

## The Seven Trumpets

Typically, when we look at a book like the Revelation, we are so struck by its imagery and fantastic creatures and all the numbers and times that are recorded in these visions that we can quickly forget that it all meant something to the people who first heard it. It was tied in to their understanding of the Old Testament and especially some of the more apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament, such as the second half of Daniel or parts of Zechariah.

For example, last week we saw the four horsemen of the apocalypse, which would have triggered, at least in Jewish minds, the four horsemen mentioned in Zechariah 1 who had been sent by the LORD God to patrol the earth. Then we saw the picture of the souls of the martyrs “under the altar”, the place of sacrifice. This would have given those listening to the reading of John’s letter the idea that God was using the blood of the martyrs in some way, that their sacrifice had a deeper and lasting significance. We saw John using some of the colourful imagery of the Old Testament, particularly from Isaiah 13 which describes the darkening of stars, sun and moon in connection with God’s judgment on the nation of Babylon. Earlier we encountered a scroll with seven seals, and readers might have thought of Daniel sealing up the words of the scroll until the time of the end. And, of course, we encountered again the thunder and lightning and earthquake that accompanied God’s presence, as we saw when God appeared on Mt. Sinai to give the law to Moses.

Not all of these references serve to help us understand the text, but they all add shades of background, the idea that God’s plans are being put into place. From the use of these Old Testament images, we gain perspective, we see that God is aware of everything that is taking place, and that these prophetic revelations are almost reminders of things spoken in the past, although they are seen here in a new light, with a different history being written in these days.

Now we come to some disturbing scenes from the Revelation, scenes of chaos and destruction. They are introduced by the seven angels with the seven trumpets and, as each trumpet is sounded, another disaster comes to the earth. A third of the earth is set on fire, a third of the oceans turns to blood, a third of the fresh water becomes bitter and a third of the light of sun, moon and stars is lost. These are images that draw us back to the plagues of Egypt: the waters of the Nile turning to blood, the darkness that was so intense people couldn’t see their way around, the hail and lightning that left the whole land of Egypt in ruins. When the fifth trumpet sounds a plague of locusts is released, which is what the nation of Egypt also endured in Exodus 10:12-15.

What are we supposed to think about these plagues?

1. They represent God’s judgment. When the seven seals were broken, calamities like war and famine and death were unleashed on both the unrepentant people who opposed God’s Kingdom and upon the faithful ones who held onto the promises of God. But when the trumpets are sounded, the punishments fall only on those who

are opponents of God's rule. There is a term that is used in chapter 9, "the people on earth", and it refers to the people who are earthbound, who love the world and its values, who refuse to repent and worship God. These are the ones who experience this judgment in all its force.

2. In the exodus from Egypt, the plagues were followed by deliverance which was followed by God establishing His rule, His Kingdom, over the Hebrew people. This also was signalled by a very loud trumpet sound (Ex. 19:16) which summoned Israel to Mount Sinai where Moses was to receive the laws of God, the Ten Commandments.
3. John saw the visions of the seven seals broken by the worthy Lamb before He saw the visions of the angels and their trumpets.

That doesn't mean that the calamities associated with the seals are different from the calamities associated with the sounding of the trumpets. John saw one series of events, then he saw another, and both had massive effects on the earth that God had created. In fact, so many of the effects are similar that it seems as though John is possibly describing visions of the same events, but from two different perspectives. The first is to give comfort to the church, struggling under persecution. The second is God's answer to the prayers of the martyrs who cry out from beneath the altar, "How long, O Lord, before You judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us?" (6:10) In both cases, there is a climax that occurs with the final seal or the final trumpet, and that climax is the last judgment.

So, let's look at the trumpets, with a view to seeing what Old Testament passages they would have brought to mind to those reading or hearing this prophecy. The first angel blew his trumpet in chapter 8, v. 7, and hail and fire mixed with blood were thrown down on the earth and a great fire is ignited. When you read about fire, you are reading a code word for judgment. The judgment of God falls on the whole earth, just as it once fell on Egypt. Another passage that talks about the fire of judgment and a severe famine is Ezekiel 5. This chapter is directed towards Jerusalem and those who seek refuge there while still maintaining their worship of idols.

The second trumpet is sounded and a great mountain of fire is thrown into the sea and 1/3 of the sea is turned to blood. In Revelation, mountains represent kingdoms, both good and bad, and in the Old Testament, mountains often represented kingdoms that were the objects of God's judgment. In Isaiah 41:15, the mountains are the enemies of Israel and Ezekiel 35 describes God's judgment on Mt. Seir, which is the people of Edom, descendants of Esau. Jeremiah speaks of Babylon as a destroying mountain which will be burned by fire -- again, fire is the symbol of God's judgment -- and Zechariah says that no mountain will stand before the priest of the LORD, Zerubbabel. And the plague of water turning to blood is the first of the plagues in Egypt and is described in Ex. 7:14-25.

The third trumpet sounds and a great flaming star falls from the sky and turns 1/3 of the fresh waters bitter. Now, where have you seen a star falling from the sky in other parts of the Bible? You find it first in Isaiah 14:12-15 where Babylon's guardian angel is thrown down from heaven. You see it again after Jesus sends out seventy-two

followers and they report back that even the demons have to obey them when they use Jesus' name. And Jesus reply was that He had seen Satan fall like a flash of lightning from heaven. The name of the star in Revelation is "Wormwood", which refers to Jeremiah 9:15 and 23:15 where God disciplines His people by giving them worm-wood to drink, not literally, but figuratively. The sufferings they experience, the bitterness they endure, are what is meant by the use of this metaphor of wormwood.

While the first three trumpets have all brought the fire of judgment and the suffering of famine, the fourth trumpet produces something very similar to the plague of extreme darkness that fell over Egypt in Exodus 10:21-29. The Jews always understood this as a mental darkness, a spiritual blindness, whereby people would slip into deep depression, hopelessness and fear. There are several other places in the Old Testament where this loss of sun-light or moonlight is used as an illustration of something that is not physical darkness, but something else. Last week I mentioned Isaiah 13:10 where the sun is said to be darkened and which clearly refers to God's judgment on Babylon. Joel 2:1-10 describes a trumpet blowing, the sun and moon growing dark, the stars losing their bright-ness, but it is a call to repentance for Israel in that day. Zephaniah 1:15,16 uses similar language to describe God's judgment of idolatrous Israel and Ezekiel 32:7,8 does the same thing in a renewed promise of judgment against the current pharaoh of Egypt.

To bring this into our historical situation, you can see around you a growing darkness, where media and the courts and politicians and educators rail against values that we learn from Scripture. The immediate result of this propaganda is that people have confused ideas about the core of the Christian message and twist the principles of our faith to make them sound unloving and unjust. This results in a cycle of ever-greater spiritual darkness, which leads to more and more defiance of God's ways and will, ultimately, bring God's judgment.

But why does a loving God judge the world? Why not just put up with our weakness and ignorance and lower His expectations for what humans are capable of becoming? That's the question that we have to answer as we go through these frightening chapters of Revelation, because if we can't understand the reasons for judgment, we will certainly not understand God in His goodness and grace. An important part of the answer will come as we look at the results of sounding trumpets 5 and 6.

*Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen to earth from the sky, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. When he opened it, smoke poured out as though from a huge furnace and the sunlight and air were darkened by the smoke.*

*Then locusts came from the smoke and descended on the earth, and they were given power to sting like scorpions. They were told not to hurt the grass or plants or trees but to attack all the people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. (9:1-4)*

The passage continues with a description of the locusts and their power to inflict pain

and then this, in v. 11:

*Their king is the angel from the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon - the Destroyer.*

Here again we see a star falling to earth and we can say now that these fallen stars are living beings, they are, in fact, fallen angels. These “stars” are servants of Lucifer, like him thrown out of heaven, like him, opposing the kingdom of God on the earth. The fallen angel doesn’t have a key, isn’t able to take the key, but is given the key. That tells us that Jesus allows these beings to work their destruction for a time, but that, ultimately, they are not in control. They wait for His permission and when He gives the key, for a season, they wreak havoc. Their work is to bring judgment on the unbelieving world, on the people who have given their minds and hearts to the prince of darkness.

Notice that when the pit is opened, smoke pours out from it, “as though from a huge furnace, and the sunlight and the air were darkened by the smoke.” The smoke represents deception, because it hides the light - it hides the truth. People who are caught in this deception are people who have already chosen it, have already said in some way that they prefer darkness to light. People today who openly mock Christian faith, who write blogs that make caricatures of Jesus or other biblical figures, who try to make evil look good and good look evil, are captive to this deception and serve Satan in extending it further.

One other point before we go to the sixth trumpet and that is that this part of Revelation cannot be referring to the final judgment. This judgment is only partial and many unbelievers escape its effects. It is also quite temporary and doesn’t lead to any ‘wrapping up’ of historical events. There is more to follow after we read of trumpet number five. So this isn’t the end; it must be seen as part of the great tribulation that began with the birth of Christ and continues through our day and on until the last judgment.

The sixth trumpet is sounded, four angels that had been bound up, restrained, one would think against their will, are ordered to be released. These can only be servants of Satan who have, with him, rebelled against God’s rule. They have been bound in the region of the Euphrates River, which in several Old Testament prophecies means the area called the “north” from which armies of destruction will come. (Jer. 1:14,15; 6:1,22; 10:22; Ezekiel 38:6; Is. 8:7,8)

The four angels lead an army of 200 million mounted troops who are riding fire-breathing horses who destroy a lot of people with fire, smoke and burning sulfur. And here is where things get really interesting, because in the next passage we get insight into why God is doing this and why the destruction is getting so overwhelming:

*But the people who did not die in these plagues still refused to turn from their evil deeds. They continued to worship demons and idols made of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood -- idols that neither see nor hear nor walk! And they did not repent of their murders or their witchcraft or their immorality or their thefts. (Rev. 9:20,21)*

God is establishing His Kingdom on the earth He created. He has every right to do this because He made it and also because He paid for it with His own blood. As He brings in His Kingdom, people have to choose whether they will honor the King and serve His interests, or if they will honor and serve the agenda of the demonic forces that are arrayed against God. They have to choose between humble obedience and worship, or proud defiance and rebellion. There is, really, no middle ground, no happy compromise where we can live in honoring both God and Satan.

It seems like a normal response for a proud and selfish people would be to choose our own way, to rebel against rules and God's demand that He be worshiped. We'd rather not have to give anything of ourselves to Him. So what can God do to draw us out of this self-centred and self-destructive mindset that will, ultimately, shut us out of His Kingdom? Just to get our attention, God has to take off His hand of protection and allow us to experience the fruit of our choices. Until He does that, very few take Him seriously. Until He removes the buffer of grace and mercy that permits us to live in relative peace, we have no sense of our need for God, and we find incredibly inventive ways of ignoring Him.

The plagues of Egypt were intended to bring Pharaoh to a place of repentance, so that he would let Israel go. The plagues of Revelation are also intended to bring people to repentance -- this is God's mercy -- but it seems that most would prefer to suffer judgment than to admit their failures and ask for forgiveness. They would rather cry out to the rocks to fall on them than for God to heal them. That was the choice described in ch. 6, v. 16 and in ch. 9, vv. 20,21. It seems that all a person would have to do to avoid judgment would be to humbly repent of sin and acknowledge that God is the only one worthy of worship ... but the people who belong to the earth in Revelation refuse to go there.

The terrors that accompany the last three trumpets are intended to amp up the danger, to be more frightening than the ones before. Why? If you hear about a massive flood in Bangladesh, you might think, "Hey, it's monsoon season and they got hit especially hard this year." It's unlikely that you will think that God was calling them to repentance. There are many natural disasters, but most of them don't lead the governments of the affected nations to declare a national day of prayer and repentance; most of them don't have the affect of the plagues in Egypt. To get people's attention, unfortunately, the effect has to be very severe.

When it is extreme, then some people will start to consider that this might be God's judgment and they might humble themselves in the face of these great dangers. It is God's mercy to proud and stubborn human beings that stirs us to repentance. In these chapters of Revelation, every aspect of the tribulation has limits, both in the extent of the trials and in the time they endure. This shows us, as I said a few minutes ago, that this is not the final judgment. It also tells us that God is looking for a response from those who survive these various crises; He looks for them to repent of their evil, turn to Him and receive His grace. The sad thing for people of the world is that their level of denial, of pride, of rejection of God's rule, is so high that His

response has to become more and more severe - just to get their attention. That's how I interpret the message of the sixth trumpet -- God wants people to repent so that they can be a part of His Kingdom. But if He establishes His Kingdom and there are people who want no part of it, He will, it seems to me, allow them to opt out. That's the picture of kings and slaves calling for the mountains to fall on them rather than turning to God in chapter 6 and it's the picture of people refusing to turn from evil here in chapter 9. He gives lots of warnings, and the judgments are part of those warnings, but for those who reject those warnings there will be a final judgment -- but that comes later in Revelation.

Notice what happens when the seventh angel blows the seventh trumpet. The first thing that happens is that loud voices in heaven shout out:

*"The whole world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever." And the 24 elders sitting on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped Him. And they said, "We give thanks to You, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who always was, for now you have assumed your great power and have begun to reign.*

*The nations were angry with You, but now the time of Your wrath has come. It is time to judge the dead and reward Your servants. You will reward Your prophets and Your holy people, all who fear Your Name, from the least to the greatest. And You will destroy all who have caused destruction on the earth."*

(Rev. 11:15-18)

When God finally establishes His rule over the earth, when He takes His rightful position as the great King and His eternal reign begins, then the time will have come for the final judgment. And evil will be dealt with. You can't have a just ruler who won't deal with the evil in the world. If there is to be a Kingdom of justice and righteousness, then the ugly stuff has to be cleansed and rebellion has to be judged and ended.

Our application for today is very simple: we must pray for and witness to the world around us. People, as we see from this book, have the option to mock our message, to refuse to repent, to be angry with God or with us, but that doesn't change our responsibility -- to tell the good news.

Related to our witness is the need to be praying that God will open the eyes of unbelievers, will give them a spirit of repentance and will allow them to enter His Kingdom, fully prepared for the judgment that is to come.