

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Revelation 8–9

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Revelation 8:1–9:21 (NIV)

“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. 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. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. 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.

Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. 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. 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, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. 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—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. 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. 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!’ The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. 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. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come. The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled

the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. The rest of mankind that 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.”

I. Let’s take just a moment to again focus in on what Revelation is doing as a book, so we don't we lose our key to understanding it.

Two illustrations help us to see how this book may be interpreted. One is the illustration of instant replay. This is what the Book of Revelation keeps doing in regard to the end. Time after time we are brought to the end. Seals are opened, and we’re at the end. The trumpets are sounded at the end, and we’re at the end. The bowls of wrath are poured forth, and we’re at the end. We just keep coming from different camera angles, sometimes even at different speeds. Like the bowls of wrath, which come later in Revelation, seem to focus in on the stop action sequence moments before the end itself.

Rather than seeing these as a chronology, we see them as many ways of looking at the same historical unfolding of events.

Perhaps, too, the sense of an art gallery mural gives us a perspective on Revelation. If we make the mistake of interpreting Revelation as being a successive chronology of events we would have real problems when we got to Revelation 12 and found it referring to the birth of Jesus, which would all of a sudden dip us back into time with this fluidity in terms of time. It’s as though through Revelation, we’re taken to look at a vast mural and there were moments when we

backed off and looked at the expanse of the mural. The trumpets, the seals, the bowls of wrath help us to see the vast expanse. There are sometimes we are called to focus in a little bit closer and see this element of detail in the mural.

The Scriptures we have read today form the second sequence of judgments, the second panorama of events in regard to God's final dealings with the human race. As we have said all along, when we look at the Book of Revelation we must not just talk about the end we must talk about now. For there is reflected here patterns in the way God is functioning with us right now.

II. As we open the Scriptures today, we see first of all that there's a preparation for the trumpets to be blown.

The first five verses set the stage for the trumpets. There is an opening of the seventh seal. And by the way, we're never given the content of the seventh seal. Many people think that the seven trumpets are the content of the seventh seal. Revelation itself doesn't say this. It just says the seal was opened and there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

The silence however has tremendous meaning as we look at it. In that period of silence of half an hour some events begin to occur on the stage. In thinking of this, we must picture in our mind's eye the throne of God and the four living ones that are about the throne and the twenty-four elders and the thousands of thousands and the ten thousands of ten thousands of angels that are worshiping there in chorus and in song. Now there is complete silence. The angels have quit singing the songs that were sung in Revelation 4 and 5.

During the end part of this silence, seven angels are silently coming across the stage to take seven trumpets and blow them. They are reminiscent of Jericho, and indeed we cannot help but think of that Old Testament incident of a city falling as a result of seven trumpets that were blown. The imagery here is of the day of the Lord, which is being announced by means of

trumpets. Zephaniah 1:14–16 calls the day of the Lord a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trumpet blasts and battle cries. The angels take the trumpets though the silence is interrupted first, not by the sound of trumpets, but by the sound of the prayers of the saints on earth coming into heaven, and an angel taking incense symbolic of prayer and mingling the incense with the prayers before the presence of God. Notice, by the way, the angel is not serving as an intermediary for the prayers, nor are the prayers being offered to the angel. He simply has a symbolic role in worship, of combining prayers and having them come before the throne.

What this is saying is before God brings judgment upon the world He listens to the prayers of His saints. Just as the first seals were not broken until the Lamb had proven himself worthy to open the seals by shedding His blood for mankind, so the trumpets of judgment are not blown until God has first heard the prayers of His people who are crying out before Him from an earlier text in Revelation, “Oh, Lord, how long?” (Revelation 6:10).

There was the sense that while there was silence in heaven in order that the prayers of saints can be heard there is a special meaning I think that comes to us when we pray. God must listen to a lot of sound. From Revelation, we have the text of various hymns that are sung in heaven by vast choirs and the like. But somehow, with all that incredible enriching sound which is far beyond the great Hallelujah chorus, there are moments in God’s experience, the angels’ experience, and the assembled hosts’ experience when all is quiet so that the prayers of the saints can be heard. This is meant to be a lesson for the church worshipping now: When we pray, our prayers are not somewhere lost on God, or drowned out in the activities that are about his throne, but heaven, as it were, becomes still in order that the prayers of the saints can get through. It’s a remarkable thought.

In the Jewish Talmud there's a lesson that says that angels sang unceasingly through the night but they are silent by day to allow the praises of Israel to be heard in heaven.

God acts when His people cry to Him. There's so much parallel of the trumpet judgments to the plagues on Egypt. For Exodus 2:23–24 says that “the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant” (NIV). Then He acted to bring His people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. So here in Revelation, God is about to act with judgments in order to bring His people out from bondage and out of the territory and oppression of the enemy into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

As we begin opening these plagues, we have to take note that after the silence is broken by the prayers of the saints there is all kinds of noise and stereophonic sound and lighting in heaven before the trumpets are actually sounded.

III. The trumpets divide into some very clear sequences. The first four trumpets belong together.

They speak to us of God's judgments upon nature. The first trumpet is sounded against the earth and is reminiscent of the seventh plague of Egypt, an outbreak of hail. This time, though, the hail is mingled with fire and blood and cast upon the earth. And a third of the earth is impacted.

Notice in these plagues, the number “one third” is used over and over again. It is a figure of speech meant to convey the fact that God is not yet moving in universal judgment. His judgment is one, which at this point is impacting a significant portion of mankind but not even the majority of mankind. It's not affecting all the earth. There must, according to 2 Peter 3, come a day when the heavens and the earth melt with a fervent heat. But that moment has not yet come. This is a judgment coming before that.

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First the earth is struck. Then there is a plague against the sea, reminiscent of the first plague of Egypt where the waters are turned to blood, and commerce as well as the things in the sea are affected.

There is, again reminiscent of the first plague of Egypt, the strike against the freshwater. The substance of wormwood, a bitter tasting plant, is cast into the water that it might not be drinkable.

Then there's a strike against the lights of the heavens. This strike reminds us of the ninth plague of Egypt where God struck Pharaoh's land with complete pitch darkness. Here the lights in heavens are affected so that twelve hours of daylight becomes instead only eight hours of daylight. And instead of the twelve-hour night there comes four hours when one cannot see the sun, the moon, and the stars. Man's environment is shaken and disturbed. This is what Jesus means when He says in the Olivet discourse there will be signs in the earth and signs in the heavens: cataclysmic shaking.

There are some who take these plagues to say here we have described a thermonuclear warfare. This is the ability of mankind to throw hydrogen bombs at one another. They may very well be right. Although the agency of the judgment here appears more directly from the hand of God through the sounding of the trumpet of the angel, it's possible that God could use human means. We know that at the time Revelation was written there was no way that a huge mountain of fire could be cast into the sea. There was no way human, that is, for that to occur. There was no way that one fire could cause such a conflagration that one third of the earth would be burned by its effect. But one of the great claims that we have to note is the inspiration of Scripture and that God can speak a word concerning the nature of the elements to his apostle long before man himself discovered that this world is really a fire ball waiting to be ignited by the explosion of

atoms. God knows that all along and He's ready to use that instrumentality He's built in nature to bring about His judgments.

These first four judgments really do not appear to affect man. They are judgments upon nature. But the judgments that are coming in the trumpets strike directly upon men and that is why an eagle flying in mid-heaven cries out "Woe, Woe, Woe" to those who are dwelling upon the earth. The King James text has "angel." The better rendering here is "an eagle," symbolic of that bird of prey, that bird which can fly the highest, getting to the highest point in heaven looking down upon the whole expanse of earth and crying a word of great woe. What is coming? Terrible destruction and agony for mankind.

IV. The fifth trumpet then is sounded, and a plague of locusts erupts.

He's again reminding us of a plague in Egypt, the eighth plague in Egypt in this case. The locusts come out of a region called the bottomless pit, which is a translation of the Greek word "abyss." They come out of the abyss, the bottomless pit. We know a little bit about the abyss from Scripture. The abyss seems to be a place where when angels fell from heaven God allowed some evil presence to be on earth. But some powers He did not allow to be on earth because of their evil and potency. In fact we find when Jesus confronts the man who had been possessed of the legion in the gospel—Luke 8:31—they begged Jesus to let them go to the swine rather than send them to the abyss. Jesus let them have that choice of destiny. That's kind of a come down. You realize the seriousness the demons had in the abyss when they would rather choose pigs than go to the abyss.

2 Peter 2:4 says that "God did not spare the angels when they sinned but sent them into hell [The word means the bottom of the abyss] putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment." Now, in this end-time judgment, demons are let loose upon the earth for that's what

is being told here. What is essentially being said is if you want to know what a demon would look like, if one could be materialized, here is the appearance that he would have. It's symbolic. We're not expecting ten-foot high horses with the physical experience to actually protrude on earth but the spiritual representation of the demonic which are let loose from the abyss in the end are here being described.

The fundamental definition is locusts with the power of scorpions. Locusts eat everything in sight. They come in great clouds and plagues. Scorpions have great power to sting. In the biblical word, they were about 6 inches long. They look like a lobster. They grabbed you with their two front claws and their sting was in their tail. They would arch that tail and stick their stinger in you, and it was a very painful and sometimes deadly experience.

There's something strange, though, about the locust-scorpions. They're told they cannot effect any vegetation. It's like telling a grasshopper that it can't eat grass. Locusts exist to feed off vegetation. But instead we are told that they are to harm men. However, their mission has some limitations on it. In 9:4 they are told that they are not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads. In other words they cannot touch those whom Revelation 7 described as being sealed. We've indicated that in the epistles the idea of sealing is in terms given to believers who are sealed with the Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance until that day when we receive it. When we come to Christ there is that witness of the Spirit of God within us. The demonic hosts are simply told in this period of judgment they cannot touch the people of God.

I'd like to pull that into the now. If, in the Tribulation period, the demons cannot harm the elect of God who bear the seal of God, how much more so can they not attack and latch onto and possess the people of God who are living before the tribulation. If there was ever a text that I

would use to assert that the Christian cannot be demon possessed I would think among others, and in this particular passage, in the Tribulation they cannot harm. How much more so now can they not harm the people of God?

Their target is limited, and their time is limited. They have a five-month span, again symbolic, perhaps expressing the fact that the normal life span of the locusts from the time of larvae to the final stage is about five months. They cannot attack forever. They have a limited effect. They cannot bring death. They can only bring great misery. People will be demonically possessed and want to die but literally cannot take their life. Pain will be at its all-time high but suicide will not be an option.

Their appearance is meant to scare you to death, and it does: the power of beastly quality but a human face, again describing demonic sorts of representation. Demons come to us really in human form. Flying through the air, their hair from their existence looks like women's hair—long in the wind. Their teeth will grate you. They have great defenses, scales of iron breastplates. There is a tremendous power in their sting.

But I want you to know that all these for the child of God who has the seal of God upon his life, they flee at the name of Jesus. That's what's striking about this text. It's a scary force. You might read this, and, if I'd had this dream and woke up, I would be petrified. But all you have to do to scare the whole hosts away is to say, "Jesus!" I have the seal of the Holy Spirit. There's no force in the Book of Revelation as powerful as Jesus.

V. There is then a sixth trumpet, which is sounded bringing another kind of a judgment.

At the river Euphrates, at its border are four angels, which are bound. Whether John is speaking symbolically, as he does a great deal through the book, or literally, we may have some question. But there seems to be at this point a special power that God has reserved to let loose upon the

world. Whether these two hundred million cavalry troops are the troops of China or Russia or whether they're a special host of supernatural forces that are at the disposal of God, the text doesn't answer. Some people say it's got to be the two-hundred-million army of Red China. Others say it's got to be Russia. Since the text doesn't say I'm not sure.

What is being said is, after all this mammoth amount of destruction which John has talked about, there is still a force in reserve ready to move at the day and the hour and the month and the year, very precise timing, the only time I think in Scripture that the timing is so noted so closely. It's like D-Day or Pearl Harbor when it was struck. The hour, the day, the month, the year. Specific time.

The river Euphrates comes into the text here because in Old Testament times the river Euphrates was the ideal border of Israel. In Genesis 15, Abraham was given the promise of the land "all the way to the Euphrates." Therefore, beyond the Euphrates speaks of those enemies against the people of God that are ready to strike. The time of the writing of Revelation as well Euphrates served as kind of the outer limits of the Roman border. Beyond were the troops of Rome's feared enemy. The security of people was going to be struck by the invading forces.

Their weapons are fire, smoke, and sulfur coming out of their heads and tails. Meaning that, as they advance, they can shoot from their heads. As they retreat, they can shoot from their tails.

They're weapons of destruction, people of destruction, forces of destruction.

What I want to get to and we've lightly covered each of these trumpets, is the effect of the trumpets. That is really the purpose of giving us the judgments, to let us see what the result really is upon mankind. God has already appealed to the world through the cross of Jesus Christ, and through the love of God, and through signs and wonders done through His people. And through the love which is present in the body. All these have failed to win the vast segment of humanity

to the cross and to God. God will not tolerate sin as a part of the eternal existence. Therefore He is determined, absolutely set on eradicating rebellion, disobedience and sin. One last hope, one last measure when all else fails is an act of judgment that still might bring the world to repentance. It's clear from John's statement in verse 20 that one of the motivations of all these plagues is that the rest of mankind might repent. But, instead of seeing these judgments as God's invitation to those who remain to repent and to escape the day of wrath, there is instead no repenting. Life remarkably goes on unchanged after all these traumas take place. That's the incredible verdict of Revelation. There's no change from idolatry. There's no change from murders or violence. There's no change from sorcery. The word for sorcery that's used here in the Greek is the word from which we get the word "pharmacy" and at its root is a word that means drugs. In this case, the taking of drugs is associated with the occult. Drug taking and sorcery do not end. There is no change from immorality. This relates to fornication, adultery, and homosexuality. There is no change from theft. People are still out to get people to make a fast buck, to rob, pilfer, embezzle, and the like. Mankind is unchanged after the most traumatic events of human history.

As we attempt to relate this to the present, we may be prone to say, "Surely mankind would be impacted by a massive judgment such as this." But the Scripture is saying to us, if we hold this viewpoint, we have missed human character if we feel that people will be moved by massive judgments in history or upon mankind.

There is a statement made here that as a result of the sixth trumpet, a third of mankind is going to be killed. A third of mankind is about 1.3 billion people. That's an astounding figure. We can hardly grasp it or take it in.

In this last year about 80 million people have gone to the grave. Has that motivated anyone to repentance? If you break that down further, there are 220 thousand deaths every single day.

Every 2 seconds 5 people die. Has that motivated anyone to repent?

What the Scripture is saying to us whether it's one third going in a moment or one third going in sixteen years the fact remains that God has intended that on earth death serve as a reminder of judgment. It is His judgment upon human life. It is His judgment for sin. It is the fact that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and with sin, God has no way of bringing us into His presence and death must eventuate. There's not a one of us who can claim outside of Jesus Christ to lay claim to immortality. The great fact of the gospel is that Jesus came to save us from death and bring us to the cross and into fellowship with God.

One writer has said, "All must die sooner or later, alone or in company, violently or in their beds. John is combating the idolatry that life on earth is so infinitely precious but the death, which robs us of it, must be the ultimate tragedy. Men have wrongly made themselves utterly at home in this transient world order. If all must die, and in the end heaven and earth must vanish, it is in accord with the mercy of God that He should send from time forceful reminders of the insecurity of their tenure."

You look at these judgments and realize that God, in order to bring men to repentance if all else fails, will even use trauma to bring them to himself. I would ask of us, if you have not come to the Lord, is there not enough trauma in your life to already bring you to repentance? This is what this text is saying to us. There is coming a moment when God will act in judgment. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as this book goes on to say, is there is a kingdom which is coming and a kingdom which already we are now permitted to take part in.

The people of God knowing that these things are going to take place are united to Him who has all power in heaven and on earth.

Closing Prayer

There are times, Lord, when we look at judgments in our lives and perhaps we guess wrongly what they were doing, what they were meant to do. Your disciples once thought that sickness was judgment on man and asked “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” You told them that neither was the case. But it happened that the glory of God may be revealed. But there are occasions in our lives when we do experience trauma and sometimes that trauma is allowed by you as an act of mercy to bring us into your presence. To cause us to repent of that which is wrong in our lives. The idolatry which places ourselves or others above You. And the idolatry, which issues in a life that is not lived in accordance with obedience to You. We hear Your word afresh today. If there be among us those who have not repented and changed may this word from You today be sent to them as a special delivery letter of love warning of the wrath that is coming. We recognize that death is judgment. Sin has impelled us in death and none of us have the hope of ever living in Your presence without Jesus Christ. So Lord to You only do we cling. In You only do we hope. Amen.