

Revelation 8-11: Trumpet Warnings

By chapter 8 of the book of Revelation, six out of seven seals have been opened. Now we come to the seventh seal. When the seventh seal is ready to be opened there is silence in Heaven for half an hour. And John writes, "I saw seven angels standing before God. To them were given seven trumpets." So the seventh seal opened seven trumpets. What do the seven trumpets do? Broadly speaking, trumpets make noise. Why do people blow on trumpets? They want to announce something, which could be triumph, remembrance, celebration, or warning. What are these trumpets going to announce? They blow out words of further troubles upon the earth.

The first, second, third and fourth trumpets blow out the note of warning on the earth. For example, Revelation 8:7-9 say, "The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed." As you proceed through the trumpets, they are signs of trouble. There is no mistaking that the trumpets release more trouble on the earth.

What might these symbols be all about? First of all, I want you to notice that early on, in Revelation 8:3-4, it says that,

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

Only then do the angels begin to blow their trumpets. I take this to refer back to chapter 6 where we have the saints who have been slain, calling out for God's judgment upon the earth and asking how long until their blood is avenged. They call out to God for justice. That call for justice, call for vengeance, is then answered by acts of judgment from God.

The trumpets are roughly like some of the 10 plagues of Egypt. Hail and fire is the first trumpet. There was also hail and fire upon the Egyptians. Then the sea was harmed and became like blood. That also happened to Egypt. Next the sun was struck. The plague of darkness was like that one. And so these plagues look kind of like the plagues in the land of Egypt at the time of the exodus. What did those plagues do? What did God mean to accomplish by those plagues in Egypt? They showed the power of God. But He also wanted them to repent. The Egyptians were called to recognize that God is the living God. The plagues were both judgment and a call to repentance. In fact all the judgments that we have in this earth are both. For example, diseases are plagues from God. Disease reminds us of our mortality and that we should get right with God because we are going to die. And some people get some diseases due to personal sin, though not all diseases are that way. Alcoholism is another example, which also is sin.

In 1993 there was a flood in the St. Louis area. Was that a warning or a judgment from God? The answer is not a simple yes or no. If people asked if it was from God, I would say it was. It reminds us that nature is not under our control. Did we talk about this? A levy had been built called the Monarch Levy near the Missouri River and it was going to be the king of all levies. It was said the levy would not be breached more than once in a thousand years. It was a thousand year levy. But it lasted fewer than 10 years. That seems to be a warning that you cannot control the world. God is still God and He may want

to remind us. Whenever catastrophe strikes it reminds us that God is sovereign and that God has justice and has the power to judge. That is what's happening here in this section. The burning hail and the sea stricken and a burning mountain and rivers afflicted by a falling star and natural resources being destroyed in the sky, are all indications that you have time to repent but you must take advantage of it.

In Revelation 9:20-21, near the end of the trumpet description, it says, "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts." The point was to get them to repent and to warn them. But they did not stop "worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts." The word of all judgments, of all plagues, is the same. The message is repent. You are going to die. You are going to face God. All catastrophes warn us to consider eternity, as do all diseases. It is not that God singles out any particular group or individual as the most spectacular sinners deserving a special wrath. We are all sinners before God. That is the point. We all need to get right before God. Remember also that the locust plague in chapter 9, as an example of all plagues, does not simply come from God, but also come from Satan. He delights to bring his plagues on everyone. But God protects His people so they do not receive the worst of it. Even if they die they are protected. Satan strikes his own above all.

Chapter 10 moves to a very different scene. We have a vision of a mighty angel coming down from heaven. Who does he sound like to you? He comes down from heaven, robed in a cloud with a rainbow above his head. His face is like the sun. His legs are like fiery pillars. Who does he sound like? He sounds vaguely like Jesus from chapter 1. This is certainly a good and great figure of some kind and I take it to be literally, a great angel. One of the great and mighty angels has come. And he comes bearing a scroll. Now this scroll has a message that is sealed up. But there are clues still about its meaning. One of the clues is actually that it is called a mystery. The day is when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, which is the seventh trumpet. Now the mystery of God will be accomplished just as He announced to His servants the prophets. The word 'mystery' in the New Testament ordinarily means the mystery of the Gospel. A mystery is not something that is unsolvable, but rather something that can only be known when God reveals it. That is the meaning of the word 'mystery.' It is not an inscrutable riddle but a riddle that only God can uncover for us. So I think that the mystery is the Gospel.

Next John is given a scroll to eat. He is not supposed to tell what is on that scroll, but he does describe it a little bit in Revelation 10:10. He has this little scroll and it is as sweet as honey in his mouth when he is eating it, but in his stomach it turns sour. Then he is told in Revelation 10:11, "You must prophecy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." There is another scroll that a prophet is told to eat in the Bible and it too tastes sweet initially and then it turns sour. The other prophet is Ezekiel. When Ezekiel gets this scroll, he is told that he must take a message to a rebellious nation whom he must not fear and God will give him words of lament and mourning and woe. And the message is on a scroll that he must take and eat. When he eats that scroll, just as in Revelation, it is sweet in his mouth. But Israel does not listen to what he has to say. They are hard and obstinate and God tells Ezekiel he has to be every bit as hard as they are. They are going to be stubborn. They are going to be as hard as flint. So Ezekiel has to be as hard as flint too. It is his responsibility to prophecy against Israel and to warn them of the coming judgment. They will not listen to Ezekiel, but he must keep on talking. When Jerusalem falls the way he said it would, then they will start listen. Only then did they listen, because he predicted it and it happened. They thought Jerusalem could not fall.

That is the universal experience of all God's prophets. The prophecy is sweet and sour. It is sweet to know the Word of God. It is sweet because every revelation, even a revelation of woe and warning and judgment and wrath, is still God's truth. It is still revealing of God's nature. If you have no wrath when a drunk driver kills a little child, then you are not in touch with God's nature. If it does not upset you when a corporate executive, who has a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, breaks his contract and sends people to unemployment, while getting extra millions of dollars in bonuses for cutting costs, then you do not understand God's nature. God is a God that loves justice and loves mercy. When there is evil in the world, there is sweetness even in being with God and understanding God's wrath toward evil. That wrath has to do with His purity and His holiness and His justice and His righteousness and zeal to fulfill His kingdom. All those things are good, so even a word of judgment has sweetness to it because it touches on the nature of God.

On the other hand there is bitterness to it. It is not pleasant to tell people that they are going to suffer the wrath of God. We love the revelation of God's nature, but we hate saying to people, "You are a sinner. You are in trouble." So there is bitterness. There is also bitterness when they say in return, "Who are you to say where I am? Just take a look at yourself. Who set you up?" Maybe your answer is that God did. But then they say, "Prove it." So there is bitterness in being an agent of God's judgment. Nonetheless the Word must go forward. And the Word does go forward.

Chapter 11 describes the same thing in somewhat different ways. In Chapter 11 there are two witnesses. I do not take it that these are primarily two literal witnesses that are going to come in the last days. That could be so, but I think that it is also true that these witnesses are describing everybody who goes out proclaiming the Word of God in this sweet and bitter experience of describing the Gospel and judgment. The Gospel is sweet, but the word that you can only be saved through the Gospel is not sweet to someone who does not love the Gospel.

What do we know about these witnesses? We know first of all, from Revelation 11:1-6, that God will give them power. They will stand before God and He will give them power. This is an allusion to Zechariah 4 where He sent out two witnesses. The two witnesses also remind us of the 70 and the 12 whom Jesus sent out by twos. And it might remind us of the principle from the Old Testament that every matter must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. The two witnesses are wearing sackcloth, which signifies repentance and sorrow due to the message of judgment and woe. And they have the power to shut up the sky, which reminds us of Elijah. It is a sign that God's judgment would come when He closed up the sky. And they have the power to bring plagues and the power over the water, which reminds us of Moses. He called Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of judgment. And so today they are witnesses reminding of God's judgment. They also measured a temple. Measuring is in the Bible often. In Zechariah it is a sign of protection or knowing. The temple is known. God knows the temple and He will protect His temple, according to Zechariah 2.

The witnesses continue and they are protected by their powers, so their message is proclaimed. But then when they are done they are going to be killed. Revelation 11:7-13 tells us,

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. But after the three and a half days a breath of life

from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

I am not going to tell you that I understand everything in this vision, because I do not. But I am sure I understand a few things about this vision. One thing is that these two men are witnesses of the church. They are lamp stands. They are two lamp stands, according to Revelation 11:4. A lamp stand gives light. Jesus talks about a lamp not being hidden. And the lamp represents the church in chapter 1. In general, lamps give light to all things. So they are light givers. The fact that there are two witnesses signifies completeness. After their witness is over, they are attacked. They are killed and their bodies are exposed, their bodies are disgraced. They are not buried. People are glad that they are dead. They are glad to be done with them. The world is glad that they do not have to hear about judgment anymore.

What is this city? Where do they give their witness? What is this city that gloats over them? It is Sodom and it is Egypt and it is the city where Jesus was crucified, which is Jerusalem. Do you see why I take the book of Revelation symbolically? I am not completely literalistic with things because there is no city that is Sodom and Egypt and Jerusalem. So where are the witnesses killed? What would Sodom represent anyway? What is Sodom? Sodom is the city especially known for its sensuality and immorality and wickedness. What is Egypt? It is the land of bondage, the land of oppression, and the land of mistreatment of the poor. It is the land of oppression of God's people. If Sodom is the pinnacle of sensuality and self-indulgence in the Bible, then Egypt is the pinnacle of oppression. What would Jerusalem be? It would be the pinnacle of false religiosity, of false spirituality and deadness. All three cities will oppress God's people. The sensual do not want to hear about restraint upon their sensuality. The oppressor does not want to hear talk about justice and a God who takes care of the needy and the poor. And the religious do not want to hear the Christians say there is only one way to God. The religious want to say, "There are many ways to God. You have your religion, I have my religion, and we all have spiritual needs. We just solve them in different ways." They do not want to be told there is one way. This is why I say that there are not two literal witnesses because they are killed in all three cities. Will there possibly be two great final witnesses, who will speak with great power at the end of time and will be persecuted in a special way? That is very possible. But the point is that God's witnesses are always liable to persecution. That is actually a theme found not only in Revelation. Jesus says something very similar in Matthew 23. When He speaks to the Pharisees and the scribes about the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, He says, "All the righteous blood that has been shed on earth will come against the scribes and the Pharisees."

Jerusalem is guilty of the blood of all the martyrs. Yet another city is guilty of the blood of all the martyrs, the city of Babylon. That is what Revelation 17:6 says. Later John sees the harlot representing Babylon in Revelation 18:24, and he says, "In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth." So Babylon is guilty of all the blood and Jerusalem is guilty of all the blood and Sodom and Gomorra is too. There is a hidden solidarity between them all. In the last analysis, false religion, oppressive power, and sensuality are all one. They are all mankind shaking their fist against God saying, "I do not want Your rule. I do not want Your reign. I do not want Your Gospel. I want to do things my way, with my religion, for my pleasure, in my power, and do not interfere." And they all agree that God's holy and fearless agents must be stopped, must be silenced. Sometimes it is through actual death. But other times it is through milder means. Sometimes it is by saying, "Sure, we

will give you a place at the table and you can give your word of judgment while we give our word of inclusiveness.” That is another way of silencing.

Some of you may be troubled by the way I am talking about judgment so much. You may be troubled to hear that the saints call out for vengeance. If that is the case for you, consider looking at things this way. All of God’s covenants are one, but all the covenants do not say exactly the same thing. Some things are more prominent in some covenants than others. If you look at the covenants in the pages of Scripture, it is possible to evaluate them or categorize them according to the relative prominence of grace and mercy or love and forgiveness or law, righteousness, and justice. In the covenant of Adam, which was more to the forefront, law or grace? Before Adam fell he did not really need a whole lot of grace. Of course he had sustaining grace, life itself as a gift. But saving grace was not needed before Adam fell because he was not a sinner. So we could say that law, as in “Do not touch,” was more prominent, relatively speaking. Which was more prominent during the period of Abraham, law or grace? There was a law given to Abraham that he had to be circumcised. Was that before Abraham was justified or was it afterwards? It was afterwards. Therefore which one is more prominent? Grace is more prominent. God just calls Abraham out. Abraham was a pagan and God says, “Abraham, I want to give you some promises.” After they have been in relationship for five or six chapters, then God starts talking about the need to be holy. So grace is more prominent. In the Mosaic covenant there is plenty of law, and there is plenty of grace. But relatively speaking, which one is more prominent? Law is relatively more prominent. God and His holiness and God regulating behavior and declaring the consequences of covenant violation are stressed. In the new covenant, the covenant of Christ, which is relatively more prominent? Again there is plenty of both, but grace is clearly more prominent. What about in eternity? Which is more prominent, relatively speaking, law or grace? That is debatable, but do you not see that there is a moment of law that is necessary to open up the eternity of grace? There is a need for the judgment day for the purging of the earth. And there is a time when it is right to say, “Lord, judge now. Remove the evildoers. Avenge the blood of the saints.” The book of Revelation is looking at that time. It is looking at the time when the evils of this world must come to an end so that the reign of Christ, unblemished, can continue for all eternity, because evil has to be rooted out. Every evildoer has to be removed. Heaven is not heaven if there are billions of unbelievers, or if Satan is running around. So there has to be a call for judgment. If we can divide up eternity, in a sense, grace is all in eternity. But there has to be this moment of law of the call for justice before eternity is ushered in. That is why we have so much of a call for vengeance and for justice in the book of Revelation.