The Trumpets of God Proclaim the Coming of Christ

Revelation 8

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 8:1-5 The opening of the seventh seal brings silence in heaven at the prospect of the final judgment
* Revelation 8:6-12 In a recapitulation of the ongoing calamities of the church age, four angels sound their trumpets, and disasters of nature affect the land, the sea, the rivers, and the sky
* Revelation 8:13 An eagle announces extreme woe on the earth when the final three angels sound their trumpets
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| **Summary Sentence** | The opening of the seventh seal brings the course of history to the threshold of the return of Christ in power and glory, but John’s Revelation turns back to the beginning of the church age to demonstrate how destructive forces of nature have served to challenge man’s confidence in himself. |
| **Central Idea** |  In every age we are empowered to bring glory to God  |

I don’t really enjoy reading about God’s judgment. I know that it enhances my appreciation of the holiness of God. I know that it increases my gratitude for God amazing grace in my life—that He saved a wretch like me. I know that it teaches me about God’s power and His certain victory over evil. But my thinking is just not right—I don’t want to think about God’s judgment.

This last week we read in the news about the cruel torture and execution of Moammar Gadhafi. It is clear that he was a cruel man—an evil man, and yet I found no pleasure in the brutality of his death. He deserved to die, but I turned away in horror from accounts of his death.

I don’t like the prospect of observing God’s judgment on the wicked. I would much rather be home reading my Bible and eating chocolate. If God intends to bring judgment on the wicked, that’s fine with me—whatever God does is good, I just don’t really want to see it. I don’t want to think about it.

And yet the book of Revelation, as well as some of my other favorite books of the Bible inform us about God’s coming judgment. Many of the books of the Bible affirm for us that one day Jesus will return to judge the wicked, to raise the dead, and to make all things new. That day is coming, and God intends for us to know about it.

If we’re supposed to know about that day, then perhaps the revelation is given to us so that we will know what we are called to do in that day. And as I read the Bible, what I have learned is that whether we are living today in the final age, or whether the return of Christ is thousands of years from now, **in every age the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God**. Whatever sufferings we encounter in our lives, **we have been empowered to bring glory to God**.

So in our study this year, we’re reading in the book of Revelation, and we’re reading about God’s judgment on the earth. How do we know when these events are going to happen?

One of the problems that we have in reading the Bible is that we come to the Bible with an expectation that the events described in the Bible are going to be presented in chronological order. We live in an era that is very much shaped by the rationalism of the Age of Enlightment. Because of our roots in the Age of Enlightenment, we expect reality to be rational, reasonable and scientific. We want our stories to be told in chronological order.

But the ancient Hebrews had a different mindset than we do. That’s not a bad thing; it just is what it is. And so, if we hope to understand the Revelation that God has given us through the expression of Hebrew writers, we need to appreciate the way they thought. We need to observe how they presented ideas in their writing.

The Hebrews didn’t feel constrained to tell their accounts chronologically. The emphasis in Hebrew writing is on concepts, not on timelines.

And so, what you see in the book of Revelation is not a set of events presented one after another in chronological order. Rather, it’s very much like what you see when you watch a football game on television.

You’re watching the game; you see the quarterback throw a long pass to his receiver. You watch the running back race down the field, outrunning and outmaneuvering the defensive linemen. It’s a touchdown! The crowd is on its feet. And then everything stops.

Now we have a replay, where the same play is shown from the vantage point of a camera in the end zone, and we get a whole different view of the events we’ve just seen. Then everything stops again. Now we have another replay, and we watch the play through the lens of a camera that was zoomed in on just one aspect of the action, and we see the same play again.

The accounts of events in the book of Revelation are very much like that. Back in chapter 6, when we saw the vision that was given to John as the sixth seal was opened, what we saw could only have been the utter destruction of this present world. We saw a worldwide earthquake and a cosmic cataclysm.

Listen to the description from Revelation 6:12-14. *“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”*

First-century readers who read the description of the sixth seal would have said, *“I know what this is talking about,”* and they would have remembered our Lord’s words in Matthew 24:29-31. In Matthew 24, the disciples asked Jesus what would be the sign of His return; what would be the sign of the end of this age. Jesus described that day this way. Jesus said this: *“Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”*

So this day in Revelation chapter 6 is the day of Christ’s return. This is the day when Jesus will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. This is the day when Jesus returns to judge the wicked, to raise the dead, and to make all things new. But although the vision given with the sixth seal takes us to the brink of the return of Christ, there’s still another seal to be opened.

Last week we looked at chapter 7, and chapter 7 took us way back in time. Chapter 7 revealed to us from the beginning of the church age—from the time of the second chapter of the book of Acts—God has protected the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit. As we live our lives in this fallen world, persecution may happen; suffering may come to us, but the seal of God’s Holy Spirit enables us to stand firm. **In every age, the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God.** Because of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the sufferings we encounter serve to build Christlike character in us. **In every age, the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God**.

Now, as we come to Revelation chapter 8, we return to the vision of the seventh seal.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 8. Look at verses 1-5. *“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.”*

*“There was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”* What does that mean?

Repeatedly in the Old Testament prophetic books, there would be silence at the prospect of the imminent judgment of God. Divine judgment—when it comes—is an event of such fearsomeness that all the earth keeps silent. The prophet Zephaniah (Zeph. 1:7) proclaimed, *“Be silent before the sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near.”* And so, in verse 1, we see *silence* in heaven, and we know that the day of judgment is here.

The outpouring of the final judgment is described in a summary fashion—just so briefly—in verse 5. Look again at verse 5: “*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.”* There are no details given here, just an abbreviated report of fire from heaven cast down upon the earth along with supernatural thunder and an extraordinary earthquake. This is the seventh seal judgment.

In our study of Revelation, we’re going to see three cycles of judgments. We’ve already seen the seven *seal* judgments, and today we’ll see the first four of the seven *trumpet* judgments. Later on we’ll study the seven *bowl* judgments.

But before we leave the *seal* judgments behind, look with me at the seventh *trumpet* judgment. We’ll need to turn forward to chapter 11. The final description of the seventh *trumpet* is given in chapter 11:19, where it says, *“God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within His temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.”* This description from chapter 11 of the seventh *trumpet* matches the description of the seventh *seal* judgment.

Now look ahead at the seventh *bowl* judgment, which is described in chapter 16. Revelation 16:17-19 says this: *“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.”*

So what we find is that the seventh *seal* judgment and the seventh *trumpet* judgment and the seventh *bowl* judgment seem to describe for us the same glorious event—the final judgment of this present earth in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The seal judgments, the trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments are different in kind and different in intensity, but they all come to their conclusion on the day of final judgment—the day of the return of Christ.

So as we look at chapter 8 verses 1-5, it appears that the sixth and seventh seal judgments have taken us up to the day of the return of Christ. The touchdown pass has been thrown, the runner has made it to the end zone, but now the screen fades to black, and we’re going to see an instant replay of this victory.

We’re going to do a rewind, and we’re going to look at another series of judgment events. These trumpet judgments are designed to proclaim the power of God and God’s sovereign control over nature.

Now, in chapter 8, we see seven angels prepared to sound seven trumpets.

The first-century reader, reading about seven trumpets, would immediately have thought of the battle of Jericho.

When Joshua led the people of God into the land of promise, they found just across the Jordan River a heavily fortified city—an evil city, Jericho—that blocked their entry into the promised land. God commanded that the Israelite army march around the city wall of Jericho once a day for six days, with seven priests sounding trumpets as they marched. On the seventh day the Israelites circled the city seven times, and on the seventh lap, the seven priests sounded the trumpets, and the walls of Jericho collapsed outward. The army of the people of God were able to march straight into the city, and the judgment of God came to Jericho that day.

Like ancient Jericho, which blocked the entry of God’s people into the promised land, the godless cultures that dominate this fallen world must be defeated before God’s people can receive their eternal home in the coming Kingdom of God. The godless, secular cultures of this world will fall before God’s righteous Kingdom is established.

Here in the book of Revelation we see God’s angels announcing God’s judgments by sounding trumpets in the same way that the priests of Israel sounded trumpets to warn the people of Jericho of the coming of God. The trumpet judgments are warnings, announcing the coming of God in glory and power.

We live our lives today in a world that is not the way it’s supposed to be. In spite of the witness of God’s work in history, our world largely dismisses the notion of a righteous God. In spite of the testimony of the people of faith, our world largely rejects the claim of God’s authority in the lives of men. In spite of God’s evident goodness and abundant provision, our world today lives in rebellion against God.

And so, in the course of history, God’s trumpets sound to announce a coming judgment. God’s trumpets sound to warn of the coming of God. God’s trumpets sound in the book of Revelation to announce the certain return of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will come in glory and power to judge the earth, to raise the dead, and to make all things new.

In Revelation chapter 8, with the sounding of the first four *trumpets* of judgment, we see a different class of judgments that God will bring.

Back in Revelation 6, with the first four *seal* judgments, we saw earthly destruction that comes as a direct result of man’s sinfulness. We saw the death and destruction that comes as a result of conquest, of war, and of extreme poverty and famine. The sufferings described in the first four seal visions seem familiar to us. At any time during the church age, we may see these calamities occurring. Conquest, war, famine, death—these are all ongoing characteristics of life in a fallen world.

But by contrast, with the first four *trumpet* judgments, we see disruptions in the natural order. The first four *trumpet* judgments bring God-ordained calamities that disrupt the resources given by God to meet mankind’s physical needs. The four trumpet judgments impact the land, the sea, the rivers, and the sky.

These are fundamental elements of creation, things that mankind has always placed confidence in—the stability of the earth; the vast oceans, teeming with sea life; rivers and streams that provide water for life; the sky, the atmosphere, seasons, the sun, the moon, darkness and light. But with the trumpet judgments, God reveals to rebellious man that these foundational aspects of life are gifts from God. Those who rebel against God; those who victimize God’s people and scoff at God may find one day that God’s gifts will be taken away.

The trumpet judgments, like the seal judgments, are limited in their impact. God permits these judgments to impact only one-third of the earth whenever and wherever they occur. God continues to restrain the extent of His judgment. God continues to offer the mercy of salvation to all who would come to Him in faith. The trumpet judgments warn of the coming of God, rebellious unbelievers have the opportunity to take heed and repent.

Let’s look at these trumpet judgments.

At the first trumpet, John saw hail and fire mixed with blood thrown to the earth, which then burned one-third of the ground, one-third of the trees, and all of the green grass.

How are we to understand this terrible event of hail and fire mixed with blood? It has been popular over the past several decades for Bible scholars to consider this to be a literal description of a single event. But that has not been the way the book of Revelation has been understood over prior centuries. These elements of judgment have been understood over prior centuries as being figurative representations of the sorts of ordeals, the sorts of calamities that may come by the hand of God to visit warnings and judgments on the hardened and rebellious people of earth.

Fire often represents the presence of God. It can represent the presence of God in a good way, as when God led His people out of Egypt by a pillar of fire; but fire can also represent the coming of God in judgment.

Hail brings devastating damage to a land because hail can quickly destroy all the crops in a field. Hail can quickly destroy whole herds and flocks. The result of hail is famine and death. Hail brings disastrous loss. A judgment of hail raises the specter of famine and death.

With the second trumpet judgment, something like a blazing mountain was hurled into the sea, and the result was that one-third of the sea was contaminated with blood; one-third of the sea creatures died, and one-third of the ships on the sea were destroyed. This judgment affects the sea—one of man’s key resources for commerce and food supplies for the world’s people.

What is this blazing mountain? The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the evil city Babylon as a *“destroying mountain”* and the prophet declares that God will make her a burnt-out mountain and submerge her in the waves of the sea. Jeremiah’s prophecy warns of God’s ability to bring to ruin the most powerful and prosperous center of idolatrous living.

The second trumpet judgment may refer to something like a meteorite crashing into the sea, or it may refer to God’s judgment on a wicked kingdom. It may refer to the times in history, or the times in the future when great centers of commerce are suddenly brought low—such as Egypt, or Rome, or Assyria, or the Soviet Union, or Germany. The collapse of such a center of commerce affects economies all over the world.

The third trumpet judgment is described as a burning star named Wormwood falling from heaven and poisoning fresh water sources—rivers and streams . A star from heaven would usually connote a spiritual being, like an angel, delivering judgment from God. In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet warned that because God’s people Israel had turned away from Him, that God would feed them Wormwood and give them poisoned water to drink. This is a warning. When the people of earth fail to honor the God of heaven, God’s abundant blessings may be taken away.

The fourth trumpet judgment presents a scene of reduced natural light. One-third of the sun, the moon, and the stars are affected such that there would be a total absence of light for a third part of both day and night. This judgment would bring to mind the ninth plague against Egypt—the plague of thick darkness that spread over the land of Egypt for three days.

How are we to understand this vision? At its most fundamental level it demonstrates that the elements of our universe that have been most dependable—the rising of the sun, the progress of the seasons, nature’s provision of light and darkness to enable the growth of crops—all of these necessary provisions come from the hand of God. Those who rebel against God; those who victimize God’s people and scoff at God may find one day that God’s gifts will be held back.

It may be that this judgment is a supernatural darkening as happened in God’s plague against Egypt, or it may be that some event like a continuing volcanic eruption brings about the judgment described in this vision. The issue isn’t how the judgment comes about; the issue is whether the godless inhabitants of the earth will heed the warning and repent and turn to God.

One day our Lord will return to judge the wicked, to raise the dead, and to welcome the people of faith into the Kingdom of God. Jesus will return. Just as trumpets announce the coming of God throughout the Bible, the trumpet judgments, whenever they occur, and however often they occur, warn of the coming of God. Jesus will return and God’s Kingdom will be established.

After the fourth trumpet, an eagle appears, and from his flight overhead he cries out, “Woe, Woe, Woe to those who dwell on the earth.” This is meant to be a strong warning. This meant to be an announcement of impending doom. It’s meant to be terrifying.

The warning is given to the *“earth-dwellers,”* to *“those who dwell on the earth,”* and that phrase refers to nonbelievers, not to believers. That phrase refers to those who have chosen to reject the authority of God and to align themselves with the corrupt practices of the world. They are the people of the earth, in contrast to the people of faith, who are people of the Kingdom of God. Earth-dwellers stand in defiance of God, but **in every age, the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God.**

The eagle’s warning serves as a transition between the four trumpet judgments sent by God upon *nature* in order to lead man to repentance, and the far more devastating judgments to come—judgments that involve demonic plagues—demonic woes.

In every generation, the people of faith have encountered opposition and suffering and persecution. In every generation there have been horrifying events that demonstrate the sinfulness and depravity of man. In every generation there have been natural disasters. But in every generation, **in every age, the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God.**

The people of faith, who live their lives with the certain knowledge of the love of God and the goodness of God and wisdom of God find that the sufferings they encounter serve to strengthen their faith and bring maturity of character. The people of faith live their lives with confidence that this world is not their home. One day Jesus will return to judge the wicked, to raise the dead, and to welcome the people of faith into the perfection of the Kingdom of God. We look forward to that day.

In the meantime, as we continue our earthly lives in a world that is corrupted by godlessness and evil, we know that our lives are being used for God’s purposes. We live in world that experiences the judgment of God—the opposition of God, but God in His grace enables His people to have an impact on the world around us. God enables His people to participate in the ongoing work of God in drawing people to Himself. Through the Holy Spirit, God enables us to participate in the work of God in bringing salvation to the lost.

One day Jesus will return, but until that day we are to serve our God by responding to the tribulations of life in a way that brings glory to Him. **In every age, the people of faith are empowered to bring glory to God.**

Let’s close in prayer.