



"We must not conceive of prayer as overcoming God's reluctance but as laying hold of his highest willingness."

—Richard Trench

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## Silence in Heaven (Part One)

As Revelation 5 opens, the apostle John sees a scroll, sealed with seven seals, in the right hand of [God](#). The only One [worthy to open the seals](#) is the Lamb of God, and He begins to do so, as Revelation 6 chronicles.

The seventh of these seals contains seven tremendous plagues, each preceded by an angel sounding a trumpet. But when the seventh seal is first opened—before the first angel sounds—there is a singular event:

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. ([Revelation 8:1-6](#))

As verse 1 shows, when the seventh seal is opened, silence descends on heaven "for about half an hour." The Greek word translated "silence," *sige* (*Strong's* #4602) is used in only one other place, [Acts 21:40](#), providing a parallel description: "Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a *great silence*, he spoke to them." The image is of silence in anticipation of an event, or even more specifically, it implies focused attention while waiting for something to begin.

In Paul's case, the enormous crowd quiets down to hear what he is about to say. Earlier, Luke writes that "all the city [of Jerusalem] was disturbed" (verse 30), and that there was a "multitude," a "mob," stirred up against Paul (verses 35-36). Crowds are typically noisy. Luke describes a great mass of people gathered, all focused on hearing one man, all waiting silently in anticipation. It is no wonder that the silence is described as "great"! Being so contrary to the normal course of affairs, that silence must have been remarkable.

What happened with Paul, though similar, is undoubtedly a mere hint of what happens in heaven when the seventh seal is opened. We can only imagine what the level of activity surrounding God and His throne must normally be like. Glimpses of heavenly activity appear in various passages, and in every case something is going on or some significant sound can be heard—except here. Whenever God speaks, His voice is described as being like a trumpet, like thunder, or like the sound of many waters. We know that there are angelic messengers and servants being sent here and there and reporting back.

[Revelation 4:6-8](#) describes four living creatures who "do not rest day or night, saying: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!'" [Isaiah 6:1-3](#) contains a similar scene involving seraphim. Continual praise is given to the Most High God and to the Creator. Untold voices sing, and musical instruments are played with skill far beyond man's.

We cannot comprehend the reality of all these things, but we can reasonably assume that the locus of all power and authority in the vast universe contains a high level of activity and sound.

Yet, when the seventh seal is opened, for the space of half an hour, heaven is silent. The Father and the Son do not speak. The four living creatures stop their praise. The angelic messengers hold their [peace](#). The heavenly choir, with its vast multitude of pure, angelic voices, falls quiet. All activity in heaven appears to stop as the heavenly realm turns its attention to what comes next, pausing in silent anticipation.

In advance of the seven angels sounding their trumpets, [Revelation 8:3-5](#) describes an angel, armed with a golden censer, who offers a large amount of incense along with the prayers of the saints. This combination is surely a pleasing aroma to God, as the angel would not otherwise offer it before Him. Even though the aroma is pleasing and perhaps soothing, what happens next is anything but peaceful.

Before continuing with the sequence of events, though, we can glean a good object lesson here. Verse 3 mentions the prayers of *all* the saints, indicating both those who were alive at the time as well as the previous prayers of the saints who had died and were awaiting the resurrection. The prayers of the saints are first mentioned in chapter 5, when the Lamb of God takes the scroll from the Father to begin opening the seven seals ([Revelation 5:1-8](#)). What is the connection?

The saints' prayers are initially mentioned when the Lamb takes the scroll, and then He opens each of the seals at the appropriate time. When He opens the seventh seal, the deafening silence falls, and their prayers are brought up again as God begins to act. We can draw from this that, when we pray to God, it will sometimes seem as if things become even worse (which is analogous to the devastation that results from the opening of the seals). It may even seem as if the only response we are receiving from God is silence.

We are not alone in this. In at least half a dozen psalms, the psalmist beseeches God not to be silent. He is asking for God to send forth His Word to set things straight, to judge his enemies, or to intervene in some other way. This does not mean that complete silence in heaven as described in

[Revelation 8:1](#) is a common thing—it actually seems to be a singular, momentous event. Even so, we have each felt at some point as if God were silent, that He has not heard our cry, that perhaps He does not care, and maybe He has abandoned us.

Nevertheless, this section of Scripture reminds us that, although God may seem to be silent, He is far more aware of what we are praying about than we are! If our prayer is in accord with His will, He will respond in a perfect way. That perfect way includes perfect timing, which, to us, often seems incredibly inconvenient, as we want things to happen *now*! This discord results because we do not yet fully trust Him to work things out and because we are not yet in full alignment with Him.

We have probably each experienced a time when we finally let go of control and surrendered a matter completely to God, *then* the silence ended and things began happening. So, when we pray about something significant, it should not surprise us if there is a pause—seeming silence—before there is a response from God.

In Part Two, we will return to the flow of events in Revelation 8 to see their significance to us as the end of the age draws near.

- David C. Grabbe

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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