

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE VICTOR

A Seal, a Censer, and Six Trumpets
Revelation 8-9

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When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 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. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. 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. 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. The third angel blew his trumpet, and 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 people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. 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. 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).

The book of Revelation is designed to be an immersive book. Apocalyptic literature makes a point and sends a message through emotion imagery and symbolism. It attempts to reach the heart through the imagination and emotion.

It reminds me of an "amusement" ride I experienced last year. The ride wasn't a roller-coaster, it was one of those rides where you are locked into a cart as you are driven into various movie scenes in front of a huge screen. There's sound, lights, sprinkles of water, and the cart moves and shakes as a massive screen makes you feel like you are in the movie. It's crazy because you know that you're not flying around mountains, but the movement of the cart and the scene in front of you makes it feel incredibly real.

Now, in full disclosure, I can only describe the first two minutes of the ride I experienced. The reason? Well, the ride was so real that I quickly became nauseous. I kept telling myself, “This isn’t real! This isn’t real!” But it was real. It was real. Then, as we were walking down the ramp after the ride, Savannah asked me if I liked it. That’s when I had to tell her, “The first few minutes were great. But I had to close my eyes for the rest of ride.” It was real.

With a pretty sick feeling in my stomach, we walked out. And then I remembered a sign that I scoffed at before the ride: “Caution: This ride involves sights, sounds, and movement. May cause dizziness or nausea. Pregnant women and wimpy men should be warned.” Of course, the sign didn’t say that, but there was a warning. And I didn’t heed it.

Revelation 8-9 is another warning text that features a series of judgments. These are meant to bring divine justice to the earth, but they are recorded here as a warning. And that gives us our main idea for the sermon. Revelation 8-9 invites us to **heed the warning message**.

In other words, don’t look away from this text. Don’t walk by the warning sign flippantly. Don’t minimize or rationalize what you see here. Take careful inventory as we consider: 1) A Sovereign Plan, 2) The Divine Consequences, and 3) A Dire Warning.

1. Sovereign Plan (8:1-5)

Last week we examined a flashback that recounted the sealing of God’s people as the seals of judgment were opened. Two weeks ago, we looked at chapter 6, where the Lamb began opening the seven seals. However, in that text the seventh seal wasn’t opened yet.

Jumping now to chapters 8-9, we find that the seventh seal is opened, and within this seal there are seven trumpets. More on this later, but we first need to look at the vision John receives. Before we learn about the seven trumpets, there’s an important context that relates to God’s sovereign plan.

First, take note that when the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven. You could think of this as the silence before the storm. There’s no rushing and hurrying in the execution of divine justice. God has a plan, and it will be worked out. You could also think of the parallel between the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection. There was silence. But the silence doesn’t mean that God isn’t right on plan. The silence is part of the plan.

In verse 2 we learn that the seven angels who are around the throne are given seven trumpets. Hold that thought because we’ll come back to it. For now, just note that there are angels with these trumpets as the seventh seal is opened.

Another angel appears in verse 3. He stands at the altar with a golden censer. The last time we heard about the altar, do you remember the context? It was in chapter 6. Under the altar were the cries of the martyrs (6:9-11). This angel is back in that same spot, but this time with a censer.

Do you know what a censer is? It’s a little golden pot in which incense is burned. In religious services it was swung back and forth, and the smoke filled the worship space. If you grew up in a Catholic or

Orthodox church tradition, you know what I'm talking about. In the Old Testament, the censer was brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. The cloud of incense covered the mercy seat over the ark of the covenant before the High Priest sprinkled the ark seven times (see Lev. 16:12-14). In the Old Testament, incense and acceptable sacrifice were linked together.

Notice verses 3-4 and the way that the incense is mingled together with the prayers of the saints. These prayers seem to be the cry for justice and for God's name to be honored. These are the prayers of faithful believers who have persevered through the trials and travails of this life. Their broken-hearted prayers under the crushing weight of a world marred by sin are offered to God as a sacrifice. Their passionate laments become offerings that will result in divine action.

That might encourage a few of you to pray differently this week. Lamenting your desire for justice or the sorrowful prayer when you see evil around you, isn't wasted. I needed a reminder of that this week after a four-hour committee meeting with some of our elders where we were trying to find ways to shepherd the most broken situations you can imagine. It's helpful to be reminded that my spiritual groanings are not wasted. In fact, they are part of the over-arching plan of God.

What happens next is stunning and fits with what we learned last week about singing. According to verse 5, the angel takes the censer (an instrument of worship), fills it with fire, and throws it to the earth. An article used in worship is now used as a mechanism of judgment. It produced "thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightening, and an earthquake." This is similar language used to describe the environment around Mt. Sinai. It represents the powerful presence of God. And in Revelation we now see that the holiness of God has led some to worship, and it will now lead to judgment.

God is holy. He has a plan for the defeat of sin in the world. He's provided a means of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Through Jesus we can be welcomed into the presence of God's holiness. But that depends entirely on which side you are on. A censer of worship became a weapon of judgment. God's plan is to eradicate sin from the world, and we need to be sure we're on the gracious side of his righteousness. Heed the warning.

2. Divine Consequences (8:6-9:19)

Beginning in verse 6 through 9:19, we find an extended description of the judgments that follow. The previous judgments were connected to the opening of the seals—remember the four horsemen? Now these judgments are connected to the seventh seal, which has seven trumpets. Verse 6 tells us that the angels prepared to blow their trumpets.

Before we look at the specifics, I want to bring you into the text. Remember that Revelation is meant to be a book that draws you in. So, let's not remain distant from this text. For example, the trumpets are noteworthy. Perhaps you remember the Old Testament story of Jericho.

And the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the

seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets (Josh. 6:2-4).

You may know that on the seventh day they marched around the fortified city seven times and then they blew their trumpets. I'd like you to listen to a contemporary example of a trumpet blast. Close your eyes and listen so that your heart can see.

Now, what you hear depends on where you are located as it relates to the trumpet. If you are one of the Israelites marching around the city, the trumpet is thrilling and victorious. But if you are inside the city of Jericho and you've heard about the previous cities that fell in defeat, this trumpet blast is frightening. It portends judgment. What you hear and see depends on your position relative to the trumpet.

When the first trumpet sounds (v. 7), hail and fire mixed with blood rain upon the earth, resulting in great destruction. Take note that hail is used here because these judgments are similar to the plagues of Egypt—an unrepentant king and nation fall under the judgment of God as he delivers his people.

The second trumpet (v. 8) and “something like a great mountain” ravaged the sea. Remember the Nile River? Now we have both the land and the sea devastated by God's judgment.

The third trumpet (v. 10) involves a star that fell from heaven, blazing like a torch. Perhaps this is some kind of meteorite or a nuclear missile. It's interesting that this star is given a name: “Wormwood.” This name has significant Old Testament background, especially in the prophets (see Lam. 3:15,19; Amos 5:7; 6:12). It was a bitter herb, and it could contaminate water, even becoming poisonous. The prophets often used “wormwood” for the bitterness of being under God's judgment.¹

The fourth trumpet (v. 12) results in the darkening of the sun, moon, and the stars. This is similar to the ninth plague where darkness covered the land of Egypt for three days (see Exod. 10:21-29).

With the first four trumpets, we have divine judgment on the created world. The earth is destroyed as land, sea, and rivers are affected. The sun, moon, and stars are changed in ways that are frightening. The location and source of human life are devastated. Imagine what that must be like.

On Tuesday of this week (Election Day), from 4:10 am to 7:50 am, we'll see a blood moon lunar eclipse. Maybe you should get up a little early and remember this text.

The final verse of chapter 8 is an announcement that shifts the focus from the activity on earth to spiritual realities that take place. According to verse 13, John sees an eagle flying overhead. The eagle issues a sober warning: “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.” Things are about to get worse. Much worse.

¹ G. K. Beale, [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 479.

Chapter 9 opens with the fifth trumpet and another star that falls from heaven to earth. But in this case the imagery is of Satan. What's more, the text is clear that he is given the key of the bottomless pit. The description here is frightening. It portrays the release of satanic forces. Let me just read the text:

He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them (Rev. 9:2-6).

To make this point even more evident, John narrows the focus on the locusts. It would seem that this description is probably not designed to link locusts with military helicopters but rather to demonstrate that these evil forces are “powerful, swift, intelligent, fierce, and capable of inflicting intense mental and spiritual torment.”²

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; they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon (Rev. 9:7-11).

The names “Abaddon” and “Apollyon” are related to destruction. This is either Satan or a high-ranking demon. Don't forget that these forces are attacking the humans who are not sealed. So, these humans have sided with the devil, and yet they are being destroyed. This is the essence of evil, isn't it? Satan is not interested in rewarding a person's allegiance. He's a destroyer of everyone and everything. He loves to hate, loves to deceive, and loves to destroy. Keep that in mind the next time the temptation to sin comes your way!

Verse 12 offers another warning. There's still more to come. And in verses 13-19, the sixth trumpet is blown. This time a voice is heard from four horns of the altar, releasing even more judgment. Notice again that this is at the command of God (vv. 14-15). However, this time instead of the image of locusts, we see mounted troops—twice 10,000 x 10,000—which is 200 million troops. Again, the description is terrifying:

And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. By these three plagues a third of mankind was

² Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2476.

killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound (Rev. 9:17-19).

The image here is of miserable and painful judgment. It's overwhelming and frightening. These are the dire consequences of being on the wrong side of God. But before you are tempted to look away, remember that this a warning. You might wonder, "How could this happen? How could God permit this?" Let me ask you a question: Could it be that you don't have the right understanding of God's holiness and his glory? It is possible that we easily forget the nature of God's holiness.

With that question hanging in the air, here are the last two verses and our final point.

3. Dire Warning (9:20-21)

You might think that with all this judgment, people would repent of their sins and turn to Jesus. Surely this kind of destruction would humble them! Surely this overwhelming misery would cause them to break! Sadly, however, this is often not the case.

Sin has a hardening effect. And we get a clear sense of this along with a clear description of what kind of rebellion we are talking about. In other words, what does it look like to be on the wrong side of God's holiness?

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 (Rev. 9:20-21).

This is what brings about the wrath of God. This is what it means to be an enemy of God. It's a dire warning. And the question is whether or not we'll listen.

Now, I realize that this is a heavy message. I've tried to be faithful and close to the text so that you can know what it means. Why is it helpful?

First, this text demonstrates to us – yet again – the amazing nature of God's grace offered to us through the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. This text can be a moment of gratitude for Christians to consider what God saved us from. Jesus not only saved us from our sins, but he also saved us from being on the wrong side of God's holiness.

Second, this text reminds us of the despicable nature of sin. Over time and with cultural inoculation, we can minimize the disgusting nature of sin and its effects. This passage helps us to see the diabolical nature of temptation. It shows us the horrors of what sin can do.

Finally, this text is an invitation to consider which side you are on today. Are you part of God's family? Are you marching your way to Zion? Or are you still resisting the call of God? Are you hiding inside the walled city of your rebellion? We need to think about what we'd hear when the trumpet sounds.

Heed the warning.

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