

“The Seven Trumpets”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 14

Texts: Revelation 8:2-13; Joshua 6:2-5

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven. But now a new cycle of judgment is about to begin as John sees seven angels with seven trumpets. “Woe!” “Woe!” “Woe, to the inhabitants of the earth, for God’s wrath is coming upon the nations.” God has heard the prayers of his saints and he will crush all those who oppose his kingdom and his Christ.

We left off last time with the opening verse of chapter 8, when the Lamb opened the seventh seal of the mysterious scroll and then there was silence in heaven for a short time. At first glance, the grand climax of the cycle of the seven seal judgments becomes the grand anti-climax. And yet, as we have seen, there is some rather extensive Old Testament background connecting the Day of the Lord to a period of silence after God’s judgment has fallen upon a wicked and unbelieving world.

So, the silence in heaven is not really anti-climatic at all. It simply means that when the seal judgments have at last run their course and Jesus Christ has returned to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new, there is nothing left to say. The entire universe is left speechless. All of creation remains silent before the Lamb and the one seated on the throne.

Before we begin looking at the next cycle of judgments revealed by John—the trumpet judgments of Revelation chapters 8-11—it is important that we remind ourselves about the nature of apocalyptic literature such as that we find here in Revelation. This book is not historical narrative. We are not to read the Book of Revelation like we would the historical books of the Old Testament, which set things forth in a very straightforward and chronological manner. Apocalyptic literature is not like that. Things are arranged in this book by topic, not so much by the order in which they occur in history.

We also need to remind ourselves that John does not in any sense intend for us to take the things he writes about literally. What the apostle is doing is using highly symbolic language to describe the theological meaning of the on-going struggle between Christ and his already defeated foe, the Devil. John uses this highly symbolic language to paint a word picture of the final goal of redemptive history. The interpretive key to understanding this highly symbolic language, therefore, is the Old Testament. Nowhere is this more evident than with this next section of Revelation and the series of trumpet judgments beginning here in Revelation chapter 8, as there are many allusions to Old Testament themes.

Recall that there are three cycles of judgment in Revelation. The first cycle of judgments are the seven seals of Revelation 6-8:1. Here we saw a series of judgments from the perspective of the throne room of God and of the worthiness of the Lamb, who redeemed his people and who, through this series of judgments vindicates their cause, even though they suffer at the hands of the beast during the great tribulation. When the Lamb opened the first four seals we read of four horsemen going forth and removing peace from the earth, as well as bringing famine, sickness and economic hardship to one fourth of the earth’s population. But the fifth seal contained a vision of the saints in heaven before the throne of God, crying out “how long O Lord” as they await the return of Jesus Christ and the resurrection at the end of the age. When the beast kills one of Christ’s saints during the great tribulation, that saint comes to life and reigns with Christ.

When the Lamb opens the sixth seal, the great day of judgment has come. The entire cosmos shudders with the second coming of Jesus Christ. There was a great earthquake—connected throughout the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation to the final judgment. Using apocalyptic imagery, John describes how the skies will roll up like a scroll, how the sun ceases to give light, how the moon will turn to blood and how the stars will fall from the sky. And then God’s judgment comes upon all the earth’s unbelieving inhabitants. Great and small, rich and poor, kings and generals are terrified by the wrath of one who sits upon the throne and the Lamb. They would rather the rocks fall upon them than behold Jesus Christ coming in judgment!

After the sixth scroll is opened and judgment comes upon the earth when the Lord returns, there is a dramatic interlude, in which John describes the fate of God’s people while the seal judgments are executed upon the earth. In Revelation 7, John gives us a vision of the 144,000, symbolic of the church militant upon the earth, sealed by God with the name of Christ and thereby protected from his wrath during the time of tribulation. Though the world may attack them, they need never fear the wrath of God depicted in the sixth seal judgment or in the trumpet and bowl judgments yet to follow. In addition, John sees a great multitude in heaven so numerous that no one can count them. These are people Christ has redeemed by the shedding of his blood. They come from every race and tribe and tongue under heaven. But not only are they washed in his blood, they wear white robes—since as justified sinners they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ—together with the elders and the living creatures they praise the Lamb who has redeemed them. It is after John has reassured the readers of this book that they will be spared from God’s wrath that we come to the seventh and final seal in the opening verse of chapter 8, which is silence in heaven.

The way these seven seal judgments unfold in human history is important because the seven trumpet judgments in Revelation 8-11 follow much the same pattern. Like the seal judgments, the trumpet judgments also cover the entire period of time between Christ’s first advent and his second coming. But they do not view things not from the perspective of the heavenly throne and the worthiness of the Lamb. Instead, the trumpet judgments describe the present course of history from the perspective of the plight of the unbelieving inhabitants of the earth who as a result of the prayers of the saints ascending to God’s throne, now face a series of judgments from God very much like those faced by the Pharaoh in Egypt.

Because of their direct connection to a number of Old Testament themes, in these judgments we are also given the picture of the church in the midst of a new Exodus from bondage and captivity to sin, now en route to the glorious freedom that awaits them in the heavenly city, even while believers remain in the midst of the great tribulation going on upon the earth during the last days.

As we work our way through the trumpet judgments we must keep in mind that these judgements cover the same period of time as do the seal judgments.¹ As we have seen with the seals, there are six trumpet judgments and then comes an interlude. Like the seven seal judgments, when the seven trumpet judgments have run their course, God’s wrath is complete when we arrive at the end with the second coming of Jesus Christ. So, even though the trumpet judgments come after the seals in the Book of Revelation, and indeed are more intense than the seals, they are nevertheless describing the same period of time as the seal judgments, namely the period between first and second coming of Jesus Christ, known as the church age, the last days, the thousand years and a time, a times and half a time.

¹ Beale, Revelation, 472.

Perhaps it is helpful to think of these cycles of judgment as follows. Each one of these cycles of judgment views the same events from different perspectives and tells the same story from a different angle. Think of watching an entire football game through the lens of one camera in the end zone—you'd get a very important, but certainly one dimensional perspective on the game. Then think of watching the same game through a wide angle lens positioned at the 50 yard line. Because of the change in perspective you'd think you were watching a different game, perhaps. Then think of watching the same game through a camera which zooms in for close-ups on each play. This too would be a different, but more intense look at the same game. This is very much like we find in apocalyptic literature. Each vision describes the same period of time, but from a different perspective or angle.

Add to this the fact that each vision intensifies as it moves closer to the return of Jesus Christ. Then as the visions move from the seals to the trumpets to the bowls, the visions become more intense and the imagery more dramatic. John does this to remind us that human history is racing towards its divinely appointed end—the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age when the father will bring all things into submission under one head, Jesus Christ. Therefore, human history has a final goal and that everything which happens to Christ's church and his people is bringing this to pass.

With all of this in mind then, let us turn to our text this morning in Revelation 8:2-13.

With all of this in mind then, let us turn to our text this morning in Revelation 8:2-13. If you know the Scriptures, you know that the sounding of a trumpet has an important place throughout the biblical narrative. When YHWH descended upon Mount Sinai to give Moses the Law, trumpets announced the great event. In Numbers 10 we read of two silver trumpets fashioned to summon the people of Israel to assemble before the Lord outside the tent of meeting. The jubilee year was announced with the sound of a trumpet, as was the news of the king's coronation. In Joel 2, we read that a trumpet will announce the Day of the Lord. On three occasions in the New Testament we read that the second coming of Jesus Christ will be heralded with the sound of a trumpet.² But when we read in Revelation 8:2, that John "saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets," we are immediately harkened to another Old Testament event involving seven trumpets, the fall of Jericho.

In our Old Testament lesson we read "*Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in.'*" The fortified city of Jericho blocked the entry of God's people into the promised land. To remove this obstacle God commanded that for six days the army of Israel, with the ark of the covenant in the front, were to march around the city sounding their trumpets. On the seventh day, the Israelites encircled the city seven times. When the trumpet sounded on the final lap, the cities' walls collapsed and Jericho was totally defeated.

It is not accidental then, that the seven trumpet judgments mirror Joshua's actions at Jericho, for when the seventh trumpet sounds, the city of man, built in opposition to the kingdom of God and later identified as Babylon the Great in Revelation 17-18—falls as a direct result of the judgment of God. Even as Jericho blocked the entrance to the promised land, so too, the city of man stands in the way of the New

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 140.

Jerusalem. Like Jericho, Babylon the Great will also fall under the hand of God's judgment. Later on in Revelation 11:19 we read that when "*God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of the covenant,*" and we are once again reminded of Joshua's actions at Jericho, when the priests sounded the trumpets and the ark was present.³ But this is not the last of the direct connection between the trumpet judgments and the Old Testament, as we will see shortly.

In Revelation 8:3-5, John sees "*Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.*" With the seal judgments, the setting was the throne in heaven and John's lament that no one was worthy to open the scroll. With the trumpet judgments the prelude to the judgments takes place before the altar in heaven. This time it is the prayers of the saints suffering upon the earth which now ascend to the throne and which causes the angel to fill his censer with fire and throw it to the earth. Therefore, in this cycle of judgment, it is the prayers of Christ's church which lead to the downfall of the city of man.⁴ Even while the beast persecutes God's people and the city of man seeks to seduce and exploit them, God hears their cries and will come to avenge them. The peals of thunder, the flashes of lightning and the earthquake, remind us that the next cycle of judgment is about to begin. Indeed we read in verse 6, "*Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.*"

Before we examine the first four of the seven trumpet judgments, it will soon become apparent that six of the seven trumpets have direct parallels to the plagues God sent upon Pharaoh and the nation of Egypt. As God raised up Pharaoh and hardened his heart so that his glory might be displayed to people of Israel, as well as to the pagan magicians of Pharaoh's court, so too, the trumpet judgments are designed to show that the destruction which will come upon the earth during this cycle of judgments is the outworking of God's sovereign hand in response to the prayers of his people. As he did with Israel while in captivity in Egypt, God protects and preserves his people even while he brings judgment upon his enemies. And yet, as in the seal judgments, God's wrath is restrained until the time of the end.

Furthermore, the obvious parallels between the trumpet judgments and the plagues God sent upon Egypt preclude us from interpreting these images of judgment in light of modern technology. John is not depicting specific things like nuclear war, ballistic missiles, meteors or acid rain. Through the use of these apocalyptic images drawn directly from the Old Testament, John is describing in broad and general terms those countless calamities—war, famine, economic hardship, plague, ecological disaster and so on—which come upon the world and are a result of human sin.

Therefore, the purpose of this vision is not to prophetically foretell of modern technology of which John had no knowledge. Rather it is to tell us that as a result of the prayers of his people, God brings judgment upon the earth while protecting his people from harm.⁵ Thus the correct interpretive key is not the most recent edition of Jane's *All the Armies and Navies of the World*, but the Old Testament. This is

³ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 140-141.

⁴ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 142. Cf. Poythress, *The Returning King*, 122.

⁵ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 143.

apocalyptic language, and is very generalized and not specific.

The first trumpet judgment mirrors the seventh plague upon Egypt. In verse 7, we read, “*The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.*” In Exodus 9:23-24, we read, “*When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt; hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth.*”

Recall that the damage inflicted by the seal judgments extended to one fourth of the earth, so now with the trumpets they increase to include one third of the earth. Not only does John have in mind the seventh plague upon Egypt but the fact that fire is mixed with blood also recalls the first seal judgment and the rider on the red horse who brings war upon the earth. Therefore, the first trumpet judgment includes war and the damage which results from the continual strife upon the earth.⁶ This time, one third of the earth is so ravaged.

The second trumpet recalls the first plague upon Egypt when the Nile turned to blood. According to John, “*The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*” Here again, we need to keep in mind the literary genre of this book. John’s own qualification, “something like,” means we are not to take him literally. The entire Roman world of John’s day knew of the destruction of Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A. D. 79, likely the source of the image of a fiery mountain wreaking havoc on the ships in the bay of Naples. This volcanic eruption therefore probably underlies what John describes as the fate of those sea-based empires of the Mediterranean world such as Rome, who dominated the commerce of the ancient world and who persecuted Christ’s people. But God’s judgment will come upon Babylon the Great—beginning with the city of Rome—and will bring about her end.⁷ As the Nile turned to blood ruining Egypt’s agriculture and commerce, so will God bring judgment upon the seas, restraining the domination of the city of man over the people of God.

The third judgment does not have a direct link to the plagues on Egypt, although it echoes the first plague upon the Nile as well as an incident from the Exodus. In Exodus 15:25 while at Marah, Moses threw wood into bitter water and it became sweet. Here, the opposite is the case. Wormwood, which is a plant with a strong bitter taste is thrown into the earth’s water and it becomes bitter. “*The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.*”

Again, the key here is not to take John literally, but look to Old Testament passages which help explain what John sees. In Jeremiah 9:15, we read: “*Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘See, I will make this people eat bitter food and drink poisoned water.’”* The prophet Jeremiah announces that the poisoning of the water—which brought death to certain Israelites, but which also brought famine by killing the vines and fig trees of Israel, is a direct judgment upon Israel because of

⁶ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 143-144.

⁷ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 144.

her gross idolatry.

Therefore, the poisoning of the water is a judgment upon the idolatrous nations of the earth, typified by Babylon the Great. To drink the water made bitter by wormwood would, over time, poison a person and bring death after much suffering. It also points us to famine and starvation. The image of the third trumpet then, is God bringing judgment upon the city of man by causing that which is pristine to become bitter and poisonous. The rivers and springs are no longer pure. People suffer and die, crops fail and lush vegetation shrivels and dries up. Bounty becomes famine.⁸

With the fourth trumpet, we have a direct parallel to the ninth plague God sent upon Egypt, that of darkness. In verse 12, we read, “*The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.*” This judgment clearly affects the skies and the amount of light which shines upon the earth. While this particular judgment sounds very much like the cosmic signs associated with the sixth seal, there are major differences. In the sixth seal, the effects were universal and total, while here, the judgment is clearly limited to one third of the light. Therefore, this judgment is not referring to the final judgment, but to a series of trials which effect a third of earth, and which precede the final judgment almost as dress rehearsals for it.

Once again, the interpretive key is the Old Testament, specifically Exodus 10:21, where we read, “*Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt.’*” God’s judgment upon Egypt—three days of darkness—was localized, and specifically designed to humiliate and expose those who worshiped Ra, the Egyptian God of the sun. Pharaoh, his magicians and all Egypt were shown once and for all that YHWH made the sun, and that YHWH, not Ra, was to be worshiped. The same thing must be seen here with the fourth trumpet judgment. The periodic interruption of light and cosmic events which appear throughout the course of the age are but constant reminders that on the great day of judgment yet to come, God himself will shake the cosmos—and not just one third of it, but all of it.

Therefore, despite the apparent power, splendor and greatness of the city of man, the period lessening of light and the signs in the sky are a constant reminder that God is creator and that he, not man, controls all things. God controls the earth and the harvest, he rules the seas and the skies. Even as the curse has brought the earth into decay and bondage, these judgments remind us that one day God will make all things new. His sovereign control of the heavens and the earth, and the judgments he inflicts upon unbelievers through them, point us ahead to the great climax of this book, which is the new creation of Revelation 21.

And so once the first four trumpets have sounded, all of the inhabitants of the city of man, Babylon the Great, have been warned that because of their idolatry and unbelief the final judgment of God is coming, and that one day it will extend to all of the earth, not just one third of it. Through these trumpet judgments, God reminds his people that he has heard the prayers of his saints and that he will punish all idolaters, even while he spares his own people.

But after the fourth trumpet sounds, John sees something else. “*As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: ‘Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of*

⁸ Beale, Revelation, 480.

the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!" There are three more trumpet blasts yet to come and unlike the first four trumpets, which are much like the four horsemen of seal judgments and limited in scope, the final three trumpets effect all unbelievers and describe in great detail the torments that await those who will not worship the one seated on the throne and the lamb. Indeed, the eagle warns us three times, "*woe be to the inhabitants of the earth!"*

When the idolatrous city of man stands in the way of the kingdom of God, when the beast rears its ugly head and wages war upon the saints, God's people cry out to him in prayer. In these, the first four trumpet judgments, we are reminded that God hears and answers that prayer of his saints which Jesus taught us to pray, "*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" If this doesn't convince us of the importance and power of prayer, nothing will!

Indeed, as the city of Jericho was destroyed on the seventh day on the seventh by blast of the trumpet, so too, when the seven trumpet judgments are completed on the last day, the city of man will collapse and then the kingdoms of this world will have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ! It is the prayers of the saint which bring down pagan empires. God has given to his people a great and mighty weapon in their struggle against Satan and the Beast. And that weapon is prayer.

Amen!