

# Messages from Heaven

## Revelation 8-9

I was reading an article this week by Dean Abbott, a writer who lives in the Midwest and advocates what he calls “The Quieter Life.” The article addresses the problem with our hyper-connected, smartphone driven, social media obsessed lifestyle. He asks the question, “Why are screens so addictive?”

“We wonder whether smartphones have somehow fundamentally altered our human nature and ask why we were so vulnerable to addiction when they arrived on the scene. Technology amplifies, but does not alter, who we are. We are creatures with a deep and abiding desire to avoid the real. We seek to escape awareness of ourselves and of God through distraction and denial.”<sup>1</sup>

What’s wrong with being constantly on your phone? What’s wrong with the constant social media chatter of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or whatever else you’re connected to? We tend to think that as long as we aren’t looking at anything immoral these distractions are ok.

But, what if it’s precisely the distraction that’s killing you? What if the primary problem with our screen time isn’t what we are watching, but what we are avoiding? Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, noted that people live busy, distracted lives, not because they have to but because they **want** to:

“Unconsciously, we want the very things we complain about...We want to be harried and hassled and busy. For if we had leisure, we would look at ourselves and...see the great gaping hole in our hearts and be terrified...Diversion serves to distract humans from a plight too terrible to encounter directly—namely, our mortality, finitude, and failures.”

And thus, Pascal warns, by avoiding the things that might lead us to repentance and faith, our diversions “lead us imperceptibly to destruction.”<sup>2</sup>

In the vision of the 7 trumpets, God uses judgements to break through man’s fatal distractions. C.S. Lewis said:

“Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world. No doubt pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But

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<sup>1</sup> [https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/06/self-denial-age-distraction-dean-abbott.html?utm\\_source=The+Imaginative+Conservative+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=870c17a853-Weekly+Newsletter\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_6c8d563f42-870c17a853-132535865&mc\\_cid=870c17a853&mc\\_eid=905e1e9ace](https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/06/self-denial-age-distraction-dean-abbott.html?utm_source=The+Imaginative+Conservative+Newsletter&utm_campaign=870c17a853-Weekly+Newsletter_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6c8d563f42-870c17a853-132535865&mc_cid=870c17a853&mc_eid=905e1e9ace)

<sup>2</sup> Taken from “Pascal on Our Addiction to Distraction” - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/pascal-on-our-addiction-to-distraction/>

it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.”

This morning we’ve come to the vision of the 7 trumpets. Here we see God planting the flag of divine truth in the fortress of this rebellious world. These trumpets are God’s megaphones meant to rouse a deaf world.

### I. The Significance of Trumpets

The original readers would be well aware that trumpets are instruments of proclamation. They are specifically connected with announcing the arrival of the King’s messenger. If the king had an important message for his kingdom, there was no email, no television or radio. Instead, the King would send messengers throughout the land. Upon entering a town or village, they would sound a trumpet to summon the people to gather in order to hear the message from the King.

We see the same thing in Scripture.

- When God appeared on Mount Sinai in the days of Moses, there was a mighty blast of heavenly trumpets summoning the people to gather.
- When God gave Moses instructions for the tent of meeting, he commanded Moses to make two silver trumpets to be used to call people to holy assembly before the Lord.
- In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Paul writes that on the last day, *“the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. ”*

Trumpets were also a part of military combat. They would call the troops to ready themselves for battle. In the book of Joshua, they are the actual weapon! Boys and girls, do you remember the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho? Remember that on the 7<sup>th</sup> day the people walked around the city 7 times, and then the priests blew their trumpets and the walls of Jericho collapsed.

The trumpet vision tells us that we are in a military context. This isn’t a symphony, it’s a battlefield. The trumpets summon the earth to hear a message from the Great King for the world and for the church. **Dennis Johnson** summarizes their significance well:

“The purposes of the trumpet cycle are to sound alarms, warning the complacent and calling them to repentance, and to summon the church to holy spiritual warfare.” (141)

It is not surprising then that the trumpet vision begins with the prayers of the church.

### II. The Place of Prayer

**Rev. 8:3-4** *And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.*

In the OT, the altar of incense was placed directly by the curtain, behind which was the ark of the covenant – the Most Holy Place, the dwelling place of God. Here we have a scene from the heavenly temple. The altar of incense is here, directly before the throne of God and the presence of God – but this time there is no veil. What happened to the veil? It has been ripped in two by the death and resurrection of Jesus!

Jesus wants us to know that our prayers ascend directly to the heavenly presence of God, and they are a sweet incense to him. We have direct access to our Lord in prayer – and he delights to receive them!

More specifically, Jesus wants us to know that our prayers are an integral part of Christ's sovereign engagement with this world! Notice in verse 5, the angel takes the censor and fills it with fire from the altar and hurls it to the earth – with great effect! Thunder, lightning, and earthquake. Things happen when God's people pray. The Devil's kingdom is shaken by the prayers of the saints.

**D. Johnson:** "The imagery is powerful: Christians' prayers are integral to the downfall of the gospel's enemies."

You see this in the life of the NT church. This is why the apostles determined that their ministry must be devoted to "the Word and to prayer." This is why Paul appealed to the church to "pray without ceasing." Prayer is the church's part in the accomplishing of God's sovereign purposes in the world as he gathers his elect and judges his enemies.

Remember in the very early days of the church, when they were being threatened by the Jewish religious leaders? Persecution for the name of Christ was suddenly becoming a reality. The battle with the kingdom of darkness was on. The church understood exactly what was going on. They prayed Psalm 2: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain against the Lord and his Anointed? Lord, you know the threats we are receiving from the enemy. Give us boldness to testify in your name."

**Acts 4:31** *And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

This vision reminds us that we do not live in this world as helpless victims of the world's opposition and oppression. We live in this world as active agents and participants in the

sovereign purposes of the living Lord Jesus Christ as he accomplishes all that he has purposed in the building up of his Church and the destruction of his enemies. **After** the prayers of the saints are thrown to the earth, the trumpets begin to blow!

This is why I am so eager to see our church grow as a praying church. You can “do church” without prayer – but you cannot do holy warfare without it.

### III. The Sounding of the Trumpets

#### A. Trumpets 1-4

In verses 6-13 we read of the first 4 trumpets. If you are familiar with the 10 Plagues in the book of Exodus, you will notice that this sound very familiar. As the trumpets sound there are devastating effects upon creation – the sky, vegetation, sea, and drinking water are the canvas upon which God displays his hatred of sin and his sovereign power over his enemies. The judgements of God are revealed in fire and hail and blood – remember the Nile River turned to blood?

Notice that though these judgments are devastating they are not total. Only a third of the earth is burned up, a third of the sea becomes blood, a third of the ships are destroyed, and many people perish because the water is made bitter – but not all people. These judgements are awful and devastating, but not complete. Why not?

Because they are meant to warn the earth, not to destroy it. They are a message from God to this world. They reveal God’s absolute utter commitment to destroy what is evil. A day of judgement is coming, but this is still a day of grace! Salvation is possible for those who will repent. And ruin is certain for those who don’t.

This is precisely how Jesus viewed calamities in his day.

**Luke 13:4–5** *Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

The disasters are messages from heaven meant to lead us to repentance. The plagues of Egypt are a perfect OT example. Egypt was a towering pillar of power in the world of that day with vast riches and unparalleled technological ability and ingenuity. It was the unrivaled superpower of its day. But then an 80 year-old-man walked in from the desert, equipped with nothing but a staff and a message: “Thus says the Lord – let my people go!” And a holy battle was engaged between the sovereign God and the stubborn heart of the mighty Pharaoh. The 10 plagues, much like the trumpet blasts of this vision, were God’s messages to

Egypt as he exposed the utter futility of Egypt's false gods, the folly of their pride, and the reality of divine judgement. That's the message of the trumpets.

**B. Three Woes.** After the first 4 trumpets, John sees an eagle crying "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth." The Hebraic way of emphasizing something is repetition. Three-fold repetition is extremely rare. "Woe" is bad. "Woe, woe" is extremely bad. "Woe, woe, woe" is unimaginable horror. And that's what we see in the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet.

### C. The 5th Trumpet (9:1-3)

*Rev. 9:1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit.*

The fallen star is the Devil. In verse 11 we are told that he is "the angel of the bottomless pit." His name is Abaddon, which means "destruction." As he opens the shaft to the bottomless pit, he unleashes a terrifying horde of demonic locusts which arise out of the smoke that billows out from the abyss. The demons of hell are let loose on earth.

I remember reading a survivor's account of the German concentration camps, and he was commenting on how quickly the manners and traditions of modern, civilized Europe collapsed into barbarian brutality and animal cruelty. He said we forget how thin the veneer of civility truly is, and once you rip the veneer, the demons of hell come swarming through the torn fabric.

#### 1. Their Work

These demonic forces are allowed to torment those who dwell on earth with great pain. The suffering will make people long for death, but just as death cannot protect people from the wrath of the Lamb, so death will not be able to rescue them from the torments of the Devil.

But notice, they are sent to harm only "those who do not have the seal of God on their forehead." Remember, last week we saw that the angels who had been given power to harm the earth were told to wait until those who belonged to God had been marked with a seal on their forehead. That seal was the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, the protective power of that seal is manifest. The demonic locusts are not allowed to harm the children of God. The Devil is only free to inflict true harm on his own children.

#### 2. Their Appearance

John takes pains to describe what they look like:

**Rev. 9:7-8** *In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth;*

- The locusts were like horses prepared for battle – they are coming to make war and bring death.
- On their heads are golden crowns – signifying power.
- Their faces are like human faces – the Devil does his most devastating work by presenting himself as one of us and seeking the best interest of humanity. Demonic power never advertises itself as demonic power – always as human interest.
- Their hair is like woman's hair. A woman's hair symbolized her beauty. Demons wield their power through our desire for beauty, for pleasure. The Devil appears as an angel of light. These demons hide in the appearance of beauty.
- But their beauty is betrayed by their teeth. Their teeth are like lions' teeth. Their intent is to devour. The beauty is just a ruse, a clever deception.

I remember seeing a poster once of an extremely attractive woman, clearly seducing with her posture and dress. But her image was reflected in a mirror – and in the mirror her face was demonic with vicious fangs.

This is not a sci-fi movie. This is what is happening in our world today. Billions of people are being deceived and devoured by the demons of hell. The spiritual darkness descending on our land is God at work in judgement, giving men over to their perverted passions.

We don't have time this morning to unpack the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet. It is a summary of the other judgments, with a third of mankind being killed by the four angles and a vast army of mounted troops. It is, once again, a scene of great conflict, destruction, and loss of life.

This is God planting the flag of truth in the midst of a rebellious world. God is speaking in wars, natural disasters, and economic collapses. These things are not "just the way things are." They are messages from heaven. And these messages tell us the way things truly are:

- Those who dwell on earth are under condemnation because of their sin – and a day of judgement is coming.
- The fact that history continues is due to the patience of God.
  - 2 Peter 3:9** *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*
- God promises that those who repent of their sin will be forgiven. Those who recognize the great danger they are in and flee to God's mercy and love for refuge will be saved. They only need repent.

Which makes the last two verses of chapter 9 so tragic.

#### IV. The Response of the World

*Rev. 9:20-21* The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Just like Pharaoh of old, the patience and punishments of God only harden the hearts of this world. The more the Lord is kind, the more they scoff at the idea of judgement and the need to repent. When he brings temporary and limited pain to wake them up, they curse his name and charge him with wrong. The one thing they don't do and won't do is repent.

Why not? Because sin is, by nature, bondage and blindness. It darkens the mind and corrupts the desires so that people love what is evil and hate what is good and would rather perish in hell than submit to the loving Lordship of Jesus Christ. Only an act of God can open the eyes of the blind and turn a heart to repentance.

**Application:** What would the benefit of this vision be for the early church? What does Jesus want his church to see?

1. **Reasons for comfort.** The church was so small, so powerless in the face of the great political and religious powers surrounding them. They were being persecuted and scorned. But they needed to see that since King Jesus holds this whole world in his hands – they were safe. They were sealed.

The loving sovereignty of God in our life is one of the most essential and comforting truths of the Christian faith. We are not victims of circumstances or consequences in this world. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. "Peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives. But my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. In this world you will have trouble – but I have overcome the world" (see John 14:1, 27; 16:33).

2. **A world under judgement.** It may have been frustrating for the early church – why weren't others flocking to receive the glorious good news of redemption in Jesus Christ? The answer, in part, is found here – the hordes of hell have blinded their eyes. They are captive to spiritual powers. This is a deeply humbling, knee-bending truth. Why should God have opened our eyes? Why did he give us ears to hear?

3. **This is a day of gospel ministry!** God is patient for a reason – he desires that men be saved! Human history continues purely for the sake of gospel mission! God is gathering his elect and building his church. And he has called US to join his cause – to engage in this holy warfare by prayer, to live for his glory, to trust in his purposes, and to await his coming.