

“Prayers and Trumpets”

Introduction: One of my trusted companions as I study the book of Revelation is author and pastor Eugene Peterson. One of his observations is that Revelation really contains nothing new theologically from the rest of the Bible, but it gives us a new way to hear it. “I read Revelation,” Peterson writes, “not to get more information but to revive my imagination” (*Reversed Thunder*, xi). Revelation, in other words, as a vision, is really a visual book, addressed to our emotion and imaginations. It needs to be felt and heard and seen. Perhaps this is why, at the very beginning, John urges his churches to read this vision aloud (1:3). And so we have just heard a rather long section of this vision to help us do exactly that, to help us feel the truth that this vision seeks to convey. And what is the truth that everything from hailstorms with fire and blood, to horses with heads like lions and tails like snakes, all announced by blaring trumpets, is meant to convey? It is all intended to show is that the holiness and righteousness of God, and the emergence of God’s new creation, require God’s just and righteous judgment. Even more importantly, it reveals that such judgment arises out of the prayers of God’s people.

In fact, as another trusted companion on the Revelation journey, scholar Richard Bauckham, notes, all of Revelation could be regarded as a vision of the fulfillment of the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: “hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 40). What is significant about that, and helpful to us, is that John and his readers lived in a world, not unlike our own, in which God’s name was not hallowed, his will was not being done, and evil reigned through the oppression and exploitation of the Roman system of power.

In chapters 4 and 5, as we have seen, Revelation reveals that God is indeed on the throne, hallowed and holy and righteous, and through the Lamb who was slain, has entered our existence to rescue and redeem the world. The chapters which follow then reveal three cycles of judgments – stylistically structured by seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls – that symbolically picture this rescue. It is not a pretty picture, but it is meant to both wake us up, and to encourage us. Let’s consider these two, trumpet filled chapters, and see how this is so.

I. The Prayers of All God’s People (the “saints”)

A. The sounding of the trumpets is brought on through the breaking of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, but before they begin to sound, a rather dramatic period of silence takes place in heaven. All of the worship, all of the discussion, all of the activity that we have been witnessing comes to a sudden stop. What is going on? Silence, as we have been saying, is not merely the absence of noise. It is a deep time through which we can begin to notice and sense aspects of reality that are ordinarily drowned out by all of our activity and noise and chatter. What John is led to notice is an angel, before a heavenly altar, offering, the prayers of the “saints,” as the term reads literally, brought before the throne of God with the aid of incense.

B. Who are these people? These are all of the people who have been praying “How long, O Lord?” These are the people who have been praying, “When will you rouse yourself, O Lord, and do something about all of the injustice in the world?” In 6:9-10, these are pictured as the followers of Jesus who have been slain because of their faithful witness and who are now waiting under the altar for God to avenge their blood, for God to bring his justice to bear on the earth, for God to cause his will to be done on earth as in heaven.

Illustration: Sometimes we wonder, do we not, whether God is hearing our prayers? We lift them up as devoutly and earnestly as possible, but when the particular situation about which we've prayed does not seem to change, we wonder if our prayers have gotten lost along the way, or ignored when they get there, wherever "there" is. And so the plea of the psalmist, which we heard earlier as we read responsively part of Psalm 55, is a familiar one: "Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me . . . the wicked . . . bring down suffering on me . . ."

C. Well, what the angel is doing, as John observes in the silence, is seeing that our prayers do indeed reach the throne room of God. They are being carried into his presence along with the smoke of the incense. We might even imagine that the silence is demanded by God so that he can make sure he hears every one. But, if he hears them, does he do anything about them? What the angel does next assures us, in dramatic fashion, that he does. The angel scoops up fire from the heavenly altar and hurls it to the earth. Its landing is pictured as peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightening and an earthquake. Remembering that this image of a thunderstorm is meant to convey the just and righteous judgment of God, what it pictures for our imagination is that God is answering our prayers, that prayer does change things, that the prayers of the faithful for the justice of God will not go unheard or unanswered.

## II. The Sounding of the Trumpets

A. And that's what the trumpets go on to convey. Trumpets, in the Bible, serve many functions, from calling people to worship, to announcing the enthronement of a new king, to warning of the arrival of invaders. Perhaps the most famous trumpets in the Bible sounded just before God's judgment of Jericho and judgment is certainly in mind here. But it's important to remember that along with judgment comes rescue and salvation. Judgment and salvation are really two sides of the same coin. If God's new creation is going to emerge, if God indeed in holy and righteous, all that is unrighteous and unholy and stands in the way of his new creation must be eliminated. God's judgment is the judgment of the creator on all that has spoiled his creation; his purpose is to bring it back from death to life. God's judgment means God cares about injustice and will make all things right. It means God takes evil and sin seriously and is not indifferent to it. The sounding of the trumpets indicates that God will act; his just judgment will happen.

B. We need to be aware that what these judgment visions are *not* intended to do is to unfold a linear sequence of events that we can identify and use to predict the end of the world as we know it. The text is too structured and symbolic for that to be the intention. Yes, John seems to use images from the first century world of his readers to get their attention, but the invading armies of horses is not to indicate an invasion of the neighboring Parthians in their day, nor are the locusts to indicate Russian helicopters, as some cold war era interpreters were inclined to conclude. These judgments do have overtones of the plagues on Egypt and what's helpful about this is that those plagues were intended to reveal God's power, move the Egyptians to repentance, and rescue God's people. The judgments of Revelation do much the same thing, though now on a world-wide scale,

C. So, instead of predicting future historical events, these judgment cycles are intended to convey present theological messages. What are they? Let me offer seven, in honor of this frequently used number of completion in the book

1. God is all powerful and all loving. He cares about injustice, he hears our prayers on the matter, and has promised to do something about it.

2. God is sovereign. Any power or authority that evil may seem to wield has been “given” or “allowed” by God and is only exercised under his sovereign hand (e.g., 9:1, 5; cf. Da. 1:2). As one commentator describes it,

The effect [of the judgments] is something like an orchestral performance in which the strings scrape dissonant chords while woodwinds shriek, trumpets blare, and cymbals crash in what seems to be wild discord—except that all the players move to the steady beat that is set by the conductor’s hand.” (Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 93).

3. In the midst of judgment, God is still merciful. The fraction “one-third” appears several times, limiting that which would be destroyed, as does the time period of five months, limiting the torture of the locust attack. These are symbols of God’s mercy.

4. In his mercy, God gives opportunity to repent. These scenes are meant not only to “comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable.” That is, not only to bring hope to those who are being persecuted for their faith, but also to bring warning to those tempted to be drawn into and molded by the pagan culture around them. In perhaps what is the saddest and most tragic commentary in these chapters, many will ignore such warnings (9:20-21).

5. God, through these symbolic visions, is zeroing in on the sin of idolatry. All humans were created to worship, but the demonic would have us worship what is not God in order to draw us away from God. But the things of the earth that we can pursue and worship in place of God will not last and are not dependable.

6. Judgment is real and terrifying. Though symbolic, these symbols do indicate that when judgment time comes, it will not be pretty. We need to take this seriously and ask, “Are we on the Lord’s side? Have we asked the Lamb to cleanse us from our sin with his blood so that, just like the ancient Israelites at Passover had the blood of the slain lamb on their doorframe, we have the protective “seal” of God on our foreheads (9:4)?

7. As the seventh trumpet declares (11:15-19), God and his kingdom will triumph. Through the Lamb who was slain, God has begun to reign, his reign will continue, and, in words made famous by Handel’s *Messiah*: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15).

And so the seven trumpets are the answer to the prayers of the faithful. They declare that, as Jesus taught us to pray, God’s name will be hallowed, his kingdom will come, and his will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. God’s rule is complete, and glorious.