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# Silence in Heaven

Revelation 8 v 1-5

## Introduction

On our Sunday mornings we have been working our way through the book of Jonah. We're half way through the book, with 2 more sessions to go, but with last week's missions service and today, we're having a short break. A gap.

In music they call it a rest: a beat, or several beats of silence in between the other notes. It's one of my favourite tricks musicians use to enhance a song. The music can be powering away and then suddenly it stops. There is tension for a second and then the music crashes back in, releasing that tension, giving a dynamic contrast to the silence. It can really enhance a piece of music.

A break in our lives can have a similar effect. We call it a holiday because it used to be the only time you had time off work was on a holy day. But it can be beneficial. Even just a change in our patterns can give us a break from the norm. If we're working or studying then a rest from that can help our bodies and brains rest, recharge and recover. It can give us a renewed vigour when we return to the normal routine.

We had a big break when COVID came along. In-person worship had to stop, and we had to work out different ways of fellowshiping. Even when we returned to the building we couldn't sing together for a good while. When we returned to normal it was great to be able to sing out with gusto. We perhaps had a greater appreciation for the chance to meet and talk with brothers and sisters in Christ. We could even take a look at some of our practices with a fresh pair of eyes and wonder if we should change anything.

But it's not all about advantages. There are some people who didn't return after we restarted. There are those whose lives have been affected by it. And some have just wandered off, having got out of the habit of going to church.

In our passage today we're going to look at a pause, a silence, see what it meant in context and what it means to us today.

## Silence in Heaven

*When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. [Revelation 8 v 1]*

John is being shown a vision of heaven. There is a scroll, written on both sides, and only the Lamb of God is worthy to open it. It has seven seals and the Lamb has opened six of them, each one resulting in terrible events on the earth. On the opening of the seventh seal there is a pause. In fact there is a pause before the last of each of the three sets of judgements: the seals, the trumpets and the bowls.

On opening this final seal, we are finally going to see the whole scroll opened, the word of God read. What will it contain? From what we've seen up to now it's likely to be the judgement of God, but what will that look like?

So there is anticipation. In fact there's silence. For half an hour. That's a long silence. And it's a contrast to what has gone before. John has seen a heaven filled with praise. God is on his throne and he is surrounded by angels and the saints, worshipping and praising, singing "Holy, Holy, Holy". And then there is a sudden stop.

On remembrance Sunday we spend a moment or two in silence to remember those who fought in wars for our freedom. Half an hour seems like an eternity compared to that. That remembrance time is for looking back. But here all those in heaven are looking forward, to the scroll being opened, to the word of God being revealed. This silence is anticipation.

### **Application 1 - Spend time in silence**

We spend time praising god. We spend time praying. We talk about him to each other and to others. When do we just stop? Listen? In silence? Waiting in anticipation for him to speak to our hearts?

We should be straining our ears to hear what he has to say to us, and instead we can spend all our time talking to him. Let us endeavour to listen more.

A bit of advice though: don't ask God to speak to you just as you settle down at night. I tried that and I just fell asleep.

### **Silence on Earth**

In the last few weeks we have turned to Psalm 46 twice, and there was something that struck me about it that changed my perception of a phrase we use quite often. Let's look at the passage:

*Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. [Psalm 46 v 8-11]*

"Be still and know that I am God". We use that verse all the time, don't we. We think of it as a suggestion, that we should contemplate on the nature of God. And that's not a bad thing, in fact it's very much to be encouraged. But that's not what the verse is saying. Look at the context of it. We are told to behold the works of the Lord. And it's not works of beauty, it's not nature that we're to admire. Here it's the God that brings desolation. The God who intervenes in wars among men. He makes wars to cease. Isn't that what we want to happen in Ukraine? We want God to intervene and cause that war to cease, we want him to punish the oppressor.

Our God is the God who breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariot. "Be still, and know that I am God" - this isn't a suggestion, it is a command. War is raging and at the word of God it stops. Think about the disciples in the boat, with the storm raging around

them. They wake Jesus up as he's sleeping in the back of the boat, and plead for him to help. He speaks... and the sea is calm. The storm is stilled. Through the power of his word he has calmed the storm. "Calmed" is too soft a word for it. It's the sort of word you would use talking about a horse that's frightened, or a child that's had too much lemonade. You calm them down gradually, gently. Jesus didn't calm the storm, he silenced the storm.

And what is the response of those who were in the boat with him?

*And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" [Mark 4 v 41]*

They saw the power of Jesus at work and wondered and feared, because here was the power of God displayed before them. "Be still!" And know that he is God.

### **Application 2 - appreciate the power of god in creating calm in this world**

If Jesus could silence the storm on the Sea of Galilee, can he silence the storms in our lives? It would be nice to live a life of quiet contemplation, but that's far from the truth for most of us. Sometimes it seems like it's just storm after storm. You know how at the start of winter they start naming the storms, beginning with A and working through the alphabet? If we have a bad winter we can get through to J and K. It can feel that the storms in our lives have gone right round the alphabet several times.

It's in the midst of these stormy times that Paul tells the Philippians they can have peace, a peace that passes understanding. How do we get that? By not being anxious, but instead handing it all over to God in prayer.

### **Silence in the Grave**

We have thought about a silence in Heaven, and a silence on Earth. Now let's look at the silence under the earth.

*The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the LORD! [Psalm 115 v 16-18]*

Death is the ultimate silencer. Those who go down to the grave never again make a sound. Their lips are stilled. The psalmist says "the dead do not praise the Lord". It's a sobering thought, isn't it? And yet the verse doesn't stop there. There's a "but". And with confidence he says "we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore". Not just until we die, but forever. Because he is confident that all who know the Lord have everlasting life. The grave will not silence them because the very second their body dies, they are with the Lord.

### **Application 3 - Rejoice in the Lord always**

Do you know the Lord? If you do, then you can have this confidence, that nothing can silence your praise to him. Not even death.

### **The Storm After the Calm**

We have looked at three types of silence:

- The silence in heaven was in anticipation
- The silence on earth was in subjection
- The silence in the grave was because of separation

What followed the silence? In music it could be anything. It might be just a voice. It might be a steady build. It is most dramatic when the break is ended by the music crashing back in full force. What happened in heaven?

*When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And 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, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 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 [Revelation 8 v 1-5]*

In Revelation the silence is followed by the 7th seal being opened, tribulation on the earth and the beginning of the 7 trumpet judgements. We see an angel come before the throne with a censer, the smell of the prayers of the saints rising up to the lord. The angel takes fire from the altar and dashes the censer to the earth, causing earthquakes and all sorts of havoc. The lord has taken the prayers of the saints and answered them, and the answer is punishment on the world. Which was what they had prayed for, as we read earlier in Revelation:

*When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. [Revelation 6 v 9-11]*

We should give God a space in our lives to speak. We need that time of silence so we can hear him. Remember Elijah. God wasn't in the thunder, fire or earthquake, he was in the still, small voice. There had to be silence for Elijah to hear it.