

God's Judgement and Mercy - The Trumpets

MJCF August 30, 2020

Revelation 8:1-13, (9:1-21)

Recently, in the book of Revelation, we've been looking at what happened in John's vision when Jesus Christ, "the Lamb", opened the seven seals. After six seals are opened, there is a pause where angels are told to hold back the winds (of destruction) until those who follow God are marked for salvation. Today, we read about the seventh seal being open. This seal introduces the seven angels who blow seven trumpets, bringing new disasters. These judgements are most likely symbolic, and are repeated in various ways. First, we read about the seven seals, then the seven trumpets. Later, we'll hear about the seven bowls of wrath. These really say the same message, repeated in different ways.

Before we get into today's chapter, I'd like to remind you that there is more than one way to interpret various passages of the Bible, especially in the book of Revelation. Many people think Revelation is like roadmap of the future. They believe the visions are actual events that will happen at the end of time. I imagine that many who believe this have not actually studied the details of Revelation thoroughly, and they may have just accepted someone else's interpretation...

Much of the details in this series of messages come from the "Believer's Church Bible Commentary," as well as my studies and discussions over the years. As I've mentioned at the beginning of this series, if we're trying to understand Revelation, it seems to fit best to see it as a series of paintings, rather than a roadmap of the future. The paintings reflect the truth of God at work in the world, both today, and at the end of time.

Earlier chapters show the joy of believers in heaven. Today, we see the other side, the judgement of the wicked on the earth. Chapter eight and nine are full of terrible judgements and cosmic disasters. These are fearful images. Do they come from God? We may wonder, "How can a loving God do such terrible things to people?" One way we can look at many of these judgements is to see them as the natural consequences of sin in our world. God protects us from many difficulties in life, but sometimes God steps back and lets us go our own way. When God withdraws, and we go our own way, we eventually experience the misery and consequences of sin. Yet, in the judgements of Revelation, the evidence of God's mercy is also clear. God is ultimately in control of everything and, in fact, God is limiting the judgements. They come and they go, and not everything is destroyed.

These judgements, rather than literal happenings, are most likely symbolic of the real pain of those who would refuse God. In refusing God's invitation to follow the Lord, Jesus Christ, many become self-centred, worshipping idols, giving energy to things other than the one true God. To reject the ways of our Creator, results in catastrophe. The judgement images are a warning to them, in hopes that they will repent and accept the forgiveness made possible by Jesus Christ. For those who are believers of Jesus, the judgements are an encouragement to remain faithful even during difficult times. Are we drawn nearer to God when our lives are shaken up? Or, do we give up on God and run away?

The terrible plagues brought on with the trumpet blasts have similarities with the plagues that happened in Egypt. God sends one plague after another, as Moses tries to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves go free. The big difference between the accounts is that the plagues in Revelation are more severe, cosmic in scale. Let's get into the details.

With the opening of the seventh seal, there is silence in heaven. It's like the silence of chapter seven where angels held back the destructive winds. There are many possible interpretations for this silence. It may have been in preparation to hear the prayers of the saints. Or, according to Hebrew tradition, it may have meant judgement is coming. It's like the calm before the storm, making us alert to what comes next.

Before the trumpets are blown, we have an important part where an angel with a golden incense pot offers incense and the prayers of the saints on the altar in heaven. The smoke goes up before God. Then in contrast, the angel fills the same pot with fire from the altar and throws it down to the earth,

beginning the disasters and judgements. The fire could represent purification. God is at work making right all wrongs. The thunder, lightening, and earthquake represent God's power, or God's weapons.

The judgements that come are actually connected with the prayers of the saints. In various ways, we often pray that evil will be conquered, and good will prevail. We long for the time when the suffering of injustice will end. Right now, in society, we are trying to fight for equality with "Black lives matter," equal rights for women, and first nations peoples. Yet, there always seems to be a new problem that we have to work at. As people suffer, we pray that there may be an end. The message of Revelation is that God is in control, and evil will be judged with the unlimited cosmic power of Jesus Christ. Revelation shows this through many powerful images.

I'll highlight a number of symbols, here... After the first trumpet there is hail and fire mixed with blood. This is reminiscent of the plagues God sends to Egypt, in order to get Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves. One purpose of the plagues in Egypt was to show that God is more powerful than the human-made idol gods that were worshipped by the Egyptians. With the plague in Revelation, the message is that God is more powerful than anything. We read that 1/3 of the earth was burned up, and 1/3 of the trees were burned up. Here is evidence of God's mercy. Not everything is destroyed. In fact, 2/3 of things are not destroyed.

The second trumpet brings something like a burning mountain that is thrown into the sea. This could be a symbol of the great nation of Babylon falling. The image could also be related to powerful volcanos that people experienced at that time... We read that 1/3 of the sea becomes blood, and 1/3 of the living creatures die, and 1/3 of the ships are destroyed. Again, the destruction is limited to one thirds. One of the plagues that happened in Egypt causes the water to turn to blood, so this is another parallel, but on a much larger scale.

The third trumpet brings a star that falls on 1/3 of the rivers and springs of water. Falling stars symbolized the end times. Named "Wormwood" this "star" poisons the waters. Wormwood is a type of plant with a bitter taste. Here, it could represent the bitterness of idolatry and God's punishment. It could be a judgement on the river gods that people sometimes worshipped in those days. God's power is way beyond any other gods or idols people may try to worship.

With the fourth trumpet, 1/3 of the sun, moon, and stars are struck. This darkening of the light connects with the plague of darkness that also happened in Egypt. Darkness represents separation from God. Yet, here again we have a lot of one thirds. Not all the light is destroyed, and there is still room for people to repent. For those who think that everything in Revelation happens literally as written, it's pretty hard to imagine what might literally happen to life on earth if the sun loses 1/3 of its light. We wouldn't be around for long. Also, back in chapter six we've read that the stars have already fallen from the sky!

With the 5th trumpet come an army of locusts who are told not to damage the grass of the earth. But, with the first trumpet we read that all the green grass was already burned up! In Revelation many of the symbols are repeated in different ways. The judgement and destruction of Babylon actually happens three different times in the book of Revelation!

Anyway, the locusts come from a bottomless pit. Some think that the image of smoke rising from the pit mean it is a place of hellfire, but the pit was an image of the underworld where people thought they go when they die. They called it Sheol, or Hades. It was considered a place of darkness and gloom, but not a fiery place like the Hollywood images of Hell. The smoke rising from the pit more likely is an image of a swarm of locusts coming out. Again, the plague of locusts is reminiscent of the plagues in Egypt. Only here, they are like demons. With faces, they have intelligence. With women's hair (long hair) they have strength (like in the story of Samson and his long hair). With teeth like a lion's, they are fierce, causing destruction both from the front, as well as behind with their tails.

Finally, four angels who had been bound are released on a certain year, month, day, and hour to kill 1/3 of humankind. God is the one in control, ready to let them out at the exact time that God allows.

Following this there is a great army (200 million troops on horseback) representing superhuman power to inflict harm. The descriptions of the army are demonic and ferocious. Satan is represented here in the horse tails that are in the form of serpents...

Even after all these terrible judgments, we read that “the rest of humankind who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent...” This reminds me of Pharaoh not repenting even after many of the plagues in Egypt.

So, as we think about what these judgements all mean for us, we need to keep a few things in mind. Even though they are likely images that symbolize judgement on evil, we still need to take evil seriously. Are we following our Lord, Jesus Christ? We likely have areas where we need to repent, and turn back to God. Yet, we don't need to be overly afraid of evil. Jesus Christ already won the battle against Satan, through sacrificial love, on the cross. Our choices matter. If we've accepted the forgiveness of Christ, we are “sealed for salvation.” We then have nothing to fear regarding the terrible plagues of Revelation. The good news is that even if we haven't accepted Christ, God is still merciful. God may allow our world to be shaken up, yet God gives space for us to turn back. As it says in 1st Timothy chapter 2 verse 4, God “desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Let's pray.

O Lord, the judgements brought on by the trumpets in Revelation are scary. Thank-you that even there your mercy is evident. You hold back and limit evil. You are all-powerful and loving, but you are also just. Thank-you for your justice. Thank-you that evil is punished. And, thank-you that even though we all have sin, and evil tendencies, through Christ you have given us salvation. When we see those areas where we've fallen short, help us to repent. Thank-you that you actually do not let us go on for too long in unhealthy ways. Thank-you for the consequences, even for pain, that may help us realise we've been on the wrong track. O Lord, God, we thank-you for your church, for each person here, and for those who were not able to make it. We are all at different places in our journeys of faith. May we continue to learn from each other as we grow in our relationship with you. And, thank-you for the power of prayer, that you hear our prayers, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.