

Alfred is a faithful worker. He gets up every morning at 5 to get to his janitorial job at the University for 6 AM. He earnestly carries out his duties thankful for any work. He had been in a refugee camp in his home country for 3 years because of civil war. Yet Alfred struggles with his supervisor John. He is a long time caretaker who does not like immigrants. He sees Alfred as another reason why "this country is in such a mess," according to John. Alfred suffers continual insults and put downs from John especially when they work together. Yet Alfred is too scared to speak up because he needs this job. Must Alfred just endure this injustice?

Miriam is a single Mom in her mid 50's. She lost her son in a tragic accident 2 years previously. He was out driving when a drunk driver broadsided his car. Miriam has just sat through the preliminary court hearing for the driver. He and his family come from Edmonton's upper class. They have one of the best lawyers in the city. He has already raised several points of objection to the crown's procedure and case. Miriam fears that the driver who killed her son will get off without any real consequences. Besides nothing can bring her son back. What hope does Miriam have for real justice to be served?

Raymond served in the military for 15 years doing two tours of Afghanistan. He was involved in a couple of fire fights. People got killed and he saw some horrible things there. Raymond came back changed. He couldn't deal very well with ordinary stress of life. He snapped at his kids and he couldn't keep focused at his job. So he went on disability and sought counseling. But now he's received a letter from some government department saying he is no longer eligible for certain benefits. Raymond can barely cope with the ordinary life. Will he get justice through this?

Mary is a faithful wife and mother. She and her husband seem to have a good marriage that cares well for their three children. But behind the scene's Mary's husband verbally and emotionally abuses her. Mary can't count the number of times she's had her soul pierced with some cutting remark. It's almost like she's become numb to it all. And she's finding that she's less willing to keep up the façade or the act. She notices anger bubbling to the surface more and more. Yet he has all the power. He controls the bank accounts. He has the job. She doesn't have any training or certification to provide for herself. When she said her vows on her wedding day, she meant them and kept them. He's broken them in multiple ways. Yet he holds the power. Where can she turn for justice?

Similar stories could be told by many of you here as you think back over your lives. You might be a child of divorce or a veteran of an unjust firing. You might have experienced discrimination because of your skin color or accent or the

neighborhood in which you live. Someone may have betrayed or abandoned you. You might have been passed over by a less qualified candidate who knew someone on the inside. Or someone slandered you and never made it right or abused you and got away with it.

Does God notice? Is He even paying attention? Is He doing anything about it? What kind of a God would allow so much injustice to occur and continue to go unpunished? That's what we're going to look at today. What kind of a God is God especially in this area of injustice?

We will learn more about God as we look at the next chapter in Revelation. We saw Revelation begin with a vision of the Son of Man, Jesus who instructed John to write down what he would see. Then Jesus gave a message to the 7 churches of Asia in chapter 2 and 3. In 4 and 5, John had a vision of the one seated on the throne attended to by the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders. He, God the Father, holds a scroll sealed by 7 seals. No one in heaven, on earth or in all of history is found who can open the scroll – except the Lamb looking as if it had been slain. He, Jesus, takes the scroll and begins to open the seals. So in Revelation 6, we saw the first six seals opened. Each released a judgment of God upon the people of the earth.

The 6th seal ended with the people fleeing to the mountains to find safety and protection from the wrath of God and the Lamb. We talked about why God judges. We either have a holy God who deals with sin or an unholy God who ignores or minimizes sin and injustice. Though most people prefer a God who is indifferent to their sin, they want God to judge when someone sins against them. We learned if God is holy, He must respond to sin. Therefore, an appropriate response is judgment. But then in Revelation 7, we heard about the sealing of the 144000 to protect them from God-separating evil. We learned this sealing would not necessarily protect them from suffering or death. But it would protect them from the wrath and judgment of God poured out on those who rebelled and committed all sorts of evil.

Now the vision continues into Rev 8. It is here we will discover first **where Christians who have been treated unjustly can turn to plead their case**. Second, we will see **how God responds to these pleas**. Then we will conclude with some ways we can respond to what we discover about God.

Revelation 8:1-12 (ESV) (Page 871)

8 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before

the throne,⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

⁶ Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

⁷ The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

⁸ The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood.⁹ A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰ The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water.¹¹ The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.

¹² The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

After the sealing of the 144000, we are brought back to the seven seals on the scroll. The Lamb, Jesus, who now holds the scroll opens the 7th and final seal. When that happens, John tells us there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Why did heaven go silent at this moment? There are several possible explanations. It needed to be silent for the saint's prayers to be heard. It is a prelude before an appearance of God. It proclaims the magnificence of God while every living creature in heaven pauses to take in His glory. It is a dramatic pause that makes the judgments about to happen even more impressive.

Now I couldn't find any other reference to silence in heaven throughout the Scriptures. But I was thinking about when crowds of people go silent. We pause for a moment of silence on Remembrance Day or when some tragedy has happened. We do that to give mental space for people to actually think and remember. But for a crowd to be silent for half an hour is pretty unusual. I think that may be heaven goes silent for half an hour because the events of the end are about to be launched. It's finally arrived. This culmination or end of history that heaven has heard about for centuries is about to take place. Maybe the heavenly creatures pause to take that in. The last seal of the scroll is finally opened. The end is very near.

We don't know if verses 2-5 occurred during the silence or broke the silence. But John sees. Seven angels stand before God. In Jewish tradition there were 7 archangels before God. We know two archangels from the Bible – Michael

and Gabriel. So this 7 could be the archangels or some other high order of angels who serve God in specific ways. Each receives a trumpet.

The trumpet called armies to battle, warned people of an invader, made people aware of an announcement or brought news of victory. Trumpets were used by the Israelites in their assault on Jericho. On the 7th day of marching around the city, after 7 times circling the city, 7 trumpets were blown. These signaled the collapse of Jericho's walls. Here 7 trumpets will each release or announce another judgment by God.

But before they are blown, another angel appears. He comes and stands at an altar with a golden censer. A censer is a container that holds incense. Incense was a type of spice or wood that burned and released strong sweet smelling smoke. There was an altar of incense in the Jerusalem temple just outside the Holy of Holies. The priests would go there to pray with incense going up symbolizing their prayers going up to God. In the Christmas story, Zechariah the priest, John the Baptist's father, is praying at the altar of incense when Gabriel appears to announce that Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son.

Here in Revelation, there appears to be one altar before God that serves both as the altar of incense and the altar of sacrifice. So this angel with the censer receives much incense to burn before God and the Lamb. But in addition to this, the end of verse 3 tells us the incense would be offered with the prayers of all the saints.

In the Bible, saints are not super Christians or the ones canonized or recognized by certain churches. Saint means set apart one. In the New Testament, every Christian was a saint not because they lived a saintly lives but because they were set apart by God to be one of His own. In verse 3, the prayers of all the saints somehow join the incense offered by the angel. Then verse 4 tells us "And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rose before God from the hand of the angel."

Now just take that in for a moment. The prayers of God's people rise before Him in the very throne room of heaven. Do you ever think that your prayers are ignored or forgotten? Do you ever think they got lost in transmission somehow or hit the ceiling and don't quite make it out of our atmosphere. No. This vision portrays our prayers reaching God Himself. It is not just the prayers of martyrs. It's not just the prayers of super spiritual. It is the prayers of "all the saints." So do not think you're prayers ever go unnoticed by God. The world may not notice. The world may mock you for wasting time doing apparently nothing. But your prayers go into the very throne room of God.

But what did they pray? We get a clue from verse 5. The angel takes the censer and fire from the altar and hurls it on the earth. This burning censer is accompanied by peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. These are all regular occurrences when God personally shows up. God is going to do something on earth. God will bring judgment upon the people of the earth. Remember in Revelation that “the people of the earth” points to unbelievers who dwell on earth.

Therefore, if this action in verse 5 is a response to the prayers offered in verses 3 and 4, what were they praying? Commentators almost universally agree they prayed for justice or judgment upon their oppressors. The prayers concerned the evil and injustice under which these saints lived. So their recourse or resource in the midst of injustice was prayer to God appealing to Him to act upon the unjust.

That’s the answer to our first question. **Where can Christians who have been treated unjustly turn to plead their case? We must turn to God in prayer and appeal for Him to address the injustice.** So these judgments are directed towards oppressors; those who have never repented of their sins and continue to walk in rebellion. These judgments address those who callously and deliberately practiced their racism or sexism for their whole life times at the expense of others. These judgments will hit hard those who have abused others and never owned up to it or repented for it. These judgments will target oppressive rulers who have used their positions of power for their own benefit at the cost of their people suffering.

This brings us to the second question. How does God respond to these pleas? **God sends judgments upon the unjust through the trumpets.** The first angel blows his trumpet. **The first trumpet – God sends hail and fire mixed with blood to destroy one third of land, trees and grass.** Now this judgment resembles the Exodus story from the Old Testament. You know the “Prince of Egypt” movie? God sends 10 plagues against the Egyptians so that they will release their slaves – the Israelites led by Moses. In Exodus 9:22 we read “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field.’” So hail was one of the 10 plagues upon the Egyptians. It caused widespread destruction upon one oppressive nation.

But here in Revelation a plague of hail hits the whole earth. Fire and blood join the hail. Fire could be lightning that causes more fires. The blood could indicate the color of the storm. Some have thought of the blood-red rain that sometimes falls in Mediterranean regions when rain hits air thick of fine red particles of sand blown in from the Sahara.

Or blood may refer to the reality that people or animals will be killed once the hail and fire do their job. Now we might think this is pretty cruel for God to do this to the earth. But who actually suffers most?

What can't you do if you lose a third of your land, a third of the trees and all the grass? You can't plant a crop on a third of your land. You can't harvest the fruit from a third of your trees. You can't feed your flocks on your grassland. This plague will hit the people hard in the area of food supply.

Then the second trumpet blows. **The second trumpet – God hurls something like a mountain into the ocean destroying one third of the sea, marine life and shipping.** This plague, 1/3 of the ocean turns to blood, also looks like one of the plagues upon the Egyptians. In first plague in Exodus, Moses stretches out his rod and the Nile River becomes like blood. All river life dies and the water source was polluted. Here the plague strikes the oceans. John says "something like a great mountain with great fire was thrown into the sea." Some commentators think this is a reference to a volcanic eruption. After all, Mount Vesuvius erupted and destroyed Pompeii about 20 years before the writing of Revelation. When the mountain exploded some burning pieces of it fell into the sea killing the sea life. Or this may simply be a picture of a devastating plague upon the ocean. One commentator suggests maybe John points us to Psalm 46 which begins "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."

Whatever John saw, it has very destructive effects. One third of the ocean becomes blood. A third of the marine life dies. A third of shipping is destroyed. Many people depended on fish as their primary source of meat. Shipping brought the fish to port. Suddenly, a major food supply and the means to get it are drastically reduced.

Then the third trumpet blows. **The third trumpet – God sends a star from heaven to contaminate a third of the rivers and springs.** Notice the star falls from heaven. This is a judgment from God. It is also on fire or blazing like a torch. So all three of the trumpets include fire – hail mixed with fire hits the earth; a mountain burning with fire is thrown into the sea; a star blazing like a torch hits the rivers and springs. Fire is a symbol of judgment throughout Old and New Testament. This fiery star receives a name not for what it is but for what it does – Wormwood – Bitter. It causes a third of the fresh water in the world to become bitter. This causes the death of many people. So now both the salt water and fresh water supply of the earth has been seriously damaged.

Then the fourth trumpet is blown. **The fourth trumpet – God darkens a third of the sun, moon and stars.** This resembles another plague against the Egyptians. In Exodus 10, the Egyptians are struck with three days of pitch darkness while the Israelites had light. Darkness was also a symbol of judgment in the Old Testament. Here there are two possible interpretations of the plague. Either the sun, moon and stars have the intensity of their light reduced by one third. Or the sun, moon and stars have the time they shine reduced by one third. So instead of 9 hours of sunlight in a day there would be 6 hours. Either way, this is a devastating blow to many pagans because they worshipped the sun. The sun was the source of life in many respects. So to suffer reduction or limitation of its light greatly threatened their source of life. Some commentators point out that the fourth trumpet may relate to the fourth day of creation. On that day, God creates the sun, moon and stars. In the fourth trumpet, God darkens the sun, moon and stars.

So God sends these four judgments announced by the first four trumpets. When we step back for a moment and look at them collectively, we see a decreation of creation. Light, land, vegetation, sea, sea life, rivers, springs of water, sun, moon and stars suffer a partial destruction. So what has God done in these first four trumpets? **God responds to the saint's prayers for justice by removing the earthly security of the ungodly.**

Think about the people in your life who don't know Christ; who do not acknowledge God or recognize Him as Lord over their lives. Why would they pay attention to Him if they have access to clean drinking water, food supply from the sea and land, a stable earth and a predictable sun and moon? These stable resources can lead people to conclude they can do pretty well apart from God. They believe they don't need God because Earth and the sun the oceans and the waters continue to provide life.

But imagine how they might respond if all of these trumpet plagues happened. No one could ignore a loss of one third of the world's resources. All this results in destabilization of the ungodly population's security blanket. All of a sudden their safety is threatened. Their confidence in their life apart from God is shaken.

Remember all of this is in response to the saint's prayers for justice. Is this justice? Well think about what the impact of this might have on the ungodly. It can go one of two ways. One – they recognize that their trust in the world's resources cannot ultimately and eternally provide for them. Maybe they accept they cannot continue living apart from God. They may turn to God and repent of their wrongs. Then, they may, like Zacchaeus, not only repent but repay those they oppressed. So if a person who wronged you sincerely repented and turned to Christ and recognized the damage done

and worked to make things right, that would make a difference. Yet it took some sort of judgment to lead them to that. Though they didn't completely pay or make up for all the wrongs done, justice for their wrong was paid for on the cross. Justice is served. I think that there is room for repentance in Revelation 8 based on the repeated reference to one third. One third will be destroyed. Two thirds remain. How will people respond? Some, a few will turn to God.

But most won't. These trumpets inflict judgment upon the earth's oppressors and sinners in response to their injustice. This is a punishment or appropriate response from God. Some commentators try to rescue God here from any punishing role. I think part of that comes from our culture's general rejection of seeing any good in punishment. Today we rehabilitate and correct. There is certainly value in some of that. But some punishment is justified when a wrong has been committed and the offender shows no remorse and would do it again if they had opportunity. In fact all of us deserve punishment for our sins yet Jesus took that upon Himself on the cross. The only response awaiting those who persist in rebellion against God is judgment; punishment a holy and righteous wrath. Because you're here today – cannot claim that you didn't know judgment was coming. This is no surprise for anyone who has read the Bible or considers the character of God. Part of justice is carrying out an appropriate vengeance against those who unrepentantly continue in their injustice.

One commentator writes "These plagues demonstrate God's uniqueness and incomparable power. They also demonstrate the hardness of people's hearts. They are punished because of this hardness. The sufferings continually remind them that their idolatrous trust in the earth itself will not sustain them through eternity. They have trusted in that which ultimately will not last.

So how will we live in light of Revelation 8? **We must turn to God about injustice and continue to pray and trust Him to respond appropriately in His time.** Maybe we need to meditate long and hard on verses 3-5 and see how the prayers of God's people go up to Him in His very throne room. So often we look at prayer as a waste of time because it seems like nothing immediately changes. But when we pray and regain this perspective of a mighty God who carries out justice perfectly, we can gain some measure of peace and release.

This does not mean that we allow ourselves to be treated as doormats or we never set up appropriate boundaries or we never call to account someone who does wrong. We do our part in seeking the Lord's wisdom and help. We depend on other members of Christ's community to pray and support us. We look after children who might have their safety

threatened and we take the steps we can take to survive. We may even take our case to the courts or to some arbiter who can help. But we recognize that human justice is often incomplete, imperfect, hamstrung by technicalities or corruption in the system. But we don't have to take revenge or let our lives be consumed by hate.

We can trust God to carry out perfect justice in His time. That frees us to overcome unjust acts with love. It's pretty normal to respond to some injustice with a vengeance or a strike back. It's superhuman to respond with mercy, love and grace. We can only get the power and strength for that from Jesus.

I think this passage calls us to **Repent of any injustice or oppression that you've done.** If we've bullied, slandered, taken advantage of, profited from another's weakness, turned a blind eye – repent. Then act on your repentance and do what's right.

Join God's justice and healing work in the world – sponsor a child; give to a mission; go on a mission; volunteer in some sort of mission. Advocate for the oppressed. Help the oppressed. Micah 6:8 – He has showed you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you. But to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

Renew your efforts to invite others to come under the loving care and salvation of God. Share the gospel. We can bring the gospel to others by showing love to those unloved, being family to those who have no family; listening to someone who has never been listened to and then bring Christ to them as their hope, help, truth and salvation. An event like this weekend can really sober us into realizing how important this is. I have been corresponding with my son over the last few days who is in Australia right now. He knew one of the young men killed on that bus, he worked with him for a year, he played hockey on an outdoor rink with him and last night he texted me this, "This whole crash makes me think about boys my age probably going to hell. Really makes me want to share the gospel with my friends more now." And for some of us here today I need to say to you...

Repent before it's too late for you. If you're not a Christian here today, God is patient but Revelation reveals His patience will one day end. He has given ample warning about this. Most of the people who will experience these plagues are already hardened and have put their trust in the things of this world – including its resources. Don't let this happen to you. God has revealed Himself through creation and reaches out to you in love today. He wants to be in relationship with you and has made the way for this to happen through the cross. Will you receive His love today and respond to it by putting the trust and foundation of your life onto Christ?

Christian, continue cry out for God to bring perfect justice in His way and His time. Continue to walk by His power and Spirit each day. Continue to share the Gospel until He returns or calls us home.