

Series Revelation

This Message #14 Revelation 8:1-13

We have now completed two panoramic scans of the history of the Church. In chapters 2 and 3 the Apostle John described the Son of Man standing in the midst of seven lampstands, which represented local church fellowships. The churches were representative of fellowships which have been in existence since Pentecost until the present time. Jesus gave an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these fellowships, and offered instructions about what members needed to do to either maintain or to recover their witness. There were stern warnings for members who were compromising with the world and tolerating false teaching, but Jesus also promised blessings for those individuals who were faithful to Him in spite of the persecution and threats they were facing.

Chapters 4 through 7 provided us another perspective of the Church Age, this time with a view from heaven. John was able to see the One who was seated on the throne surrounded by heavenly beings who gratefully acknowledged His holiness and His work of physical creation. The focus then shifted to the Lamb, who was praised because He had purchased people for God from every people group of earth.

The most important event in that heavenly vision was when the Lamb, Jesus, took possession of the scroll which was in the hand of the One seated on the throne. The scroll outlined the judgments which would bring to an end the presence of evil on the earth. The Lamb was the only person in all of creation qualified to take the scroll, remove the seals with which it was bound, and to carry out the judgments which were written in it.

We learned that the scroll had seven seals, and as each of the seals was removed, more and more of the character of this age was revealed, as well as more evidence of the sovereignty of God. On earth, there was bloodshed and famine and plague and death — the succession of afflictions which have been and will continue to sweep across the earth. History confirms that the forces of evil have run roughshod over the earth during the past 2000 years.

John saw the souls of martyrs under the altar in heaven. During this age the followers of Jesus are subjected to the hatred of evildoers. Many believers have been, and continue to be, slain because of their beliefs in the word of God and their testimony as followers of Jesus. God assured the martyrs that their deaths would not go unavenged.

In chapter 7, John gave us before and after descriptions of the circumstances of the people of God. In the early part of the chapter, God sealed His people who were going into the judgment period. They were to be protected from His wrath, although they would not be protected from the wrath of evildoers. In the second part of the chapter, John described the multitude of the people of God who had victoriously come through the great tribulation and were eager to experience the eternal blessings of God. They were standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches, praising God for the salvation He had extended to them.

The book of Revelation informs us that the circumstances of believers and non-believers is as different as different can be. When the non-believers on earth realized that they were going to face the One who sits on the throne and have to deal with the wrath of the Lamb, they called on the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and hide them. One group will go through the times of persecution and tribulation and come out victoriously; the other group will face circumstances which will overwhelm them. The faithful followers of Jesus will be comforted and blessed in the presence of God and the evildoers will do everything they can to avoid their encounter with God.

Let me summarize this review by quoting a few verses from one of the Psalms. Psalm 91 provides a good description of the circumstances of believers at the end of the age. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. ... He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge. His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling, even the Lord, ... then no harm will befall you; no disaster will come near your tent, for he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways" (*Psalm 91:1-11*). That's the kind of confidence all believers can have.

Now let us to turn our attention to chapter 8.

Read Revelation 8:1-13

The Lamb opened the 7th and last seal of the scroll just as He had previously broken the other six. This was the moment that all the creatures of heaven and the believers on earth had been anticipating. Finally the contents of the scroll were going to be revealed. The actions to eradicate evil and evildoers could be implemented. The events which would inaugurate eternity could begin.

But instead of the immediate implementation of judgment there was a pause of total silence. Immediately prior to the opening of the 7th seal there had been loud reverberations of praise by many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand, along with the four Living Creatures and the 24 Elders and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” They were loudly singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever” (*Revelation 5:11-13*). But then they fell silent.

Was the silence only to heighten the drama of the moment? Was the anticipation so great that every creature was speechless? Was it like an army which was quietly and nervously waiting to hear the signal to begin a battle? The “seven angels who stand before God ... had been given their trumpets” and they were ready to herald the coming actions. Everything was ready for the unleashing of judgment. But there was silence.

I think there are two reasons for the silence. In the Old Testament, there was sometimes a call for silence just before God was going to do something dramatic. For example, when the prophet Habakkuk was struggling with how to understand the ways of God, he concluded, “The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (*Habakkuk 2:20*). Zephaniah advised his listeners to “Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near” (*Zephaniah 1:7*). Zechariah expressed a similar thought, “Be still before the LORD, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling” (*Zechariah 2:13*).

Moses, the leader and prophet to the people of Israel, told them at a moment of crisis, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. ... The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still” (*Exodus 14:13-14*). In a similar way, the silence prepared the inhabitants of heaven for the judgment and deliverance which God was about to initiate.

The second reason for the silence fits into the context of verses 3 through 5. During the thirty minutes of silence another angel came forward to serve as a priest in a special ritual. In his vision, John saw this angel stand before the golden altar which was before the throne and offer up incense “with the prayers of all the saints.” In the Old Testament temples, the altar of incense was positioned next to the curtain which separated the outer room from the Holy of Holies. Twice each day a priest would place live coals on this altar and sprinkle fragrant incense over the coals so that “the incense would burn regularly before the LORD” (*Exodus 30:1-8*).

In John’s vision, the angel “was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints” and “the smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God.” The prayers of the saints were introduced to us in chapter 6, where we read, “Under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained ... called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’” (*Revelation 6:9-10*). In chapter 5 we learned that the 24 Elders “were holding golden bowls full of incense, which were the prayers of the saints” (*Revelation 5:8*).

Verse 3 states specifically that the “prayers of all the saints” were being offered up, obviously a much larger group than just the martyrs. This is understandable since believers have been praying for God to take action against evildoers throughout the Church Age.

Believers who are being afflicted with persecution and threatened with death have always pled with God for vindication and offered up their prayers with great intensity. From the verses in chapter 6 we learned that they continue to pray after their martyrdom. I want to digress and make a point here: as believers in America, we are not oppressed and hated like believers in other countries, and, as a result, we don’t pray with the intensity of believers I have heard in other countries. We don’t plead for vindication.

Even back in the Old Testament, David wrote a Psalm about this: “O LORD, I call to you; come quickly to me. Hear my voice when I call to you. May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice. ... My prayer is ever against the deeds of evildoers; may their rulers be thrown down from the cliffs, and may the wicked learn that my words were well spoken. ... Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass them by in safety” (*Psalm 141 excerpts*).

Prayer is important. God hears the prayers of His people, and He is aware of their plights, and He will respond with holy vengeance. When it was time for God to take action on behalf of His people in Egypt, the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen the affliction of my people, and I have heard their cry, ... and I have come down to rescue them” (*Exodus 3:7-8*). God is aware of the circumstances and needs of His people, and when everything is ready, He will repay evildoers. Until that time, we need to maintain an identity with persecuted and oppressed believers in other locations. Our intercession is important. It is an important ministry activity for all of us.

Back to chapter 8. What happened next was heaven’s response to the prayers of the saints. “The angel took the censer which had held the live coals, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth.” Some commentators point out that this altar, which is normally understood to be the place of God’s mercy, will become, in God’s time, the source of divine judgment. What is also interesting is that the first three judgments we will think about all involve objects which were “hurled” and “thrown” to the earth.

This beginning of the divine judgments was accompanied by “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” These phenomena are associated with the majesty and power and awesomeness of God. John first took note of them in chapter 4 in his vision of the One seated on the throne. Moses and the people of Israel experienced the phenomena at Mount Sinai when God met with them. Thunder, lightning, rumblings, and earthquakes will appear several more times in this book, indicating special times when God takes action.

It is at this point that the angels began to sound their trumpets. The first judgment involves “hail and fire mixed with blood.” These are “hurled down upon the earth,” resulting in the destruction of one-third of the earth. For the second judgment, “something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea,” resulting in a third of the sea being turned into blood, the death of a third of sea creatures, and the destruction of a third of ships.

At the sounding of the third trumpet, “a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky,” resulting in the poisoning of a third of the rivers and springs of water. Many people died from the polluted waters. When the fourth angel sounded his trumpet, a third of the sun, moon, and stars were affected so that a third of the day was without light as well as a third of the night.

It would be foolish for us to try to identify the objects which descended onto the earth. The objects were supernatural, and such extraordinary acts of God cannot be explained in human terms. Scripture is not concerned with “how?” but with “why?” and “by whom?” and we should keep our focus on those latter two question words.

The four judgments will damage the earth and its inhabitants in dreadful and fearful ways. The physical environment and resources, as well as the physical and emotional health of people will be affected, but the devastation will be partial, not total. The trumpet judgments are not the final end-all statement of God. Rather, they are intended to be a warning to the surviving majority of mankind. The surviving people on earth are being given a taste of the wrath of God in the hope that they will have a change of heart and turn from their wicked ways. We should think of these judgments as God’s final invitation for people to repent and commit themselves to Him. It is paradoxical, but these judgments have an aspect of mercy. Kindness, patience, and love are shown by God, even in His acts of vengeance.

There was one other time in history when God acted in this way. The pattern of the trumpet judgments are similar to God’s judgment of the Egyptians in the book of Exodus. One of the plagues inflicted against the Egyptians was the “worst hailstorm that had ever fallen on Egypt,” accompanied with thunder and lightning. It beat down everything that was growing and stripped every tree and killed every animal that was in the fields (*Exodus 9:13-26*).

God also changed the water in Egypt into blood. The Nile, all streams, canals, and ponds, even the water in buckets and stone jars was changed into blood (*Exodus 7:17-24*).

The third trumpet judgment does not have an exact parallel, but there was a plague of darkness in Egypt. The darkness was so intense that “no one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days” (*Exodus 10:21-13*). There will be other judgments with parallels to the plagues in Egypt in future chapters.

The allusions to the Egyptian plagues is God's way of saying that He is once again bringing punishment on hostile powers which have oppressed His people. God rescued His people from the power of Egypt. At the end of the age there will be another Exodus. This time the Church will be taken out of the world and into the eternal land of promise in the presence of God.

Notice the warning that God gives in verse 13. We would agree that the first four trumpet judgments were severe, but the remaining three judgments will be much worse. The voice of the eagle is loud and clear so that everyone is aware of this fact. In the passage today, the people of earth suffered indirectly since the first four trumpet judgments targeted the environment. The remaining trumpets will affect them directly. The final three trumpet blasts will be our next subject.

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