

Revelation 5

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[0 : 00] You can't see the wood for the trees is a fairly well-known expression that can flag up a danger present when we read and try to understand parts of the Bible.

And it's certainly a danger present in the reading and interpreting of the book of Revelation. We can be so intrigued by fascinating and vivid details that we miss the big picture, the big truths that a given passage, indeed the whole book, is communicating.

And in our treatment of Revelation on Sunday mornings over these past few weeks and as we continue, we've been trying to see the big picture and not fall into the trap of failing to see the wood for the trees.

But you know, sometimes you don't see the tree for the wood. Revelation is, if you wish, a big wood or forest.

But it's also populated by many beautiful trees that on occasion it's good to just pause and dwell on and admire and learn from a tree in the midst of this great forest.

[1 : 22] And one of those trees, to use the expression, is found here in chapter 5. And I'm referring very specifically to what is said about these golden bowls full of incense being carried before the throne by the elders.

Then in verse 8 of chapter 5, we were thinking about the chapter this morning, but now we focus in on this one detail, if you wish, of the description of the vision that John saw and shared with us.

And when he had taken it, when the Lion of the House of Judah, when the Lamb who had been slain took the scroll, he was found worthy to take the scroll.

Well, when he took the scroll, to begin to open the scroll, we see how heaven erupts in praise. And we're told that the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb.

And then we read, each one had a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And it's this detail that I want us to just spend a little time reflecting on.

[2 : 29] These golden bowls full of incense held by the elders before the throne of God in heaven.

So this evening, we're going to zoom in rather than zoom out as we dwell on this intriguing picture and draw from it truths concerning prayer and the one to whom we pray.

Maybe we could think of this verse and the picture that is painted in this verse as a kind of postcard from heaven. We can maybe try and visualize the picture that's being painted there.

You know, with the material that we're given, you can maybe try and visualize there in the center of heaven, we have this throne upon which God is seated. And around the throne, we have the four living creatures and these 24 elders who we've previously identified as representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles, that is, the people of God throughout time.

And these 24 elders that they're carrying, in one hand a harp, that they might bring praise to the one seated on the throne. But in their other hand, they are holding these golden bowls.

[3 : 42] So perhaps you can try and just picture that scene in your mind's eye. What is this all about? In particular, these golden bowls full of incense.

Well, we don't need to speculate as to what these golden bowls full of incense represent. We don't need to hazard a best guess because we're told what they represent very explicitly in the verse.

They were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. It's as clear as you could possibly wish. These golden bowls full of incense are, they represent the prayers of God's people.

So what does this picture teach us about prayer? I think we can draw out some of the lessons by trying to answer questions that we can pose to the text.

And let's just pose a few questions to the text and see what answers we can take from the text and in that way learn for our instruction.

[4 : 45] First of all, whose prayers are in these golden bowls that the elders are carrying before the throne? Well, again, the verse tells us very clearly the prayers of God's people, the prayers of God's holy ones, or the prayers of God's saints.

And there very clearly is stated that these are the prayers of every believer, of every saint. Every son and daughter of God is included in this explanation.

These are not the prayers of some elite category of believer. They're not the prayers of the patriarchs. They're not the prayers of the apostles. They are the prayers of God's people, of every single believer throughout time and across space.

These are the prayers that are found in these golden bowls. These are who these prayers belong to. And obviously from that you can draw out an important and encouraging truth, that your prayers find their place in these golden bowls.

The prayers of every believer over time across space are to be found in the golden bowls. The prayers of believers from, to use the very language of what follows, of believers from every tribe, language, people, and nation are present in the golden bowls.

[6 : 12] Prayers in English and Spanish and in Gaelic and Swahili and Chinese and Hindi and we could go on. They're all there. They all make their way into these golden bowls.

They all are part of this incense that fills the golden bowls. And so even at that very simple level, that simple truth that we draw from what is stated here, I would urge you to be encouraged.

Your prayers are in the golden bowls. Your prayers are even now filling the golden bowls. You know, when we prayed a few moments ago for Ruth and Esther, where do these prayers go?

Well, they've gone into the golden bowls. They're there. They make up this incense before the throne of God. When we prayed about the mission outreach in London in the summer, well, that prayer too made its way into the golden bowls.

The prayers that you pray day by day, those fleeting prayers, those sometimes doubting prayers, those prayers make their way and take their place in the golden bowls because these prayers belong, as we are told, to God's people.

[7 : 26] They are the prayers of God's people. So, just developing that a little bit, we pose another question. And having identified whose prayers are in the golden bowls, we can ask a question that we've kind of touched on already, but just deal with it a little bit more explicitly.

And that is, what prayers are in the golden bowls? Might it be that these bowls, after all, they're very special bowls. They're held by the 24 elders. They're golden bowls.

They're there in the heart of heaven before the throne. I wonder, perhaps these bowls are filled by certain kinds of prayers. Maybe only gold standard prayers find their way into the golden bowls.

You know, maybe a little bit further from the throne, there's silver bowls and bronze bowls and, you know, just the communal prayers that we pray. They don't quite make it to the gold bowls. What kind of prayers or what prayers are in the golden bowls?

Well, we can certainly identify how in the book of Revelation we find prayers of God's people that are recorded for us. And these prayers we can, with complete confidence, assert and conclude that they find their way into these golden bowls.

[8 : 43] Let's just turn to the following chapter in chapter 6 of Revelation, verses 9 and 10. What do we read? 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.

So here are saints who had died because of their loyalty to Jesus. And then we read, 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?

And so here the persecuted people of God cry out to God for vindication, for justice, that righteousness would prevail. They pray to God. They cry out to God.

And undoubtedly those prayers find their way into these golden bowls. They make up this incense before the very presence of God.

And we could go on and identify other prayers that are recorded here in Revelation. But I think the point we want to make, and I hope it's clear and obvious to us, that it's not just the special prayers, whatever we might deem to be special prayers, or whatever we might deem to be or might be considered or categorized as powerful prayers or anointed prayers.

[9 : 59] Every prayer that is the outpouring of a believer's heart and that is sincerely offered to God for the glory of God and in the name of Jesus is to be found in the golden bowls.

To put it very simply, prayer, your prayer, reaches heaven. Your prayers reach heaven. Think of the picture of a postcard.

I suggested you can maybe visualize this verse as a postcard. From heaven. You know, it's often suggested that on these holiday postcards, the message that you have is, wish you were here.

The implication being that it would be nice if you were there, but of course you're not. Well, in this case, the wonderful truth is that as we pray, we are there. As we pray, we enter into heaven and into the very presence of God in a very real way and in a very real sense.

And maybe we just need to pause and reflect on the wonder and the privilege of this reality and this access that we have to God Himself. And maybe we can reflect on how marvelous and wonderful it is by comparing it to how different it is for us down here when we seek to have access.

[11 : 17] Sometimes we need to communicate with somebody in authority for some matter that needs to be attended to. Or we need to find somebody who is able to heed us and give us help or direction or advice.

And how difficult it can be to secure that access. Let me just give you a very real example that we're living with at the moment. Some of you will know that our youngest son, Joseph, is hoping to study in the States, to go to a college in the States.

And as part of that, he needs to get his U.S. visa. And so we had applied for the visa and we had secured a date for an interview where he would hopefully be granted the visa.

But circumstances changed. And that meant that the original application was no longer valid and we needed to make a new application. Well, so far, so good.

But then the question was, well, could we still use the original interview date? We've got an interview date and we were thinking, well, could he just go and use the date that he's already separated?

[12 : 23] You say, well, that's not so difficult. Just ask. Oh, yeah, right. Who do you ask? You can't phone anybody at the U.S. Consulate. I would be happy to speak with the lowest official, but no, there is no number that you can call.

They simply don't contemplate anybody actually making an inquiry. If you can't get the answer on the website, then tough. And they do give the opportunity to write a query on the website.

And they say, and it's rather sort of, it doesn't inspire you with confidence. It says, if your question is deemed to be one that is answered on the website, you will not receive a reply.

Well, it would seem that my query, they claim, is answered on the website because days have passed and I have not received a reply and I'm not holding my breath. The point I'm making is that it can be very difficult to get access to somebody you need to speak to, to somebody in authority, even in a rather, you know, you might say quite a modest way.

It's difficult. And we know how in our own society there's scandals that have erupted over these past few years of people buying access, you know, to politicians and to decision makers, cash for questions.

[13 : 33] You know, we know about how access sometimes is granted in exchange for. That's the world we live in. It's difficult sometimes to gain access.

But how different with prayer for God's people. As we pray, as you pray, immediately and intimately, you find yourself in the very presence of God and your prayers fill those golden bowls of incense.

Prayer reaches heaven. This picture portrays vividly that glorious and wonderful truth. But to state that that is so, and we are persuaded that it is so, does rather beg another question.

And that is this question. How do prayers in the golden bowls reach God on His throne? Or rather, how do our prayers make their way to heaven and into the golden bowls?

We believe that they do, but how? So, you know, if we're honest, I think we would acknowledge that sometimes as Christians, we wonder if our prayers do reach beyond the ceiling. They don't seem to go beyond the ceiling.

[14 : 50] They don't seem to make it even to the stratosphere, never mind making it all the way to heaven. And we wonder, we doubt. Perhaps others mock the very idea that our incoherent mumbles can possibly reach the throne room of God.

And we believe they do, but how? I think there's an answer to that question, or at least we're pointed in the direction of an answer to that question by the very imagery that is employed in this picture.

The picture of the incense is helpful and revealing. We read and we sang from Psalm 141, and there the psalmist uses the imagery of incense to represent his prayers to God.

And he makes explicit reference to the evening sacrifice, that his prayers would be like the incense at the evening sacrifice. And we can maybe just explore that a little bit to draw out the significance of this incense that represents the prayers of the saints.

In the book of Exodus, we find God's instructions for temple worship. And the instructions are many and complex.

[16 : 04] But among them, there are instructions concerning the morning and evening sacrifice, that the evening sacrifice referenced there in Psalm 141.

Every day, once in the morning and once in the evening, the priest would bring a year-old lamb to be sacrificed as a burnt offering in the temple.

And in Exodus chapter 29 and in verse 28, we discover that the burning of this morning and evening sacrifice served as a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the Lord by fire.

But where does the incense fit in to these instructions? Well, the incense was offered every morning and every evening in parallel to the burning of the lamb, the presenting of this burnt offering.

And the incense represented what happened when the smoke of the sacrifice reached the throne room of God. And it represented that the smoke was to God pleasant and accepted.

[17 : 12] It was a sweet-smelling savor. Indeed, the sacrifice itself was a pleasant aroma. But the incense, in a symbolic way, confirmed and represented how pleasant this was to God.

The incense vividly and beautifully communicated that the sacrifices offered reached the Lord and were favorably received. Now, we know that these sacrifices, along with all the other sacrifices, pointed forward to another sacrifice.

They were a shadow of a greater reality. They pointed to Jesus, to the Lamb once slain, to use the language of Revelation 5. The incense pointed forward to the delight of the Father in the sacrifice of His Son.

Now, in the Old Testament, the prayers of God's people for forgiveness and fellowship could only reach heaven when accompanied by a sacrifice. The prayers were carried to heaven by the smoke of the sacrifice represented by the incense offered.

But then, in the fullness of time, we know that Jesus came, our ultimate and final sacrifice for sin, and He offered Himself up once and for all for the sins of God's people, for our sins.

[18 : 34] And, of course, you remember what happened in the temple when Jesus died on the cross. The curtain that guarded the Holy of Holies from the intrusion of sinners was rent in two from top to bottom.

Heaven's gates were open wide, and access was secured for God's people on the grounds of the sacrifice offered by Jesus on Calvary.

And this beautiful picture of the gates of heaven being thrown open by the sacrifice of Jesus is a vivid and a marvelous one. I don't know if you're familiar with the hymn penned by Don Francisco.

It goes back a few decades. You maybe need to be kind of my vintage to be familiar with it. It ends with a stirring crescendo. He's alive.

Now, I'm going to make a suggestion for you for this evening when you get home that I couldn't imagine that I would ever make from the pulpit, but I'm going to do it. I want you to Google Dolly Parton's version of that song.

[19 : 37] Now, you never thought you'd hear that from the pulpit in Bonacord, but trust me, Google Dolly Parton's singing He's Alive. And I would vouch that you would be thrilled to hear the crescendo of that hymn when it's sung and the choir joins in at the end.

The hymn basically is a story that's told about Peter following the crucifixion of Jesus. And that's the way in which Don Francisco tends to compose his hymns. There's stories that he tells.

But on this occasion, when he comes to the end of the story, there's this stirring crescendo. He's alive. He's alive. And I'm forgiven. Heaven gates are open wide. And of course, that's the wonderful reality that when Jesus offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin, heaven's gates were open wide.

He was that ultimate incense that reached into heaven and pleased the Father. And so the gates of heaven opened for all who are in him. Today, when we pray, we rest on the merits of the sacrifice of Jesus.

We know our prayers reach the throne room of God. They reach the golden bowls and they fill the golden bowls because Jesus, the one slain, is there. And we pray in his name and resting in the merits of his sacrifice for us.

[21 : 02] Let me put it this way or another way. Can you imagine Jesus approaching his Father in heaven? The lion of the tribe of Judah, the lamb once slain, he's there in the center of the throne and he approaches his Father who's seated on the throne.

Can you imagine his Father denying Jesus an audience? Can you imagine the Father saying to Jesus, not now, my son, not now, come back later.

I have other matters to attend to, not now. We say, well, that's inconceivable. It's inconceivable that the Father would ever treat his son in that way. Well, be assured that when we united to Jesus and trusting in Jesus, when we pray in his name, our access to God is as certain and secure.

You see, when the Father sees you and hears you, he sees and hears his dearly beloved. And when you pray, your prayers are like that, that incense that reminds the Father of his son and of his son's sacrifice for you.

And so you are welcomed and embraced in your prayers. Reach the golden bowls before the throne of God. Let's just ask another couple of questions to kind of draw things to a close.

[22 : 21] How does God view your prayers, our prayers, there in the golden bowls? Well, from the imagery employed, let me suggest a couple of things. Picking up again on the imagery of the incense, we can say this, that your prayers, our prayers, are precious to God.

They're precious to God. They are, after all, housed in golden bowls. And the golden bowls speak of how precious are the contents of those golden bowls.

You don't put anything into a golden bowl. You only put into a golden bowl that which is precious, that which corresponds to such a valuable receptacle.

And so the golden bowls speak of how precious the people of God's prayers are to God. The poorest believer possesses this precious resource.

When I was thinking about this, the image that came to my mind was a believer back in Peru, in Moyabamba, where we used to live. Her name is Bremilda. She'll be a lady in her, I guess, in her 70s, maybe into her 80s now.

[23 : 28] And she's really as poor as you can get. She is very poor. She's illiterate. She can't read. She can't write. She's never been to school. She knows very little about the world outwith her immediate surroundings.

If anybody could be identified as being the poorest of the poor, then it's this woman. But this woman is a woman of prayer. And when she prays, she has access to that which is so precious.

And her prayers, I'm sure, in the economy of God are of as much value, perhaps of greater value, than our many efforts to serve God in our employing that the gifts that we imagine that we have or indeed that we do have.

The prayers of God's people are precious to God. They are housed in these golden bowls. But as well as being precious to Him, they are pleasant to Him. That's the whole idea of incense.

It's a sweet-smelling aroma that reaches heaven. God never tires of your prayers. I wonder if you think sometimes God just tires of my prayers. God must be bored of my constant praying, maybe for the same thing, and we are on and on and on, and we wonder, does God get tired of our prayers?

[24 : 47] When we pray in the name of Jesus and to the glory of God, our prayers are always pleasant to Him, and He delights to hear and to answer them. And He does answer them.

The psalmist affirms that confidence when he uses this very image, this picture of incense rising to heaven received and answered by God.

Let me just ask one final question that in a way brings this discussion or this consideration of prayer as we draw out truths from it from this verse, brings it into the bigger picture, the bigger context.

And the question is this, what purpose do the prayers of God's people in the golden bowls serve? So we believe that they reach heaven. They are the prayers of all of God's people.

Every prayer reaches heaven. God is pleased as He receives these prayers. But what purpose do they serve? And as I say, here I want to acknowledge the big picture and try to see how the prayers of God's people fit into that big picture.

[25 : 53] This morning we were talking about the scroll that is spoken of at the beginning of the chapter. The scroll that was resting on the right hand of God, sealed with the seven seals. And we suggested that the scroll contains the purposes and grand plan of God for the history of the world and the history of God's people.

And the plan is there. The plan already exists. The plan has already been determined in eternity. The plan is a definitive plan. It's an immutable, unchangeable plan.

It already exists. And so we kind of think, well, why bother praying? If the plan is already in existence, if it's all already been determined by God, why pray?

What possible purpose could our prayers serve other than some exercise in self-help and making us feel a little bit better when we're a bit down? Well, the answer is simply this, that the plan contemplates your prayers.

Your prayers are part of the plan. There in the scroll, this plan of God that outlines His purposes for the universe and for His church. Within that plan is included, God included your prayer, these prayers that reach into heaven.

[27 : 06] And as Joseph was saying in his message to us, these prayers that change things in the purposes of God and in the sovereignty of God, He has determined that our prayer changes things.

And we believe that they do because they are within that big picture, within that big and perfect plan of God.

And so from this picture, as we've zoomed in, on one detail really of the scene in heaven, we've tried to draw out some truths concerning prayer.

And we close by simply reminding ourselves of this language that is employed by John in describing what he witnesses in that vision.

And when He had taken it, when the Lamb that was slain had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a heart, and they were holding golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

[28 : 09] Prayer reaches heaven. Your prayers reach heaven. So pray on and fill those golden bowls. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for the many privileges that we enjoy as sons and daughters of God. And we thank You for this great privilege of access into the very presence of God as we pray.

And we thank You that You are the God who is the hearer and answerer of prayer. We acknowledge the way that has been opened up for us. We delight in the work of Jesus who has opened the gates of heaven for sinners such as we are.

We thank You for the curtain that has been rentened to. We thank You for the access that has been provided for us in and through Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We thank You that His sacrifice was the most pleasant aroma in the courts of heaven. And as we pray, so we are united to and rest on that pleasing sacrifice of our Savior and great High Priest.

[29 : 24] And it is in His name that we pray. Amen.