercy to extend forgiveness. Asking Him to honor His promises acknowledges His faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. The different aspects of our prayers acknowledge the different aspects of His character, and thus honors Him.

Perhaps the best reason that the prayers of the saints are sweet to God is simply that He loves to hear us talk to Him. Now that the majority of those here tonight have children that are grown and out of the house, how sweet is it when your children initiate contact with you just to talk? How much is your heart thrilled when they desire to talk to you? It's the same with God the Father. He longs for those sweet conversations that you initiate.

The prayers of a saint are sweet, but the prayers of the saints are sweeter. We talked about this in another sermon, but our text reinforces the power of united prayer. No two children of God pray exactly alike. None of us recall all that needs to be offered up to the Lord. But when we join together in prayer, your prayer might spark a need in my heart, and my prayer might spark a need in someone else's heart, and on it goes. Together we can reach God with the united concerns of the Body; another reason we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

We also learn from each other as we pray together. We must be careful not to turn our opportunity to pray in public as a platform to preach, for our prayers are to God not man, but the Scriptures we use and the passion we display can encourage and teach others who hear about some aspects of prayer they may not have understood in the classroom so to speak.

The prayers of the saints incite worship. After the golden bowls of prayers are offered spontaneous singing and worship breaks out in all of heaven.

Get the scene back in your mind; the colors, the smells, the sounds, and the magnitude of a crowd so huge and so varied in appearance. See in your mind's eye people from every tribe, every nation, every tongue, every people; see angels in all of their glory; picture the Apostles, the prophets, the patriarchs, the saints of old, your loved ones and friends; imagine the awesomeness of the four living creatures that are indescribable. Now imagine that they are all poised to burst out in praise and worship but the key to opening the floodgates is your prayers.

Praise and worship goes on continually before the throne, but this scene in heaven implies that the crescendos of praise come after the prayers of the saints are presented.

Let's pray.