

THE FOUR TRUMPETS

Revelation 8:6-13

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The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth (Rev. 8:7).

When the tribes of Israel emerged out of the exodus wilderness to claim the Promised Land, the trumpets of holy war sounded. God had instructed that seven priests were to blow seven trumpets for seven days. On the final day, the priests were to lead the people around the fortress city of Jericho seven times. When the seventh trumpet blew, the people were to shout and fall upon the city (Jos. 6:1-7). Led by Joshua with the ark of the covenant, Israel obeyed God's Word. When the seven trumpets blew after the seventh time around the city on the seventh day, the walls of Jericho fell down and the city was taken. Joshua had told the people, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city" (Jos. 6:16).

When Revelation 8:6 launches the third cycle of visions with the angels blowing seven trumpets, the student of the Bible looks for an intervention from God on a scale even greater than that of Jericho's fall. The trumpet visions of Revelation 8 and 9 take on a worldwide scale, showing that the worldly city, for all its might, will not bar God's covenant people from the victory of their faith. Christ will strike the fortress citadel of sin and unbelief so that it falls in terrible judgment, just as he once declared to Peter: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18).

THE TRUMPETS OF THE LORD

In the Bible, trumpets are blown for a variety of reasons. They are sounded as a call to the people of God to assemble for an important occasion. The feasts of Israel were hailed “with blast of trumpets,” as “a holy convocation” (Lev. 23:24). Trumpets hailed Solomon’s ascension to David’s throne (1 Ki. 1:34, 39). According to the New Testament, a trumpet blast will herald the Second Coming of Christ, summoning the elect to join him from all over the earth (Mt. 24:30-31). Joel associated trumpets with 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).

Trumpets were sounded in the Old Testament to gather Israel’s hosts for battle, such as when Ehud blew trumpets to summon the tribe of Ephraim to war (Jud. 3:27). Most importantly, Israel’s trumpets signified the coming of the Lord to wage warfare on their behalf. This was the meaning of the trumpets that Joshua blew outside Jericho. Likewise, Gideon’s three hundred blew trumpets and God threw the hosts of Midian into confusion and defeat.

Against this background, when Revelation 8:6 tells us that “the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them,” we can expect to see God intervening in history to defeat his enemies. As in the blowing of trumpets outside Jericho, God is coming with power against his foes. Like at Jericho, the first six trumpets set the stage for the climactic seventh trumpet that will bring a decisive victory. Paul Gardner writes: “Certainly the holy war of Joshua 6 has its final counterpart in Revelation as God wages war against Satan and all that is evil and against those who refuse to repent.”¹

There is furthermore a clear parallel between the trumpets blasted in Revelation 8 and the horsemen of the four seals opened in chapter 6. The four horsemen unleashed warfare, violence, famine and death, and the first four trumpets likewise unleash destructive forces on the earth. The seals and the trumpets follow the same progression: the first four seals are opened and trumpets are sounded, followed by two more, an interlude, and then the final seal and final trumpet which depict the coming of Christ to judge. All of these parallels show that the trumpets of Revelation 8 do not depict a new phase of history after

¹ Paul Gardner, *Revelation: The Compassion and Protection of Christ* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2008), 127.

the seals of chapters 6 and 7. Rather, the trumpets recapitulate from a different perspective the woes visited on earth by the seals. Whereas the judgment of the seals emphasized God's preservation of the church to arrive in heaven "out of the great tribulation" (7:14), the perspective of the trumpets focuses on the victorious Lord's judgment of the wicked. Derek Thomas writes: "The seals view the unfolding of the redemptive purposes of God from the point of view of the Lord's own people, those who are sealed; the trumpets view this same reality from the point of view of the unsealed; those who are *not* the people of God. The opening of the seals brings great consolation to the people of God. The sounding of the trumpets brings great woes upon those who are not the people of God."²

INTERPRETING THE TRUMPET VISIONS

Throughout our study of Revelation it has been important carefully to consider our approach to interpretation. It is obvious throughout the book that the visions are not to be understood literally but contain symbols that depict historical realities. This becomes vitally important in the visions of the seven trumpets. Popular Christian literature tends to look for events that present some similarity with the judgments of chapters 8 and 9 and then declare that these prophecies have been fulfilled in our time. A classic example was the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster that occurred in the Soviet Union in 1986. Prophecy experts soon stated that Chernobyl is the Ukrainian word for "wormwood" and that the prophecy contained in the third trumpet had been fulfilled. This news excited Christians, despite the fact that Chernobyl does not precisely mean "wormwood" or that the event itself fell far short of the third trumpet's judgment.³ Under this approach, Revelation's third trumpet could have no meaning for all the Christians living in the nineteen centuries prior to the Chernobyl meltdown, including the Christians to whom John has told us he was writing the book. Moreover, this kind of attempt to interpret the visions literally leads us away from the actual meaning of the text.

² Derek Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 73.

³ Cited from Steve Wilmshurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 114-115.

This is not to say, however, that Revelation does not depict literal history. First we must understand the symbols. Then we will find that what is symbolized literally happens throughout the history of which he is speaking. John's draws his images from the Old Testament, and it is from there, not today's newspapers, that we will understand the visions of the seven trumpets.

What, then, do the four trumpets depict? First, they show God's judgment in the form of upheavals in nature in order to judge his enemies. In the battles that followed the conquest of Jericho, God fought against his enemies by assaults of nature. In the battle of the five kings, God rained hail on Israel's enemies, so that more enemies "died because of the hailstones than... with the sword" (Jos. 10:11). When the enemy army fled, the Lord caused the sun to stand still in the sky to provide extra daylight for Joshua's slaughter (Jos. 10:12-13). In similar fashion, the four trumpets of Revelation 8 depict plagues on nature by which God smites his enemies. Simon Kistemaker summarizes: "The sound of the trumpets ushers in God's judgments in the form of punishments that affect the earth, the sea, the rivers and springs of water, the heavenly bodies, and the Abyss."⁴

When we think of God defeating Israel's enemies by means of his sovereign control of nature, the greatest example is the events prior to the release of Israel from Egypt. In the ten plagues that preceded the exodus and in the passing of the Red Sea, God controlled natural powers to humiliate the false gods of the Nile and break the hardened will of unbelieving Pharaoh. This is important because there is a clear parallel between the plagues unleashed by the trumpets of Revelation 8 and the plagues inflicted on Egypt. This parallel reinforces the idea that Revelation's trumpets signify holy war against the ungodly nations. In particular, Revelation 8 draws from the seventh, first, and ninth plagues against Egypt, involving hail, blood, and darkness.

One of the points emphasized by the plagues on Egypt was the supernatural intervention that could only be attributed to God. Pharaoh sent his magicians to oppose Moses, but the magicians despaired, saying, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). So also the upheavals described in Revelation 8 depict God's supernatural judgment on the unbelieving world. Just as God acted through Moses to break Pharaoh's grip of slavery on Israel, the plagues of the first

⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 272.

four trumpets show God humbling unbelieving powers and punishing the world for its persecution of the church. Moreover, it is often observed that the plagues Moses announced against Pharaoh were targeted at the false gods worshiped in Egypt. Likewise, Revelation 8 shows God judging the idols of this world that man trusts. While the plagues against Egypt should have moved Pharaoh to repentance, instead they only hardened his heart and consigned him to final destruction. So it is in general with God's judgments in history.

We should further note the restricted character the judgments of this chapter. In the first trumpet, a third of the earth and its trees are burned up (Rev. 8:7). The same is true for the other trumpets: a third of the sea, with its creatures and ships (Rev. 8:8-9), a third of the rivers (Rev. 8:10-11), and a third of the heavenly objects and their light (Rev. 8:12) are judged. The point is that these are partial, not ultimate, judgments designed to announce God's wrath and warn the world against the final judgment. Michael Wilcock writes that the partial damage shows "that 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."⁵

THE FOUR TRUMPETS OF REVELATION 8

With this preparation, we may consider the four trumpets of Revelation 8. 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" (Rev. 8:7).

In Exodus 9, we read of the plague of hail and fire that God afflicted on Egypt through Moses: "There was hail and fire... such as had never been in all the land of Egypt... The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast" (Ex. 9:24-25). The first trumpet includes blood as well, perhaps to show the loss of life involved. The plague strikes not just one nation but the whole earth, yet destroys only a third of the earth's surface. Grant Osborne writes: "We are supposed to picture one-third of all the great forests of the world (the Amazon, the Congo, Yosemite, Yellowstone) burned down. It is a natural disaster beyond anything imaginable.

⁵ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 95.

Think of all the firefighters of the world trying to stem fires thousands of times greater than anything ever known.”⁶ God’s judgments in history will not only be destructive of the sources of life but will be beyond what science, organization, and human willpower can manage.

The second trumpet blows and God’s judgment falls on the earth’s seas: “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. A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed” (Rev. 8:8-9). Some writers have sought to connect this plague with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 and its destruction in and near the Mediterranean Sea. But this is far more vast, causing a third of the sea to turn to blood and destroying a third of all sea creatures and ships.

The second trumpet echoes the first of God’s plagues against Egypt, when Moses stuck his staff into the Nile River and made its waters turn to blood. As a result, the fish died, the water stank, and it could no longer be used for drinking (Ex. 7:17-21). Likewise in this plague, the seas no longer provide the economic resources on which the world depends, destroying a third of the fish and trading vessels. This image would be particularly profound to subjects of the Roman Empire, the very life of which depended on trade from the sea.

Important to this plague is the vast mountain that is set on fire and then cast into the sea. This language comes from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet refers to Babylon in this way. God calls Babylon a “destroying mountain... which destroys the whole earth.” He promises to “stretch out my hand against you... and make you a burnt mountain” (Jer. 51:25), then to destroy Babylon as if he had cast it into the sea (Jer. 51:42). The “Babylon” of John’s day was Rome, just as it had been Egypt in the time of Moses. This trumpet thus depicts the destruction of the world empires in flames as they go down to the sea and bring woe to the world.

The imagery becomes even more vivid with the third trumpet: “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. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), PG.

people died from the water, because it had been made bitter” (Rev. 8:10-11). Here, a star or flaming meteor falls not into the sea but into the inland waters so as to poison a third of its streams, killing many people. The star shows the heavenly origin of the catastrophe – it comes from God – and the star’s name reveals its plague. Wormwood was a foul herb that made water undrinkable, and which the Bible associates with “bitterness” (Lam. 3:15, 19).

This third plague may also allude to the fall of world imperial powers, through its connection with Isaiah 14:12-15. There, God compared the Babylonian king to a fallen star. Like Satan before him, Nebuchadnezzar would seek to exalt himself above God, saying in his heart, “above the stars of God I will set my throne on high... I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa. 14:13-14). In judgment, God declared, “you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit” (Isa. 14:15; see also Dan. 4:28-33). The point is that God judges idolatrous imperial pretensions, whether by Babylon, Rome, Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, or secularist America. Their idolatry is embittered because it pollutes the sources of life, such as marriage, the family, communities, and civil relationships. In this way, history records God constantly judging idolatrous man, making bitter the lives of those who seek to raise themselves above God. “Wormwood” is a biblical catch-phrase for the consequences of sin in ruining all of life. God spoke this way in Jeremiah about the spiritual consequences of runaway sin: “I will feed this people with bitter food, and give them poisonous water to drink” (Jer. 9:15).

The fourth trumpet speaks of judgment in the sky that brings darkness on earth: “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” (Rev. 8:12).

This fourth plague confirms that we are not to seek a literalistic fulfillment of these trumpets, since the idea of only part of the sun and moon shining, together with a third of the day and night, does not make sense of the physical world. Some have sought to link this plague to a great solar eclipse, but this is not what the fourth trumpet describes. Geoffrey Wilson writes that it should “be obvious that John is painting a picture and not writing a treatise on astronomy!”⁷

⁷ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 2:523.

The point of the fourth trumpet is God's control over even the heavenly bodies so that he can bring the darkness of judgment on his enemies anywhere and at any time. Although God here only places a partial judgment on the sources of light, he warns mankind against a total darkness in final judgment should sinners not repent.

Darkness describes the removal of God's blessing; it is the context of those living under sin's curse. This is why darkness descended on the cross during the time when Jesus bore the penalty of our sins. To fall under the curse of darkness is to be condemned from sin and cut off from any blessing from God, who is light (1 Jn. 1:5). God placed Pharaoh's Egypt under a plague of darkness for three days, while light continued to shine on the land where the Israelites lived (Ex. 10:21-23). This plague reminds us that only by coming to Christ in faith do we escape the darkness of sin and judgment. John said of Jesus: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4).

We remember that Revelation is not a puzzle book but a picture book. The general impression is most important, therefore. Here, the four trumpets bring plagues upon the created order – the earth, the seas, the streams, and the stars and moon – to signify God's judgment on the nations that rise up in idolatry throughout history. These woes are inflicted not by "nature" but by God, and mankind is completely unable to manage them. This is precisely what a sober view of history shows, with vast portions of the human race suffering and dying at any one time due to tragedies originating from every part of creation.

These images remind me of the years my family lived in South Florida during the most concentrated seasons of hurricanes in memory. For months every year, our community felt like a bulls-eye had been placed upon us, targeting winds, waves, fires, and darkness which we could only desperately seek to endure. Moreover, the economic effect of those storms played an important role in the collapse of the US housing market that began a national recession. The insurance companies labeled these events, "acts of God," and that is precisely what they were, in keeping with the judgments of Revelation 8. The four trumpets place the bulls-eye of divine wrath on those who are alienated from God through unbelief: God is warning mankind of a greater judgment to come, with a more intense fire, destruction, and darkness that will last forever when Christ returns to judge the earth.

THE TRUMPETS SUMMONING

I have stressed that the images resulting from the four trumpets are not to be interpreted literalistically, yet the judgment of God on history that they depict is very real. The intention of these calamities is to show that the utopian schemes of man are doomed to failure and to warn idolatrous people of the bitterness that sin earns now and of the final judgment that will come at the end of the age.

To make this point clear, verse 13 presents an eagle flying high above the world, circling for prey, and warning that even worse judgments are yet to come: “Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, ‘Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!’” (Rev. 8:13). The word for “eagle” can also mean “vulture:” this is a carrion bird looking down upon the earth expecting to eat man’s flesh as food. His three woes warn of the great judgments in the final three trumpets. The eagle represents how the upheavals of nature warn mankind to beware the greater spiritual consequences of sin. These spiritual judgments will begin in chapter 9.

The eagle’s warning of woe concludes a chapter that, first, makes three things vividly clear. First, *God is certain to judge sin in terrible ways*. The unbelieving world may look on the kinds of judgments symbolized in this chapter and make critical comments regarding the God of the Bible. “What kind of God is this,” people scoff, “who wield fire against the earth and sea, who causes streams to be bitter, and casts the world under darkness?” The Bible’s answer directs us to a holy God who burns with wrath against the sins of mankind.

When Adam fell into sin, God told him that the natural order had been cursed in judgment: “cursed is the ground because of you,” God said (Gen. 3:17). The plagues of the four trumpets show us that mankind can never escape the curse of sin apart from repentance and reconciliation with God. Moreover, God did not merely curse the ground and leave Adam to it. Rather, God continues to bring judgment on sin, punishing rebellion and warning man to repent before the final judgment of the seventh trumpet. Geoffrey Wilson writes that the four trumpets “show that there are no *natural* disasters

in a world which is governed by God.”⁸ Therefore, God intends that when we see natural disasters sweeping the earth with destruction virtually every day, punctuated by great calamities from time to time, we are to be reminded of God’s judgment on sin so that we might repent, believe on Jesus Christ, and be saved.

Second, the constant allusions to the exodus plagues on Egypt communicate to believers that *God is determined to deliver his people from worldly oppression*. We remember that John wrote Revelation to churches on the brink of a terrible persecution launched by the great Pharaoh of their day, the Roman Emperor Domitian. The connection between the symbol of Egypt and Rome is made clear in Revelation 11:8, but the allusion is not limited to the Rome of John’s day. G. B. Caird writes that Revelation’s “Egyptian typology is an emphatic way of saying that present disasters are but a prelude to God’s great deliverance. In each of the heavenly trumpet blasts God is saying to the Pharaoh of the new Egypt, ‘Let my people go!’ At the same time he is saying to the Christians, ‘When all this begins to happen, breathe again and hold yours heads high, because your rescue is at hand’ (Lk. 21:28).”⁹

Christians are therefore to look on the calamities of history and be reminded not only of the judgment we have through faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. We are moreover to see them as emblems of the great judgment by which God intends to break the will of the worldly powers that oppose the truth and grace of Christ. “Let my people go!” Moses cried to Pharaoh (Ex. 7:16). Jesus said that when natural upheavals “begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21:28). By the power of God, believers in Christ can be certain that just as we have been set free from the penalty and power of sin through the blood of Christ, God will set us free from the powers of history so that we will continue in faith until our salvation is achieved.

Third, in the angels’ trumpet blasts we hear *our own call to arms*. The trumpets signify what God is going to do, just as the trumpets of Joshua summoned God’s power to knock down the walls of Jericho. But like Joshua and the Israelites, we are then to advance behind God’s banner. We are to go on lifting our hearts in worship, whatever

⁸ Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 2:276.

⁹ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 115-116.

restrictions the world may place on us. We are to continue speaking the truth of God's Word, bearing witness to God's judgment on sin and God's gracious forgiveness through faith in Christ. We are to go on calling on God in prayer, knowing that through Christ God hears us and will answer even with the trumpets of heaven.

The trumpets blare to announce God's victory over the world through Jesus Christ. By his grace we are to triumph as well, not with worldly power or attainments but in the fulfillment of our calling as God's people in Christ. A later vision, between the sixth and seventh trumpets, makes our calling clear, as the angels marvel not only at God but also at us. "They have conquered," the angels will say of Christians in our world, "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11). This is our calling now, and the trumpets of Revelation summon us to the battle.