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Revelation #20

The Trumpet Blasts of Divine Judgment **Revelation 8:6-13; 9:1-12**

Why do people struggle with the book of Revelation? By that I don't mean why do people have differing interpretations of what will happen when Christ returns, or why do people disagree on the identity of the Beast and False Prophet. The struggle I have in mind is *the difficulty people have with the unrelenting display of divine wrath and judgment on the world of unbelievers and idolaters*. In other words, the single greatest problem people have with this book isn't its symbolism or its view of history or the meaning of the number 666. The single greatest challenge that people face when reading Revelation is *the extent and intensity of the judgments that unbelievers and idolaters endure*.

Let me put it this way. There is a test that each of us can apply to ourselves to determine whether or not we have a biblical view of God. If you want to know what God thinks of his own glory and honor and whether or not you share his perspective, all that is needed is for you to ask yourself this question:

“When I read of the devastating judgments in the book of Revelation, that is to say, when I read of the seven seal judgements, the seven trumpet judgments, and the seven bowl judgments, do I think God is *overreacting*? Do I find myself saying: ‘These judgments are *unwarranted*. They are *extreme*. They exceed the boundaries of what is just and right. The seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are *excessive* and *unjustified*.’”

If that is your reaction, then I suggest you need to revisit and reevaluate not only your view of God but also your view of the horror and wickedness of human sin. What I'm suggesting is simply this. If you cringe when you read about the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, it can only be due to one thing: *You have too high a view of humanity and too low a view of God.*

Once the human heart has seen, sensed, or come to understand but a fraction of the immeasurable glory and majesty of God, nothing will make more sense than the intensity of the display of divine wrath that we read about in Revelation. So let me ask the question again in a slightly different way. “How serious an act of cosmic treason is it that human beings whom God made to know and glorify him have instead selfishly exploited his gifts and rebelled against him? Do you find it inexpressibly deplorable that men and women have dishonored the only honorable Being in the universe and have treated with calloused contempt the only beautiful and praise-worthy Being in the universe? And do you think that human sin warrants the kind of judgment that we read about in the book of Revelation?”

If you find yourself increasingly bothered and unsettled by the portrayal of judgment in Revelation, my recommendation is that you spend considerable time re-evaluating your view of God. Once you comprehend the immeasurable height of his infinite worth and value, you will understand the immeasurable depth of human sin and idolatry, and the book of Revelation will no longer be an enigma to your mind or an offense to your soul. With that in mind, let's turn our attention to the first five of the seven trumpet judgments. As we do there are four observations that need to be made.

First, let me briefly remind you of something I set forth when we first looked at the seal judgments in chapter six. It concerns the way in which Revelation as a whole is structured. In an earlier message I argued that John's perspective in Revelation is analogous to the multiple camera angles at a football game. Imagine, if you will, several different camera locations. One is 30 rows up on the 50-yard line of the home team. Another records the game from the south end zone, while yet another is located on the visitor's side, at field level. Finally, there is one more camera directly overhead in the Met Life Blimp. My point is that each camera records the same game from beginning to end, but with each one focused on a different facet of the game. One records the offense; another the defense. Yet another concentrates its lens on a particular player. The camera overhead in the blimp records the game from a more comprehensive point of view.

John does something similar in Revelation. He is describing for us the on-going conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan that occurs between the first and second comings of Jesus. At one time he may concentrate on a particular event, while at another time his focus is on a specific person. But what we have in Revelation, at the end of the day, is a somewhat repetitive portrayal of the commonplace occurrences that transpire throughout the course of church history, leading up to the return of Christ at the end of the age.

I believe John does this multiple times in Revelation. *He describes the commonplaces of church history spanning the time between the two comings of Christ. By "commonplaces" I mean the conditions, circumstances, situations, environments in which people find themselves between the two comings of Christ. As he finishes one section, concluding with the Second Coming of Christ and the end of history, he circles back around to start all over again at the start of the game. Once he concludes yet another journey he circles back around and recapitulates the same period of time from yet another vantage point.*

As you know, the book of Revelation is built around *three series of seven judgments*. There are seven *seal* judgments, followed by seven *trumpet* judgments, and finally seven *bowl* judgments. According to the principle of recapitulation, the seven seal judgments, together with the seven trumpet and bowl judgments, are descriptive of events throughout the course of history between the two advents of Jesus. The only difference in the way John portrays what is happening is that at one time he may describe a preliminary, introductory and somewhat moderate or limited aspect of God's judgment, and then at another time portray that judgment in its more complete and devastating expression.

The fact that the trumpet judgments are partial and somewhat limited and the bowl judgments are more complete and final simply indicates that what can occur in a limited or partial manner at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, can also occur, at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, in a universal or more thorough-going manner. The effect or impact of these plagues of judgment on the unbelieving world is at one time and in one place restricted, while at another time in another place, widespread.

Thus, *Revelation is not concerned merely with events at the close of history, immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. Rather, there are multiple sections in the book, each of which recapitulates the other, that is to say, each of which begins with the first coming of Christ and concludes with the second coming of Christ and the end of history. Each of these sections provides a series of progressively parallel visions that increase in their scope and intensity as they draw nearer to the consummation.*

Try to think of it on the analogy of that football game I described a moment ago. *Each section of John's book is like each of the many cameras placed throughout the stadium or in the blimp hovering above.* In each section John is describing, generally speaking, the same period of time, just as each camera is recording for us the same football game. But each section and each camera provide their own distinctive points of emphasis.

Second, trumpets have always played a significant role in God's purposes in history. When Israel lay claim to the promised land the priests were instructed to blow the trumpets of holy war seven times for seven days. On the final day Israel encircled Jericho seven times. When the seven trumpets blew after the seventh trip around the city, the walls of the city crumbled. We also see in the OT that the feasts of Israel were hailed "with [a] blast of trumpets" (Lev. 23:24). Trumpets were blown to declare Solomon's ascension to the throne (1 Kings 1:34, 39). The prophet Joel describes the blowing of trumpets in preparation for God's coming in judgment: "Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain . . . , for the day of the Lord is coming" (Joel 2:1). Most important of all, "Israel's trumpets signified the coming of the Lord to wage warfare on the nation's behalf" (Phillips, 275). Thus when we read in Revelation of the sounding of seven trumpets "we can expect to see God intervening in history to defeat his enemies" (275).

Third, you can't help but notice that the trumpet judgments are *limited* in the devastation they bring on the earth. In 8:7 "*a third* of the earth" is affected. In 8:8 "*a third* of the sea" became blood. In 8:10 "*a third* of the rivers" and "the springs of water" were judged. In 8:12 it is "*a third*" of the sun, moon, and stars that are darkened. The repetition of the fraction $1/3$ is important. He isn't trying to be arithmetically precise, as if to say that exactly $33\frac{1}{3}$ percent of each element in creation is destroyed. His point is that *the judgments are partial*. They are preliminary to the final and universal judgment that comes at the end of history. As one commentator put it, "the Trumpets are sounding not doom, but warning. The majority of mankind is allowed to survive, being shown God's wrath against sin, and given the chance to repent" (Michael Wilcock, 95). Thus, at one time in human history the judgment of God may be extensive and severe, while at another time it may be limited and partial.

Fourth, we must resist the temptation to interpret these trumpet judgments in a woodenly literal way. The purpose of Revelation is to *describe reality through symbolic images*. No fewer than twelve times in our passage John uses the word “*like*”. His point is that what he saw was “like” or “resembled” or was in some sense similar to things with which he and his original readers were familiar. But, for example, he isn’t saying that the demonic hordes in Revelation 9 *are* literally locusts or that they literally sting people with their tails. And please don’t conclude, as some have, that these locusts are John’s way of describing Cobra attack helicopters!

The First Trumpet (8:6-7)

According to Exodus 9:22-25, in the seventh plague God rained down on the land of Egypt “hail and fire”, somehow strangely mixed together: specifically, on land, trees, and plants. Here in Revelation 8:7 the “trees” and “grass” are affected. The element of “blood” in this trumpet may derive from the first Egyptian plague in which the Nile turned to blood.

Are the “hail and fire mixed with blood” *literal* (8:7)? The hail and fire in the Exodus plague were literal, indicating that such a phenomenon here would not be inconsistent with divine activity.

The reference to “blood” may simply point to the color of the hail under such conditions, or more likely to its effect on earth among men. Elsewhere in Revelation “fire” is often symbolic (see 1:14; 2:18; 9:17; 10:1; 11:5; 19:12). Many believe that the fire in 8:7 that burns a third of the earth, trees, and grass is a metaphorical portrayal of judgment by *famine* (something we saw in the third seal judgment).

Whatever the case, the reference to only 1/3 being destroyed indicates that the judgment here is partial, with the climactic, final judgment yet to come.

Some find a problem in the fact that, according to Revelation 9:4, neither grass nor any green thing is to be hurt. They wonder how this can be if, according to 8:7, “all the green grass” has *already* been “burned up.” But as Leon Morris has said, “it is a great mistake to read this fiery, passionate and poetic spirit as though he were composing a pedantic piece of scientific prose. He is painting vivid pictures and it does not matter in the slightest that the details do not harmonize readily” (120). Perhaps the best explanation is to remember that these judgments are sometimes partial and limited in their scope and at other times are more expansive and universal. So there is no reason to think John has contradicted himself.

The Second Trumpet (8:8-9)

Something “*like*” a great mountain burning with fire is now said to be thrown into the sea. Is this literal? It may be that we have here another example of prophetic hyperbole, descriptive of seasons in history of devastation, personal loss, and instability. Let us remember the words of the

psalmist: “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though *the mountains slip into the heart of the sea*; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride” (46:2-3). No one believes the psalmist is describing multiple mountains literally slipping into the sea. It is a proverbial expression for times of devastation and turmoil among nations on the earth.

We must also keep in mind that a “mountain” in Revelation is often a metaphorical description for an earthly “kingdom” (see 14:1; 17:9; cf. 21:10). Perhaps this trumpet is a reference to the judgment of evil kingdoms on the earth that oppose the kingdom of Christ. Those evil kingdoms in Revelation are symbolically identified with the name Babylon.

Jeremiah 51:25 equates Babylon with a mountain and prophesies her judgment in similar language: “Behold, I am against you, *O destroying mountain*, declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain.” Could it be that since the mountain is a metaphor for the judgment of Babylon in Jeremiah 51, “mountains” function in the same way in Revelation 8? The description of a third of the sea becoming blood is a direct allusion to Exodus 7:20 and the plague against the Nile River. In both cases, the fish obviously die.

The Third Trumpet (8:10-11)

The presence of famine appears to be included in the third trumpet, as it was in the first two. Here we read of the waters becoming bitter and ultimately fatal. Psalm 78:44 also describes this plague: God “turned their rivers to blood, so they could not drink of their streams.”

The waters are polluted by a “great star . . . blazing like a torch” (8:10). It would be difficult to interpret this literally, for how could one star fall on one third of all the rivers and springs of the earth? The star may be symbolic of an *angel*, as in 1:19, which thus serves as an instrument of divine judgment (for similar language describing the judgment of the king of Babylon in the OT, see Isaiah 14:12-15).

The star is called “Wormwood” (echoing Jer. 9:15 and 23:15). There God says, “Behold I will feed this people with bitter food, and give them poisonous water to drink” (Jer. 9:15; cf. 8:13-14). Wormwood is a bitter herb and can be poisonous (although not known to be fatal) if drunk to excess (it is so powerful that a single ounce diluted in over 500 gallons of water can still be tasted). Israel’s sin was having “polluted” herself with idolatry. With poetic justice, God “pollutes” them with bad water. Other OT texts where wormwood is associated with judgment are Deut. 29:17-18; Prov. 5:4; Lam. 3:15,19; Amos 5:7; 6:12.

Again, the question is raised: Are the waters literally affected by a literal star making them literally bitter and fatal? Or is this a metaphorical portrayal of severe judgment that might conceivably express itself in any number of ways, perhaps primarily in the pollution of our drinking water as well as in famine (in keeping with the thrust of the first two trumpets)?

The Fourth Trumpet (8:12)

This judgment is strikingly similar to the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12-13. The major difference is that whereas this judgment is partial (again, 1/3), the other is complete. This judgment also seems to reflect the ninth plague in which darkness covers the land of Egypt (Exod. 10:21-23). Again, is this literal or symbolic? If the latter, symbolic of what? Also, in numerous biblical texts the darkening of heavenly bodies and other similar celestial phenomena typically symbolize chaos on earth and especially divine judgment against national entities. Is that in view here?

Note also that the elements affected by the trumpet judgments to this point include light, air, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, sea creatures, and human beings. Some have suggested that, although the order is different from that in Genesis 1, the basic content and structure of creation itself is being systematically undone. This notion of “de-creation” is supported by the fact that the book of Revelation itself climaxes in the *new* creation: a new heavens and a new earth!

Conclusion to the First Four Trumpets / Introduction to the Last Three Trumpets (8:13)

The OT often employs the image of an “eagle” when describing judgment (Deut. 28:49; Jer. 4:13; 48:40; 49:22; Lam. 4:19; Ezek. 17:3; Hos. 8:1; Hab. 1:8). Aside from that we really don’t know what meaning there is in the eagle. But note well on whom the impending judgments fall: **“those who dwell on the earth.”** Although Christians themselves also dwell on the earth, this descriptive phrase always in Revelation refers to unbelievers and idolaters.

The Fifth Trumpet (9:1-11)

There is no mistaking the fact that the locusts released from the abyss or the bottomless pit are **demonic spirits** whose purpose is to torment and destroy the lives of unbelieving men and women. We know this because they come out of the “bottomless pit” or “abyss” (vv. 1-3).

The Greek word translated “bottomless pit” or “abyss” (*abussos*) is used 9x in the NT, 7 of which are in Revelation (9:1,2,11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1,3). The word literally means “without depth,” i.e., boundless or bottomless. Here the shaft of the abyss is portrayed as blocked by a door to which God alone has the key. The demons whom Jesus expelled from the Gadarene entreated him “not to command them to depart into the abyss” (Luke 8:31). Here in Revelation 9 the bottomless pit appears to be **the abode of the demonic hosts**. The idea of a “pit” with a “shaft” that is “opened” or “locked shut” (“sealed”) by a “key” held by an angel is obviously figurative language.

The “angel of the bottomless pit [abyss]” in v. 11, that being who exercises authority over the demonic hordes that dwell there (he is called their “king”), the one called “Abaddon” and “Apollyon”, is certainly evil and is most likely Satan himself.

As disturbing as this portrayal of demonic activity may be, and as much as you may be inclined to look away and ignore it, please don't. John's vision is designed to let us see beyond the material realm to the spiritual dynamics that alone make sense of what is happening in our society.

"Smoke" emerges from the abyss when it is opened so that the sun and air are darkened by it (cf. Joel 2:10,31; 3:15; cf. Exod. 10:15; in these texts such darkening is a sign of judgment). Smoke here likely points us to the deception and moral darkness in which most of our world is languishing.

Demonic beings are here portrayed as "locusts" to whom "authority" or "power" "**was given**". This use of the passive voice is typical both in Revelation and in the rest of the NT. We see it again in v. 4 ("they were told") and in v. 5 ("they were allowed"). These verbs in the *passive voice point to divine activity*. In other words, it is God (or the risen Christ) who has commissioned and authorized them. This authority is likened to that possessed by "scorpions." People greatly fear scorpions because of their venomous sting, which is extremely painful and sometimes lethal.

The literal plague of locusts in Exodus 10:12-15 (eighth) also brought darkness on the land. There we read that "they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt" (v. 15; see Deut. 28:38; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chron. 6:28; 7:13; Pss. 78:46; 105:34-35; Joel 1:4; 2:25; Amos 4:9; 7:2; Nahum 3:15). But here the locusts are commanded **not** to harm the "grass . . . or any green plant or any tree" (v. 4). They are commanded only to hurt unbelievers, i.e., those who don't have the seal of God by which one might be protected from such a plague.

This is an encouraging reminder that God has taken steps to protect his people against the devastating impact of these plagues, be they literal or symbolic. God's people will never, ever suffer God's wrath! This also proves yet again that the 144,000 in Revelation 7 and 14 who are "sealed" on their foreheads must refer to all God's people, Jewish believers in Jesus and Gentile believers in Jesus. It would be wholly inconsistent with the character of God that he would protect only 144,000 Jewish believers from this horrid demonic attack and leave all the millions of other believers in Jesus to suffer this torment.

There is an additional **two-fold limitation** on their activity. First, they are not allowed to kill anyone (in contrast with vv. 15-20), but only to "torment" them (which sounds similar to what God allowed Satan to do to Job). Second, the torment will last for only "five months". Some take this literally, but have no explanation for why such an odd number should be chosen. More likely the five months alludes to the five-month life cycle of the locust. Or "five" may simply be a round number meaning "a few." We can't be certain.

The "torment" they inflict is likened to that of a scorpion when it stings a man. Scorpions are a metaphor for punishment in 1 Kings 12:11,14. The word "torment" is used in Revelation for

spiritual, emotional, or psychological pain (see 11:10; and perhaps 18:7,10,15). It comes as no surprise that John describes the suffering inflicted by demons as like that inflicted by scorpions, given the fact that Jesus himself referred to demons as “scorpions” (and “snakes”) in Luke 10:19.

The anguish of those tormented by the demonic hordes is any form of psychological or emotional suffering (physical too?) that provoked in them a desire for death. Yet they are unwilling actually to commit suicide, for surely if someone truly wants to die they can find the means to end their life. John appears to be describing that emotional and psychological depression, frustration, anger, bitterness, and sense of futility and meaninglessness and lack of value, etc. that drives people to the point of utter despair. They prefer death to life but lack the courage to take their own lives, perhaps for fear of the unknown beyond the grave. All of this, says John, is the result of demonic activity (cf. Heb. 2:14-15), like unto that of a plague of locusts unleashed into the earth!

Perhaps John is describing the horrid realization in the human heart that one’s belief system is false, that one’s philosophy is vain, that one’s values are empty, that one’s destiny is bleak, and thus that one lacks purpose in living, that one is thus helpless and hopeless. Contrast this with the “peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:8) granted unto believers who bring their burdens and anxieties to God in prayer.

People without Jesus are desperate to find meaning and dignity and happiness in any number of ways: complex philosophies, a self-indulgent hedonism, the New Age movement with its endless remedies for what ails the human soul, reincarnation, radical feminism, political agendas, homosexuality, drugs, sexual immorality, materialism, selfism, etc. Demonic “locusts” lead them into such pursuits, all of which are, at the end of the day, empty and lifeless.

The description of these demonic spirits (vv. 7-11) reflects what we see in Joel 1-2 where a plague of locusts devastates Israel’s land. There, as here, a trumpet is sounded to herald their arrival (Joel 2:1,15). There, as here, the locusts are said to have “the appearance of horses” (Joel 2:4) prepared for battle. This judgment in Joel is itself based on the plague of locusts in Exodus 10. However, whereas the locusts in Exodus were literal (though they certainly symbolized something beyond themselves), and perhaps also in Joel (although there it may be a literal army that is compared to a swarm of locusts), here in Revelation ***they symbolize demonic spirits unleashed throughout the earth.***

Let’s take each element one at a time. Their appearance was “like horses prepared for battle” (9:7). Cf. Jer. 51:27. On their “heads were what looked like crowns of gold” (9:7), a likely reference to their sovereign authority to afflict the non-Christian world. “Their faces were like human faces” (9:7), perhaps pointing to their intelligence. They had hair like “women’s hair” (9:8). In the OT, long and disheveled hair had at least three meanings: (1) it was a sign of uncleanness for people with leprosy (Lev. 13:45); (2) it was a sign of mourning (Lev. 10:6; 21:10); and (3) it was part of the sacrificial protocol for a woman accused of adultery (Num. 5:18). Their teeth were like “lions’ teeth” (9:8). The “teeth of a lion” is a proverbial expression

for something irresistibly and fatally destructive (cf. Job 4:10; Ps. 58:6). They had “breastplates like breastplates of iron” (9:9), pointing to their invulnerability. The sound of their wings “was like the noise of many chariots, with horses rushing into battle” (9:9). This is strikingly similar to Joel 2:4-5. They have “tails and stings like scorpions” (9:10), a vivid way to portray the torment they inflict on the souls of mankind. And they have a “king” over them, “the angel of the bottomless pit [abyss]” (9:11). This is either the Devil himself or his representative.

First Explanatory Interlude (9:12)

In saying that “the first woe has passed” John does not mean “that the events have already transpired in history but only that the vision containing them is now past” (Beale, 505).

Conclusion

(1) As we look across the vast expanse of human history since the first coming of Christ, and in anticipation of his second coming, we see the concrete and all-too-real effects of God’s wrath against human sin, idolatry, immorality, and unbelief: widespread famine, devastating tornadoes, floods, infectious diseases, war, psychological and emotional torment, pollution of our natural resources, and the list could go on seemingly without end. And to what purpose? To warn mankind that God will not ignore the defilement of his glory or the calloused disregard for his mercy and longsuffering. If ever there were an incentive for personal evangelism, this is it!

(2) Yet in the midst of this earthly carnage and demonic assault, God’s children are kept safe and secure, having been “sealed” by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We may well suffer at the hands of the unbelieving world. Persecution, slander, imprisonment, even martyrdom may come our way. But we will never endure the wrath of God, for Jesus has satisfied God’s justice in our place on the cross! Let us praise God for his mercy!

(3) In the final analysis, God is unfathomable. As Paul said, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).

Perhaps it is with this doxology from Paul that we should conclude. We will never fully understand God and his ways. He so often remains shrouded in mystery that transcends our comprehension. But by his mercy and saving grace we know enough to justify our praise. So join me as we celebrate and declare the majesty of his holiness!