

Revelation 8:1 - 9, 21

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[0 : 00] What did you make of our reading?

Just honestly reflect in silence. How did you respond as you listen to the chapters that we read just a few moments ago?

Do you have any idea what that was all about? What is going on? Or what is being described in those chapters that we read?

We acknowledge them to be God's Word, but that doesn't mean that we necessarily understand what God is saying by or in and through His Word.

I'll level with you and say that I'm not sure. I know what's going on. I certainly don't know the significance of every detail that we find in these two chapters.

[1 : 02] Not only do I acknowledge ignorance of some details, but indeed many of the details in this terrifying kaleidoscope of chaos and catastrophe that the vision of the trumpets assaults our senses with if we read the chapters with any degree of sensitivity and seriousness.

Now, my admission of ignorance, though honest, is hardly promising as I stand on the threshold of preaching a sermon on the vision of the seven trumpets.

Perhaps to help us get an idea of what is going on, we need to begin by listening rather than seeing. Visions generally call us to see, to imagine in our mind's eye what is being portrayed in the vision.

What John does is recount for us what he saw largely, but he also recounts for us what he heard. And maybe that is where we should begin, to begin to understand what is going on.

So what do you hear? As we read the chapters, what did you hear? Well, perhaps the clue is in the name of the vision.

[2 : 20] It's the vision of the trumpets. I hope you heard trumpets sounding forth. Surely if there's one thing we hear as we read these chapters that relate the vision of the trumpets, if we hear one thing, it is surely that.

We hear trumpets sounding forth. The trumpets that John is hearing and I imagine picturing for us are presumably the shofar or ram's horns that we sometimes come across in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

What does a sounding trumpet signify or even demand? Well, it always requires or demands a response from the hearer.

The purpose of the shofar or trumpet was not to entertain. You know, sometimes today we listen to musical instruments to be entertained, and that's a good thing.

But that was not the purpose of this trumpet. It was not to entertain, but to mobilize in some way or other. The shofar, the trumpet as it is translated, was used in different ways.

[3 : 29] We find it being used as a call to worship. We find it being used to rouse an army or a nation for battle. It was used also as an announcement of judgment and the sounding of a warning of some kind.

I think it is this third use that is most prominent in the trumpets that sound in John's vision. The trumpets and the blasting of the trumpets announce judgment and, in parallel, sound a warning to all who are ready to hear.

You know, we often, as we make our way through Revelation, we often highlight allusions to the Old Testament, of which there are many. Some of them are tentative.

Others are more striking and explicit. And on this occasion, we cannot fail to see a deliberate allusion in this vision to the fall of Jericho. You maybe remember the story of the fall of Jericho as the Israelites were taking possession of the promised land.

And on that occasion, you will remember that seven priests sounded seven trumpets as a prelude to the destruction of the city.

[4 : 42] And the parallel is so striking that it can only be deliberate. Of course, what happened at Jericho was an act of judgment on the part of God against the wickedness of Jericho and in favor of his people.

And if you want to remind yourself of that story at some other point in the day, well, you find that recorded for us in Joshua and in chapter 6. The trumpets announce judgment but also warn those destined for judgment.

Now, in the case of Jericho, the warning was ignored. We know the story. We know how only Rahab heeded the warning. In her case, of course, before the trumpets were sounded, but as a result of prior warnings received by all the inhabitants of Jericho, but heeded only by Rahab.

So what do we hear? We hear the sound of judgment and warning. The vision indeed within the chapters that we've read also contains the very language of judgment and warning, and very especially the threefold woe in verse 13 of chapter 8, as the fifth and sixth and seventh trumpets are anticipated.

Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded. So we hear the trumpet sounding, and the very sound announces for us in broad terms what is going on.

[6 : 14] This is a vision of judgment and warning. But what do we see? If we hear trumpets, what do we see? And we're at the level of big picture viewing of the vision.

We're not at the level of looking into all the details of how the locusts were clothed or described and what that could signify. That is not our concern this morning. But at the level of the big picture, what do we see or what are we reminded of?

Well, surely we see the plagues, lots of plagues and lots of familiar plagues. What we see in these chapters is what we might describe as a terrifying global reenactment of the plagues that accompanied and secured the deliverance of God's people from captivity in Egypt.

You know, in the chapters that we've read, and especially in the first few of the trumpets, but indeed in all of them to a certain extent, we've read of hail, we've read of blood, we've read of darkness, we've read of locusts, and of course death.

And the parallels, though not exact, are so striking that the conclusion demanded is that this is not fortuitous, but a deliberate echo of Egypt.

[7 : 27] And what was the purpose of the original plagues? Well, they served as acts of judgment against Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but they also served as a warning to Pharaoh.

And in the case of the original plagues, the very sequence of increasing intensity was a call to submission to God's will. Now, the call was ignored.

We know that. But it was nonetheless a warning call. So we can ask the question again, what is going on? Well, the world has been judged, and the world has been warned.

And we'll focus on the aspect of warning. Not because it's necessarily the principal one, but because it's the one that we're choosing to focus on. And we'll pose a few questions and try to answer them around this theme, revolving around this theme of God warning the world.

The first question, I've kind of answered it even in that sentence of introduction, but the first question I want to pose and try and answer is this. Where are the warnings coming from? What's the source of these warnings?

[8 : 32] Well, at the beginning of the vision, it is clear enough. The vision of the seven trumpets begins in verse 2 of chapter 8, when John declares, And I saw the seven angels who stand before God.

The vision, of course, as we know, is of heaven. John is witnessing what is going on in heaven. Heaven is the source of these warnings that are directed to the world.

They're coming from heaven and have as their source, the king of heaven. God is warning his world. God is judging his world and God is warning his world.

And notice that the angels were given their trumpets. And seven trumpets were given to them. The vision, not just this vision of the trumpets, but throughout Revelation, the vision is full of these, what are sometimes called divine passives, in reference to verbs that we find.

Namely, passive verbs where the subject of the sentence, in this case the giver, is not identified, but his identity is clear. Seven trumpets were given to them.

[9 : 43] Well, who gave them the trumpets? Clearly, God is the one who is giving them the trumpets that they are then to sound. But notice that the very beginning of the vision identifies another, what we might call auxiliary source of the warnings, or at least an explanation for these acts of judgment and warning, namely God's people and their prayers.

You see, immediately having been introduced to the main players, as it were, these angels and their trumpets, we're then told in verse 3, 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 God's people on the golden altar in front of the throne. And then these prayers are lifted up to God and he responds.

And his response is the commissioning of these angels to sound these trumpets and all the events that accompany the sounding of these trumpets.

It is as the prayers of God's people rise as incense or together with the incense that God responds in the manner so terrifyingly described in the vision.

[10 : 54] The plagues serve, at least in part, as God's answer to the prayers of his own, often persecuted and abused people. You remember it in chapter 6 in the vision of the seven seals, how when the fifth seal was opened, we encounter those who have been martyred because of their loyalty to Jesus.

And one of the things that they're doing is crying out to God, How long, O Lord? How long? And the answer that they're given is just wait a little moment more. Well, their waiting is coming to an end.

And we read of how their prayers raise to God and God responds. And so the source of the warnings principally is God himself, but we see how God's people participate in this sense by the prayers that they bring to him.

That's the source of the warnings. But what do the warnings look like? We're thinking of the nature and effect of the warnings. Now, given that the broad brush manner in which we're trying to deal with these two chapters, replete with details and pregnant with possibilities for speculative adventures, we're going to effectively ignore the details and try to provide an outline of the nature of the judgments and warnings announced by the first six trumpets in this very broad brush manner.

The first four trumpets that we read of from verse 6 through to verse 12, they seem to announce and call forth natural disasters of one kind or another.

[12 : 25] The ESV Study Bible provides a helpful summary in few words, and I'm simply really stealing from that. The first trumpet, hail and blood cast on land, one-third burned.

The second trumpet, burning mountain cast into the sea, one-third bloodied. The third trumpet, burning stars, fallen rivers and springs, one-third embittered. The fourth trumpet, sun, moon, and stars, one-third darkened.

Now, as we see these plagues that accompany or that are unleashed by the sounding of the trumpet, I don't think it's wise to try and match up these descriptions with any given natural disaster in history.

Though it's possible that the original readers, John's original readers, may have been alerted by some of these descriptions to actual disasters that they had witnessed or had participated in some way.

Some particularly highlight how the third trumpet's description would seem to tie in with what could have been the erupting of Mount Vesuvius that the readers, the original readers, would have been very familiar with, certainly would have heard about.

[13 : 35] It was in their own lifetime. But the point is that these are not literal descriptions of any given actual event, but are descriptive of any number of natural disasters that have so afflicted our world throughout history, and especially our concern is in what we understand to be the last days.

And our understanding of that expression covers the period from Jesus' first coming to His second coming, the period in which we are living. Well, that's the first four trumpets.

The fifth and sixth trumpets, the locusts, these terrifying locusts, and this huge army of mounted troops. They describe some kind of demonic army, and it takes us to another level as they announce and call forth violence on a horrific and massive scale.

With the fifth and sixth trumpets, the catastrophes described are explicitly attributed to satanic forces of some description, whether that involves Satan employing human armies or actual demons or both.

We can argue and debate about that, but we're not going to do so. What is the effect of these plagues or catastrophes or disasters? Well, all of them are destructive.

[14 : 56] In some measure, all of them are destructive. All of them are deadly. But it's also important to note how very explicitly they are all described as being limited to some degree.

We've noticed how the first four, it's a third of whatever it is being affected, be it the land or the sea or the sky. A third is affected.

So they're limited. This is not final and absolute destruction. This is judgment that is in some way controlled from heaven with the deliberate intention of restricting the destructive capacity and extent of the plagues and acts or acts of judgment.

We see this kind of thing all around us. The language is fantastic, you know, in a kind of the literal sense of that word. But we only need to look around us in the world in which we live and we see the things described.

You know, even these past weeks, we've heard of monsoons and earthquakes. We hear of famines. We see the continuing and seemingly unending violence in Syria that has been going on.

[16 : 05] And yet we've, many of us, I think, have been oblivious to because somehow it's gone off the radar. And then last week, we hear of it again as new disasters have led to death and bloodshed.

And, you know, the list could go on. And it all appears to be mindless and unbridled and out of control. But that is not so.

Hard though it is for us to get our heads round, we can and must recognize that God is still in control. These disasters, these catastrophes are limited, are restricted by God.

The plague, certainly the violence that follows the sounding of the fifth and sixth trumpets, are also directed. While the natural disasters, though limited, are indiscriminate in the sense of not distinguishing between God's people and God's enemies, the violence described in this vision that accompanies the sounding of the fifth and the sixth trumpet is described as being directed to God's enemies.

God's people enjoy God's protection. We've already heard in chapter 7 of the seal that is placed on God's people, a seal that grants protection to them.

[17 : 27] And there is a reference to that in this chapter, in chapter 9 or in the second chapter that we've read when the fifth trumpet is sounded and the horrendous violence that is unleashed.

We read there in chapter 5, or rather in chapter 4, they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

And so somehow in some sense, in the midst of these particular catastrophes, whatever they're intended to describe, they are directed to the enemies of God and God's people, those who enjoy the seal enjoy protection in some manner or in some fashion.

As we've already suggested in the past, sometimes that protection is from death, but sometimes that protection is in and through death. Now in history and in the present, it's difficult for us to see how what I'm saying, drawing from the chapters that we've read, how this pans out.

If we think of the violence of war, we see that it's suffered by pagan and pious alike. And yet this demonic onslaught described in the vision is forbidden from touching those who bear God's mark on their forehead.

[18 : 45] Perhaps it is not ordinary wars that are being described, but spiritual warfare of some description. The nature, the effect of the plagues that accompany the sounding of the trumpets.

But let's move on to ask another question. And really this is the final question we want to spend a little time thinking about. What are the warnings for? Here we're thinking of the purpose of the warnings.

What's the purpose of these warnings? And I guess the first thing we need to acknowledge, again, is that these plagues are not just warnings. They are in themselves acts of temporal judgment.

They serve the purpose of warning, but they're not just warnings. That, to simply repeat that. But they do serve as warnings in certainly at least two senses.

They warn of future and increasingly severe temporal judgments. Much like the plagues in Egypt, there is a growing intensity in them. But they ultimately point forward to and warn solemnly concerning a final, coming, unimaginably dreadful day of judgment.

[19 : 53] They warn all who are willing to listen to flee from the wrath to come, to be prepared for that day of judgment. And in this regard, they do serve and are intended to serve as a call to repentance.

And that truth is explicitly found in these chapters that we've read at the close of the chapters. In the final verses from verse 20 through to verse 21, so just the last two verses, you have this very explicit reference to repentance.

In this case, the absence of repentance, but nonetheless pointing the direction of that call to repentance that is implicit in these events. So, let's just remind ourselves of what these last two verses say and then just reflect a little on them and close there.

Verses 20 and 21 of chapter 9, we read, The rest of mankind were not killed by these plagues. The reference here may be simply to what we've read in these two chapters of the seven trumpets.

It may go right back to the seven seals and all that we read there. It's not of great significance how we understand it, especially if we consider these cycles to be describing essentially the same events.

[21 : 05] But nonetheless, the rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands. They did not stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood.

Idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts. Now, let's just spend a little time considering these final couple of verses and what they say about repentance.

Well, I think the first thing that they do, perhaps not explicitly but implicitly, is that they do remind us. They speak of God's desire for men and women to repent. Now, the vision highlights that the plagues failed to secure the people's repentance, at least largely.

But that does not rest from the gracious opportunity afforded by God through His acts of judgment, calling men and women to attention. Bringing before them these warnings, dramatic and chaotic, certainly from our perspective.

The people of the world, the enemies of God, were called to repentance, but as we are told, most still did not repent. Now, when we read and study difficult passages of the Bible, like the one that we're looking at this morning, it's helpful, not only helpful, but it's necessary to bring to bear on difficult passages, clear biblical truth that must inform our understanding and our interpretation.

[22 : 28] And in this matter, Paul tells us explicitly in his first letter to Timothy, in chapter 2 and verse 4, that God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And when we recognize that that is true, because the Bible tells us it's true in such clear language, then we come to this passage, we need to bring that to bear on what is being said here about this opportunity that was given for repentance that was spurned.

But in the giving of the opportunity, we see the grace of God. We see the love of God warning those who are bound for and headed towards judgment.

But these verses also provide God's instructions as to what repentance involves. What do we need to repent of to be spared from future judgment?

Well, we might summarize it in this way. We need to repent of the bad stuff that we do and the false gods that we worship. Now, though these two things are distinguished, even in these two verses, they are, of course, very much intertwined.

[23 : 35] What is the bad stuff? Well, what does the verse say? In verse 20, the rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands. And clearly, the work of their hands is a reference to their sinful deeds and acts.

They did not repent of them, the bad stuff that they were doing. But then, of course, in verse 21, we have particular sins highlighted. It's not an exhaustive list, but nonetheless, some are highlighted.

Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts. What we need to do, of course, is repent of these things. We need to repent of the bad stuff that we do.

But what about repenting of the false gods that we worship? What or who are the false gods? In the Bible, sometimes the way idols are described is a bit of a, or produces, generates a bit of a conundrum.

Sometimes idols are presented as nothing in their mops. You know, these idols of wood and stone and metal fashion, and they can't hear and they can't see.

[24 : 46] Indeed, here in this verse, they're spoken of in those terms. The idea is they're nothing. They're nothing. And yet, sometimes, idols are spoken of almost as personal beings in some sense.

The Apostle Paul deals with this conundrum in his letter to the Corinthians. We don't have time to think about it in any detail. But you may recall how in chapters 8 and 10 of that first letter, in chapter 8, he speaks of idols as nothing.

He uses that very word, idols are nothing. And yet, just a couple of chapters later on, when he's continuing to develop the theme, he affirms that, and I quote, the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God.

Now, they were being offered to idols, but Paul says that they were being offered to demons. And so, you're saying, you're left thinking, well, what's going on? Either they're nothing, or are they nothing, or are they demons?

I think, really, the conclusion is that the idols themselves are nothing. And yet, behind the idols are demons employing the idols for their destructive purposes.

[25 : 55] But what about today? What are these idols today that we need to repent of, that our society, that our world needs to repent of?

Well, curiously, the bad stuff that is highlighted, or the examples are given of, in some way serves to reveal some of the contemporary false idols. Maybe I could summarize it in this way, the idols of power, pleasure, and possessions.

Why do I identify those three things? Well, when we see the examples of the bad stuff, murder and magic arts often have to do with the exercise of power.

Sexual immorality is in the realm of selfish pleasure, seeking pleasure for oneself, independently of God's instructions and directions.

The theft that is spoken of points to a hunger for possessions. Now, we may worship these idols in more respectable ways, but it is worship, false worship, all the same.

[26 : 59] If we are consumed by the pursuit of power, or pleasure, or possessions, if they have displaced the place of God and the worship of God in our lives, then we are idolaters, guilty of worshiping these demons, or the demons that lie behind them.

The bitter tragedy, the ironic bitter tragedy of idol worship, as our passage vividly portrays, is that it involves men and women worshiping that which is seeking to destroy them.

You see, we've read in these two chapters that these demons, these satanic forces, hate us. They're seeking to destroy us, to kill us, to massacre us.

You witness the ferocity of the demonic forces that are unleashed by the fifth and sixth trumpets, and yet we worship them. The very forces seeking to destroy us are the ones that we bow down before.

What utter folly that we are guilty of, if that is true of us. Well, we need to pull the strings together. We began by making the point that the sounding of trumpets, though variously employed, always demands a response.

[28 : 14] And so, at the very beginning, the fact that these trumpets are being sounded alerts us to the fact that we need to respond to the sound of these trumpets. What about these trumpets and the realities they portray?

How do you respond? Let me give you some do's and don'ts, or don'ts and do's. One thing I would counsel you not to do is don't protest and maybe philosophize on the seeming severity or seeming injustice of God's judgments, the seeming indiscriminate nature of them and the victims of them.

When I was thinking about this, what came to my mind, and it's not a direct parallel at all, but nonetheless, it came to my mind. I think it brings something to the table. I was thinking of the occasion when the disciples were asking Jesus about the folks who had died because of the Tower of Siloam that had fallen on them, and the disciples were theologizing about it.

You know, were they guilty or were their parents guilty or, you know, what were the reasons that they suffered this tragedy? And it's very interesting how Jesus responds. He doesn't really answer their questions. He simply warns them.

He says, don't you worry about them paraphrasing. Just you repent or you will likewise perish. I think sometimes when we witness these things that we have difficulty in understanding and processing and getting our heads around it, sometimes wise to just listen to Jesus as he says, don't get overly wrought about these things.

[29 : 45] Just you repent or you will likewise perish. But also, and perhaps more significantly in the light of the readings, don't ignore the warnings. Pharaoh ignored the warnings.

We know that. The inhabitants of Jericho ignored the warnings. We know what happened. Mankind, we are told, largely ignores the warnings. And we know what's happening and what will happen.

Don't follow that example. Those are the don'ts. But the do's are important also. Do repent and do trust.

Repent to God and trust in God. The one who desires to save and protect you and seal you with his eternal and beautiful name, put your trust in him and seek and find security and protection.

In him and in him alone. But also help others to heed the warnings and embrace the Savior. Between the sixth trumpet and the seventh trumpet, much as with the seals, we have an interlude composed of chapters 10 and the first half of chapter 11.

[30 : 52] And in these chapters, we will discover something of John's mission and the mission of God's people to warn others in the midst of tribulation, in the midst of judgment.

But that is for another day. Though the warning is not for another day. But our consideration of it in the light of these following chapters is for another day.

Let's pray. Have any.