



Part 20 – The Seven Trumpets (1)

Revelation 8:6-13

In the trumpet and bowl judgments we find some of the most frightening images in the Book of Revelation. It is vital that we understand these visions within the symbolic categories in which they are written. John's repeated use of the words "like" and "likeness" demonstrates that he was himself struggling to describe to his readers what he saw in his vision. We must also understand how these visions are informed by Old

Testament imagery, the perspective of John's original audience, and the broader historical context. Sam Storms observes:

"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."¹

The First Four Trumpets

There are two events from Israel's past which form the primary biblical background for the seven trumpets in Revelation. The first is when God afflicted Egypt with seven plagues as judgment for their hardhearted refusal to release his people. The second event is the fall of Jericho described in Joshua six. The wicked city stood between the people and their possession of the land. Seven priests were commanded to march around the city for six days. On the seventh day, seven trumpets were sounded and the city collapsed.

Vv. 6ff – The trumpets represent the catastrophes that are common in this world. The original readers of Revelation would have thought of the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus and the fall of Jericho. The army of locusts would have reminded them of the prophecy of Joel and would have called to mind their own fear of invasion by the Parthian cavalry. The catastrophes would have called to mind the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were subject and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences, their fear of wars and natural disasters and cast them in apocalyptic categories. Repentance, not predicting a future sequence of events, is the goal.²

Some of the images seem utterly bizarre, such as locusts with the faces of humans and teeth of lions (9:7ff). Obviously, these are highly symbolic references to threats within the world in every generation. Every day the world experiences the woes that those dramatic images describe. While God spiritually protects his people through judgment, having sealed them with his Holy Spirit (chapter 7), he allows them to go through the judgments that they may be both sanctified and serve as his witnesses in the world.

Vs. 7 – The first trumpet sounds and judgment is poured out upon the land, the source of food. This corresponds with the seventh plague on Egypt but adds the element of blood. In the ancient world, hail and fire were symbolic of divine judgment. Water turned to blood was symbolic of a Divine curse.

Vv. 8-9 – The second trumpet with the sea turning to blood corresponds to the first of the ten plagues on Egypt. A mountain "burning with fire" would have reminded John's readers of the devastating eruption of Vesuvius just years prior (79 AD). The Roman world surrounded and depended upon the Mediterranean Sea. The sort of damage described here would have devastated their economy, military, and food supply.

Vv. 10-11 – The third trumpet portrays a star falling to the earth which may describe a meteor. Typically stars falling from the sky was meant to "correspond to events in the human realm."³ "Wormwood" is a bitter substance described elsewhere in Scripture (Prov. 5:4; Lam. 3:15, 19). The polluting of water was commonly understood as divine judgment.

Vs. 12 – The events surrounding the sounding of the fourth trumpet correspond to the ninth plague upon Egypt. The partial damage done by the judgments (*one third*) indicates that John is not describing the *last*

¹ Sam Storms, *Our God Reigns* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2024) p. 280

² Richard Baukham, *Theology of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 20

³ Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 172

judgment but the ongoing experience of the fallen world. Therefore, chronologically, what John sees in the trumpets precedes the breaking of the sixth seal (6:12-17).

Vs.13 – The sounding of the first four trumpets was, in a way, preliminary. Woes had befallen the natural world, but the judgments would intensify. The eagle is symbolic of a messenger flying at midday to be seen and heard by the largest number of people. The phrase “inhabitants of the earth” occurs seven times in Revelation and always to designate the pagan, unbelieving world in its hostility to God.

- The significance of the “third” portion of the land that is destroyed and the sun that is darkened is symbolic of God’s restraining hand. In other words, what is being described in the first four trumpets is not the final judgment (as was described in the sixth seal). John’s vision is of the restrained judgment of God which the world has experienced during the entire church age (and before). John is seeing that period of time in which God has not yet brought about the end of the age but is exercising a measure of judgment in answer to the prayers of the saints (Rev. 6:9-11) and in order to warn humanity.

1. Cultivate enough humility to consider sin in light of God’s holiness.

The greatest challenge faced by those who read the Book of Revelation is not understanding its symbolism but in accepting the intensity of God’s judgment as just and righteous. Perhaps the greatest test we have to judge whether our view of God is biblical is how we respond to his judgment. It requires humility to not put God in the “dock” presuming to be his prosecutor, demanding him to justify his actions. It requires humility to understand that our sin is worse than we imagine and that God’s holiness is greater than we imagine.

2. Check your security

While the blessings of land and food and water, etc. are good, our idolatrous hearts tend toward making the blessings of God our saviors. Perhaps that is why in the first four trumpets God pours out judgment upon the world’s pillars of security. The second commandment warns us against worshipping anything in creation precisely because that is our sinful inclination. The judgment of God upon the earth reminds us of the folly of finding our security in creation.

3. Discern your times

John’s first readers would have understood the layered symbolism of his writing. They would have understood much of what he wrote as describing events in their own lifetimes. Inhabitants of the Roman Empire during the first century would have lived with the anxiety of the threat posed by Parthian invaders from the east. They would have had fresh memories of the massive human cost due to the explosion of Mt. Vesuvius. They had experienced earthquakes and times of famine. They knew how quickly a plague could take the lives of many thousands. John is explaining those calamities as consequences of God’s judgment on the world.

Without speculating beyond what is justified by the Scriptures, we can say with confidence that the calamities which befall the world are not random events outside the orbit of God’s sovereign rule. The Scriptures offer full support to the conclusion that whatever secondary means may be involved, the manifold disasters in this life are the “birth pains” of a world under God’s judgment (Matthew 24:8). That is not to say that God’s judgment is the immediate first cause of everything bad or sad that happens. It is to say however that the presence of all sickness and sorrow and sin in this world ultimately owes to the fact that God the Judge has turned this world over to the futility of its rebellion (Romans 8:20).

4. Repent and Believe

In light of such sobering passages concerning God’s judgment, it may well be that we need to repent of our complacency. Have we truly believed what the Scriptures tell us about God’s judgment now and yet to come? Have we heeded the many warnings in God’s Word to be watchful and sober as we see the Day approaching?