

Study 9: Revelation Chapter 8

Introduction

“...As we studied the seven seals in chapters 6 and 7, we were seeing something of world events affecting the Church. Now we retrace, and go over the whole ground again, seeing that same period between Christ’s two comings – *but this time from the point of view of the unbelieving world ...*”

Body of the Study

Introduction

The Seventh Seal

The First Trumpet

The Second Trumpet

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The Herald of Woes

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 8

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 9 in preparation for the next study

The images describe how one calamity after another is thrown on the earth. Why do you think these things happen like this? Why doesn’t God just do it once and sort things out once and for all?

Reflect on how you (and also on others you know) react to difficulties and calamities. Do they make you a better person, or worse?

Notes for study 9: Revelation Chapter 8

“...As we studied the seven seals in chapters 6 and 7, we were seeing something of world events affecting the Church. Now we retrace, and go over the whole ground again, seeing that same period between Christ’s two comings – *but this time from the point of view of the unbelieving world*¹...”

Introduction

Following the interlude of chapter 7, John’s vision returns to the opening of the seals. The opening of the seventh seal heralds the seven trumpets, which continue through chapter 11. The first four trumpets are revealed in chapter 8. Just how do the seven trumpets relate to the seven seals? One view is of continuing revelation – ie that the events of the seven trumpets follow after the opening of the first six seals. However, another view is of parallel revelation ie that the seven trumpets parallel the first six seals. It is a bit like watching a goal score in a football match on TV. After the goal is scored, we see *the same goal again* but this time from a different camera angle. If we didn’t understand this, the football game would be very confusing! A goal would be scored, followed by another just a minute later, and then another played in slow motion! Add to that, the scores don’t match the numbers of the goals that we are seeing!

In the trumpet judgements, we see God’s wrath revealed from the perspective of the unbelieving world. In the opening of the seals, it was from the perspective of the Christians.

The Seventh Seal

The seventh seal announces the heralding of the seven trumpets. As with other numbers in Revelation, it should not be taken literally, and *seven* means *complete*. But when the seal is opened, things go quiet. “...*When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour...*” (8:1 NIV).

What does this period of silence mean? Some writers suggest that it is like a sabbath period of rest before God brings in the final judgement. Others suggest that it is to emphasise the announcement of the trumpets. Hailey notes²:

In contrast to the constant singing of songs and shouts of praise which have filled heaven’s court, there is now a solemn and awe-inspiring silence bringing in an air of expectation shared with heavenly beings. The tension is the kind that grips one while he waits for some singular event, whether honor or calamity. The opening of the seals now reaches a climax; but is this to be the glorious sabbath rest of promise and of hope (Heb. 4:9), or is it the prelude to judgement?

Let the reader keep in mind that the book is a revelation of the fortunes of the church in the world and the destiny of the world as it opposes the church. The climax is judgement and a revealing of the invincible power of the Christian’s secret weapon: the divine response to the prayer of faith. The Father watches over His own; He hears their petitions and responds with action.

Half an hour is a relatively short period of time when you are busy. But when you have a half-hour of silence it can seem like a long time as you await the end. When I was at school, one of the forms of punishment was “detention” after school. You would have to sit still and in absolute silence for half an hour. [I’ll only admit to doing detention for the times that I was unjustly given it, in case you were wondering ☺] Well, that time just seemed to drag on forever, even though it

¹ Bewes, p. 64

² Hailey, p. 214

was only 30 minutes! The end of the period was eagerly awaited, and focused attention on the things that followed.

After the period of silence, the preparation for the continuation of opening of the seals is revealed “...And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets...” (8:2 NIV). The seven angels are symbolic and represent completeness. Hailey notes³:



There were seven Spirits, yet there is one Spirit; seven churches, but one church; seven horns, perfection of power; seven eyes, perfection and fullness of insight; seven seals, completeness and perfection of God’s plan set forth in one book. Here are seven angels and seven trumpets, signifying unity, perfection, fullness, and completeness of whatever the angels were to do and the trumpets were to signify.

In the previous section, the Lamb opened the seals. In this vision, the angels sound the trumpets. But before sounding the trumpet some more of the scene is revealed. “...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...” (8:3 NIV). The verse gives us a clue as to what the vision is about – the prayers of the saints! Note that it was not just the martyrs who are under consideration, but *the prayers of all the saints*. The scene is reminiscent of the sacrifices under the Old Covenant, where incense was offered to God (Lev 10:1; 16:12). It reminds us that God answers our prayers “...The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand...” (8:4 NIV). But what does God do when He hears our prayers? How does He react to those who are bringing suffering to His people? The answer is illustrated in the vision



“...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...” (8:5 NIV)

³ Hailey, p. 215

This is not an explanation as to where physical thunder and lightning come from, but how God brings judgement and retribution to the enemies of the Christians.

The First Trumpet

God is about to show His vengeance. It is not total judgement against all of humanity, but is of an earth shattering magnitude – one third of the earth – is significant but not total. “...*Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them...*” (8:6 NIV). As with the seals, the first four have a similar pattern, then the fifth is different, the sixth is different again, and the seventh brings in the next event (the bowls).

Trumpets are used to herald an introduction – to announce (for example) that a king is about to arrive, or to warn of approaching danger (Amos 3:6; Hos 5:8).

Shofar "trumpets" (GK G4894; made of a ram's horn) were used in Jewish life as signaling instruments. They sounded alarms for war or danger as well as for peace and announced the new moon, the beginning of the Sabbath, or the death of a notable. Trumpets were also used to throw enemies into panic (Jdg 7:19-20). Their use as eschatological signals of the day of the Lord or the return of Christ is well established in the OT and NT (Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zep 1:16; Mt 24:31; 1Co 15:52; 1Th 4:16). (NIVBC)

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.171) gives a succinct view (from his perspective concerning the destruction of Jerusalem) of the seven trumpets:

“1. The *hail, fire, blood cast upon earth*. These descriptions were symbols of devastation. The earth, as in previous signs, denoted the place of powers (Ezra 1:2), and here applies to the Jewish powers (Rom. 9:28), as the comparison with the records of Matthew and Luke have verified. It is the trumpet of devastation on the land of the Jews, and of judgments on the *land beast*, the Jewish persecutors.

“2. The *trees and green grass*. These symbols signified that the plague of devastation affected *the earth* and all that was naturally of it, or the total destruction of that *part* of the nations represented by the Jewish powers. The meaning of a *third part* was based on the three woes, one part for each woe of devastation.

The first trumpet brings devastation on the land “...*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...*” (8:7 NIV). With the *hail and fire* – God’s retribution – came bloodshed. Since this was done in response to the prayers of God’s people, then the bloodshed has been brought on the enemies of God’s people by their own deeds. With the retribution comes suffering and destruction of the people who live on the earth – but as previously noted, not total destruction.

The Second Trumpet

The second trumpet brings devastation on the sea “...*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, ⁹ a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed...*” (8:8-9 NIV). However, the core of the vision begins when a flaming mountain is cast into the sea. Mountains are used to designate kingdoms (as in Is 2:1-4), and in this instance it is a *huge mountain, all ablaze*. The vision concerns a kingdom that was fully functioning and consuming all who were before it. To the Christians in first century Asia Minor, there would be no doubt about which

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.171) continues:

“(2) The sea smitten – (the second trumpet)

1. The *burning mountain*. The mountain was used to signify a powerful monarchy, as in Amos 4:1 – and the *mountain burning with fire* in this symbol signified that the powers which hindered the church were seething in the fury of preparation for attack and destruction.... In this vision of the tribulations which were so soon to overwhelm the church, the burning mountain symbolized the lust of war, and it was descriptive of the Roman and Jewish persecuting powers.

kingdom was in mind. However, Hailey notes⁴:

The vision indicates judgement upon a worldly society when its center of power is cast down and its economy falls with it. To go beyond this broad application by designating a particular city is unwise, although this pattern fits both Rome and the entire empire when they fell. The description reveals a general corrupt condition and its consequences, which could involve any society.

The Third Trumpet

Next comes a storm of pollution. "...*The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water...*" (8:10 NIV). The previous destruction had been of the sea, and now the inland waters are also affected. Stars and cosmic characters are often used as symbols for those in power. The fall of the great power came at the call of God, and brought about further destruction. Those on the earth felt the consequences "...*the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter...*" (8:11 NIV). Harkrider notes⁵:

Wormwood is a bitter plant that is often mentioned in the Old Testament, usually in connection with divine chastisement against idolatry (Duet. 29:18; Jer. 9:15; 23:15). In this third trumpet, wormwood in the fresh waters symbolizes the bitterness and sorrow that men will suffer because of their profanities and their idolatries. Not everyone, but many, died because the waters were made bitter.

Hailey adds⁶:

In contrast to the seven torches before the throne which illuminate and comfort (4:5), this blazing torch brings bitterness and woe to society... When men prefer the bitter waters of idolatry to the fountain of living water, they will receive these bitter waters with the fatal consequences which follow.

The Fourth Trumpet

Next comes a cosmic destruction "...*The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night...*" (8:12 NIV). The image is reminiscent of the ninth plague of Egypt (Ex 10:21) where the sun was darkened. Such imagery was sent as a warning to those who do not obey God.

The heavens are struck with partial darkness, reminiscent of the ninth plague (Ex 10:21-23). The references to "a third of . . ." refer to a

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.173) continues:

"(2) The rivers smitten – (the third trumpet)

3. The *waters became wormwood.*

Wormwood was the name of a plant, distinguished for intense bitterness, and used to denote anything offensive and nauseous. ... In this connection the name of the falling star was called *Wormwood*, for the bitter effects accompanying the downfall and destruction of Jerusalem. It was so revolting that even the mental picture of the physical putrefaction turns to nausea, the bitterness of which only wormwood could signify.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.174) continues:

"(2) The sun smitten – (the fourth trumpet)

3. The *sun, moon and stars*: The blackout of the sun, the moon, and the stars, the darkness of the day and even the denseness of the night are the signs of the stark distress and pall of gloom descriptive of the fourth stroke of the trumpets, in the darkness that settled over the Jewish state and nation.

⁴ Hailey, p. 220

⁵ Harkrider, p. 102

⁶ Hailey, p. 221

partial impairment of the ordinary light from these bodies. In the OT the darkening of the heavens appears in connection with the theophany of God in judgment (cf. Isa 13:10; Eze 32:7-8; Joel 2:10; 3:15; cf. Mt 24:29). An unusual darkness also attended the crucifixion of Christ (Mt 27:45). (NIVBC).

Hailey notes⁷:

Before total darkness engulfs any society, God sounds a trumpet warning to that society. He sends minor judgements which mark the beginning of the society's destruction unless repentance turns the course of its destiny. These four trumpets call for the reformation, not the destruction of mankind.

The Herald of Woes

Before the next three trumpets sound, they are heralded in "*...As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!"...*" (8:13 NIV). Instead of *eagle*, the KJV has *angel*, but the word *aetos* is in other places consistently translated *eagle*. The eagle flies alone, and is ready and swift to swoop down and consume its prey. If the world is not ready, it will soon be the victim. Harkrider notes⁸:

The solemn triple woe announced by the screeching eagle shows that the three trumpets yet to sound are to bring worse plagues than those already delivered.

Historians agree that three major factors contributed to Rome's demise: natural calamity, internal rottenness, and outside invasion. It seems that these three areas are symbolized, first, in the warning sounds of the trumpets, and again, but more completely, in the outpouring of God's wrath from the seven bowls which are yet to be revealed. The first four trumpets were pictures of natural calamity used by God as an agent of destruction. The fifth and sixth trumpets emphasize mankind's role in the downfall of Rome, an empire weakened by internal wickedness and finally overcome by external invasion. In this pageantry the symbolic details are used to make an impression. The lesson is missed if one attempts to interpret a meaning for each specific part of the vision rather than visualising the scene in its entirety portraying a single message.

⁷ Hailey, p. 223

⁸ Harkrider, p. 102