

#15 THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (REV 8:6-9:21)

God's "Israelite" army has been sealed on the forehead, so they can have confidence that they are secure no matter what comes. The seventh scroll has been opened, but before it was completed, seven angels were given seven trumpets (8:3) that are not blown until now. John's vision continually overlaps and interlocks like this. The effect is to portray a unified vision and to say, "This is all about the same thing, but I haven't shown you everything yet." John is now ready to see more layers of God's purposes through the lens of the seven trumpets.

The seven trumpets (8:6-9:19). From a high level, there is a pattern between the succession of the trumpets here and the bowls that come later. The first trumpet and bowl judge the earth, the second the sea, the third the fresh waters, and the fourth the luminaries. The trumpets deal out fractional judgments, while the bowls do not. The sixth trumpet and bowl both have armies coming from the East across the Euphrates. Relating the trumpets back to the seals, there is a significant interlude between the 6th and 7th of the seals and the trumpets.

The content of the seven trumpets bear similarities to the plagues against Egypt — a parallel that will continue with the two witnesses in chapter 11. Hail, fire, water to blood, darkness, and locusts come in both the plagues against Egypt and in the seven trumpets. Both receptors of God's judgments are also hardened by means of partial judgments.⁹⁴

Considering the trumpets and their results, two key questions emerge. **First**, what are we seeing and what is its significance? Bauckham explains that the trumpets and bowls portray intensified versions of the worst *ancient* fears using the language of past biblical judgments.⁹⁵ While the visions here are certainly terrifying, they may not all be the first fears that would come to our mind *today*. In the first four trumpets, we see one-third of much of the created order falling apart as a large portion of their natural resources and means of survival are destroyed.

- **First Trumpet.** We are terrified of hurricanes, they were terrified of hail storms and fire that would consume their natural resources (*cf.* Exod. 9:22-25; Ezek. 5:2, 17; Joel 1:19-20).
- **Second Trumpet.** In recent memory, catastrophic oil spills have been concerning for us, but for them anything that would have killed sea creatures and destroyed their ships would have devastated their already delicate food-supply chain. The sea turning to blood also plays on ancient fears of what happened to Egypt. This is all precipitated by *something like* a burning mountain being cast into the sea — which is likely the image of a kingdom falling (*cf.* Jer. 51:25, 63-64; Matt. 21:21).
- **Third Trumpet.** Bitter waters come as a result of a star falling from heaven onto a third of the waters. Ancients saw the fall of earthly and heavenly powers in terms of stars falling (12:7-9; Isa. 14:12-15; Lk. 10:18). In Daniel, heavenly powers are described as princes of various nations (Greece, Persia, etc.). This image likely unites the judgment against both a kingdom and the demonic spirit over and at work in them (*cf.* Deut. 32:8-9; Ps. 82; Eph. 2:2; 6:12). The contamination of the water supply is terrifying in any society. God declared in the past that he would give Jerusalem bitter food and poisoned water because ungodliness went out from them (Jer. 23:15). Because of the fear of becoming Job's friends, we may hesitate to ever suggest that people or nations are getting a partial taste in this life of what they ultimately deserve, but that is the image here. It is intended to warn them in advance of the whole bowl of wrath being poured out on their fresh waters (16:4-7).
- **Fourth Trumpet.** The ancients viewed changes in the luminaries as signs of change (*cf.* Gen. 1:14). Anyone, whether then or now, would be alarmed at the sudden darkening of a third of the sun, moon, and stars. This language is often used in the midst of judgments against nations (Exod.

⁹⁴ With the plagues against Egypt, this hardening allows Yahweh to display his power so that all the earth knows there is none like him (9:13-21).

⁹⁵ Bauckham, 20. "John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms."

10:21-29; Isa. 13:10; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:2, 10). Since the darkening is partial here, this does not signal the immediate end but rather warns in advance of the day when all luminaries will be destroyed (2 Pet. 3:10, 12). Everyone walking in darkness now (1 John 2:11) is shown to be walking in darkness and is warned that the gloom of utter darkness awaits them (Jude 13) if they do not turn.

- **Fifth Trumpet.** Similar (or analogous) to the fall of Satan and his angels in 12:7-9, a star falls and he was allowed (by God) to unleash hellish locusts from the bottomless pit (11:7; 17:8; 20:1). Locusts normally destroy crops, but this terrifying army *torments* anyone who does not have the seal of God. People will seek death, but will not find it. This 5-month torment is a taste of the torment with no rest found in the lake of fire that comes later for the beast and its worshippers (14:9-11; 20:10; 21:8). Beale explains that “such reminders induce fear and despair as people are forced to reflect on their hopeless situation.”⁹⁶ This trumpet is particularly striking for a couple of reasons. *First*, God is sovereign over this Satanic force which unleashes hell on the earth. *Second*, these Satanic locusts have human-like qualities (vs. 7-8) which may, in accordance with Joel 1-2, depict human armies as hellish beasts ruled by Satan. *Third*, these forces of evil torment those who do not have the seal of God. *God gives up the evil to beget evil that torments the evil.*
- **Sixth Trumpet.** Across the Euphrates in the east were the horse-mounted Parthians who always lingered as a great fear for anyone West of the Euphrates (Rome, Asia, Judea, etc.).⁹⁷ This image and fear will be played on and filled out more with the sixth bowl as kings come from the east across the Euphrates (16:12). Beale suggests that because these angels are *bound* at the Euphrates, they are likely held against their will and thus demonic in nature.⁹⁸ This may be confirmed by the fact that the horses have lion-like heads which breathe out fire, smoke, and sulfur and tails that are like serpents. Again, evil forces torment those who are evil, bringing down 1/3 of mankind.

Understanding both ancient fears and ancient biblical judgments helps us see that the seven trumpets are terrifying sci-fi-like renditions of some of the worst fears of the Roman empire in the first century. Had Revelation been written today, it is likely other images riffing on the themes of hurricanes, stock market crashes, ecological disaster, and modern warfare would have been used.

A **second** question emerges at this point: what is the Spirit intending to communicate through this vision? Bauckham helpfully explains: “The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.”⁹⁹ Instead of using the language of logic, God uses the power of vision to transform our imaginations so we can reconsider modern disasters in light of God’s judgments. This is so that our lives may be changed before the end.

It is likely we are intended to see these example judgments in light of the various disasters today which cause such great psychological pain to those who do not know God. Beale helpfully points out that “The theme of spiritual and psychological suffering [in 9:5-6] explains why sealed believers are not affected, for they have confidence in their destiny in Christ.”¹⁰⁰ Unbelievers give over to despair in such catastrophes, but believers are steady. Those marked with God’s seal may be pruned or disciplined by such events so that they may be more fruitful (John 15:2; Heb. 12:3-11). On the other hand, worshippers of the beast are warned by such events (and by the church’s witness — ch. 11) to repent before they likewise perish (Luke 13:1-5).¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Beale, 183.

⁹⁷ Beale points out that, in the OT, forces of destruction are often pictured as coming from the north (with respect to Egypt and Israel) around the Euphrates (Isa. 7:20; 8:7-8). Considering that John’s first readers are in Asia, these forces are pictured as coming from the east. Beale, 189.

⁹⁸ Beale, 189.

⁹⁹ Bauckham, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Beale, 184.

¹⁰¹ Aligning with the logic of Luke 13:1-5, we can profess that God does not intend for us to see those who are impacted or killed by such disasters (like floods or the COVID-19 pandemic) as more wicked than the rest of us. Unbelievers are warned to repent before a similar or worse fate meets them. [Sealed] Believers are preserved through such disasters.

The rest did not repent (9:20-21). If it wasn't already apparent, the summary of the plagues brought by the six trumpets makes it clear that these judgments were intended to bring those who did not die to repentance. However, as we will see, judgments alone are largely ineffective in turning idolaters and evildoers. Though their idols continue to prove worthless and their sins continue to not give them lasting pleasure and security through the trumpets, they continue to return to idols and evildoing. They are unable to see or hear, just like their idols (Ps. 115:4-8).

What strikes you as significant or impacting from the trumpets and the response to them? What do you believe the Spirit is intending to accomplish in Revelation's readers/hearers in this vision?

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Why do you believe people do not repent after any of the disasters brought by the trumpets? Today?

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APPLYING THE TEXT: *Repentance.* In our secular age of wealth, technology, and scientific understanding, it is easy to put humans on the throne by explaining disasters only by means of human action. While humans often participate in bringing disasters (maybe seen in the 5th and 6th trumpets), everything in Revelation flows from the Lamb and the One on the throne.¹⁰² Only explaining disasters by means of human action makes us arrogant and causes us to think the *real* answer to catastrophes, injustice, persecution, and all of histories problems is something we can make with our own hands (9:20-21): more education, wealth, technology, and scientific understanding. Judgments proceeding from God's throne are not intended to show us our need for ingenuity but repentance. Believers may find they need pruning, but that must not be superimposed that on the unbelieving world which must repent.

One can imagine that if the Tower of Babel event happened today, we would distribute Google Translate devices and move on. If a tower fell and killed 18 people today (Luke 13:4-5), we may only talk and pray about steel frame buildings. These reactions correspond to false mental narratives. As Matt Qualls put it, "Secular headlines may proclaim the effects of such a collapse, but fail to recognize their true source and meaning. Only those who are spiritual, attuned to God's will, appreciate their true significance."¹⁰³

We often treat symptoms more than the sickness. The *real* answer to Chernobyl is not a nuclear reactor that will not explode. The *real* answer to the COVID-19 pandemic is not a vaccine (or, alternatively, a response that diminishes the pandemic). Technologies can be a blessing (I thank God that he used medical technologies to save my own daughter in the NICU), but they can distract believers from being pruned and unbelievers from repenting. Also, one certainly ought to hide when God's wrath comes (Exod. 9:18-21; Isa. 26:20). But the *real answer is to repent or we will likewise perish* (9:20-21; Lk. 13:1-5). Our technological answers to catastrophe may only cause us to temporarily avoid God's softer judgments and earn us a more heavy-handed judgment in God's never-ending quest to wake us up.

¹⁰² Ironically, catastrophes do happen because of humans, but not in the way we normally think: idolatry, greed, injustice, impurity, foolishness, and not worshipping the true God.

¹⁰³ Matt Qualls, *Overcoming with the Lamb*, "The Seven Trumpets," 65.