

The Seventh Seal and the Beginning of the Trumpets

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the significance of the seventh seal and the ensuing trumpet judgments as a demonstration of God's sovereign judgment and the importance of prayer and intercession.

Scripture: Exodus 9:18, Exodus 15:23, Exodus 19:19, Exodus 30:34, Psalm 19:1, Revelation 8:1-2, Revelation 8:7-8, Revelation 8:10, Revelation 8:12

Topics: "Eschatology", "Divine Judgment"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the opening of the seventh seal in Revelation, signifying the beginning of the prophetic judgments of God. The seventh seal encompasses the subsequent events leading to Christ's second coming, including the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of God's wrath. The silence in heaven for half an hour before the seventh seal is opened indicates the gravity of the impending events. The introduction of the seven angels with trumpets and the angel offering incense with the prayers of the saints symbolize the preparation for divine judgments. The sounding of the first four trumpets brings devastating physical judgments upon the earth, sea, waters, and heavenly bodies, serving as warnings of more severe judgments to come.

Transcript

8:1 And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.

This chapter opens with the announcement that the seventh seal is opened. This is the last of the seven seals marking the prophetic judgments of God. With the opening of the seventh seal the narrative is resumed from the close of chapter 6. Though simply introduced, the seventh seal is obviously the most important development up to this point. Contained in the seventh seal are all the subsequent developments leading to the second coming of Christ, including the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of the wrath of God. Scroggie, after a careful discussion of the chronological order of the book of Revelation, concludes:

The trumpets, therefore, do not double back over all or some of the Seals, but lie under the sixth Seal, and proceed from it. For this reason it is equally incorrect to speak of the Trumpets as following the Seals. They do not follow, but are the Seventh Seal.176

In like manner he holds that the bowls constitute the seventh trumpet:

Therefore the Bowls do not double back over the Seal and Trumpet Judgments; neither is it correct to say that they follow the Trumpet visitations. They do not follow because THEY ARE THE SEVENTH TRUMPET CONTENTS.177

Scroggie goes on to note that the judgments of the bowls are poured out in quick succession. Alford disagrees with this conclusion stating,

I believe all interpretation to be wrong, which regards the blowing of the seven trumpets as forming a portion of the vision accompanying the seventh seal in particular: and again... I place in the same category all that which regards it as taking up and going over the same ground again.178

Alford, however, does not give any explanation as to what the content of the seventh seal is and thus leaves his conclusion unsupported.

Blanchard believes that the seven trumpets are included in the seventh seal and that the seven bowls are included in the seventh trumpet:

It is interesting to note that the series of three sevens are really included in one series of seven, that is, the seven trumpets are included under the seventh seal and the seven bowls are included under the seventh trumpet, so that we have in fact a single series in three movements--the first six seals opened, then the seventh seal which includes the seven trumpets blown, and then the last trumpet sounding, introducing the seven bowls and concluding the opening of the seven seals.179

In fitting recognition of the important character of this seal, the Scriptures record that there is silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. Though thirty minutes is not ordinarily considered a long time, when it is a time of absolute silence portending such ominous developments ahead it is an indication that something tremendous is about to take place. It may be compared to the silence before the foreman of a jury reports a verdict; for a moment there is perfect silence and everyone awaits that which will follow.

Introduction of the Seven Angels (8:2-6)

8:2-6 And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings, and an earthquake. And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.

In verse 2 John records his vision of the seven trumpets given to the seven angels standing before God. Though there has been some speculation as to the character of these angels, the best interpretation is to take the revelation in its ordinary sense, that is, that these are indeed seven angels appointed by God to direct the series of judgments symbolized by the seven trumpets. These angels are to be distinguished from those who pour out the seven vials and are not to be confused with the seven spirits of God of Revelation 5:6. The number seven is in harmony with the seven seals and the seven vials. The fact that these angels stand before God indicates a place of prominence such as is given to the angel Gabriel (cf. Luke 1:19).

The use of trumpets by the angels has considerable background in the Scriptures. Trumpets were used in various phases of Israel's economy. They were sounded at times of public assembly, used to direct soldiers in war and to signal important events on the calendar. Trumpets were used on the occasion of the giving of the law, were sounded on the first of the month, and served to announce almost every important occasion (cf. Exodus 19:19; Lev. 23:24; 25:9; Num. 10:2-10; Joel 2:1).

In verse 3 another angelic personage is introduced as standing before the altar with a golden censer presenting incense and the prayers of the saints before the throne. This is a beautiful picture of the prayers of the saints as seen from heaven. In the Old Testament order the priests would burn incense upon the altar of incense, and the smoke would fill the Temple or the Tabernacle and would then ascend to heaven. Incense was symbolic of worship and prayer and a reminder that intercession to the Lord has the character of sweet incense. The altar in heaven is referred to seven times in this book (6:9; 8:3a, b, 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). Commentators differ as to whether the altar is the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense, although the latter is usually preferred.¹⁸⁰

Difference of opinion has also been expressed concerning whether the angel mentioned in verse 3 is actually an angel of high rank or an angelic representation of the Lord Jesus Christ. From the fact that the angel has items given to him in order to make his worship possible, some have concluded that this is only an angel designated for this work in heaven. From the nature of his work as a mediator serving in the role of a priest, others have argued that it must be the Lord Jesus Christ because this would not be a proper function of an angel. The fact that Christ appeared in the Old Testament frequently as the Angel of Jehovah lends further support to this point of view (cf. Gen. 16:7; Exodus 3:2; Num. 22:22; Judges 2:1; I Kings 19:7; Ps. 34:7; Isa. 37:36). There is no way to determine with finality which of these two views is correct though the preponderance of opinion seems to favor regarding the angel as Christ in His work as High Priest.

Though nothing is said as to the nature of the incense, it is reasonable to suppose that it fulfills the same function as incense used in Old Testament worship, composed of the four spices mentioned in Exodus 30:34-38 and regarded as so holy that the people of Israel were forbidden to use it for any common purpose. The incense speaking of the perfections of Christ is inseparably bound up with any ministry of intercession, and the believer's petitions are coupled with the worthiness of Christ in their presentation at the heavenly altar, testifying at once to the necessity of praying in the name of Christ and to the efficacy of such prayer when faithfully ministered on earth.

Attention is also directed in verse 5 to the censer, apparently corresponding to the instrument used to offer incense in the Old Testament worship. It was made of gold (Exodus 37:25-28; Heb. 9:4), and it was used to take fire off the altar to be carried into the Holy of Holies where the incense was added. Here the angel is said to take the censer filled with fire and to cast it into the earth. The incident is followed by voices, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. The clear implication is that the censer is here used as a symbol of judgment, apparently in response to the intercession and prayers of the suffering saints in the midst of the great tribulation. The scene, therefore, is set for the judgment symbolized by the seven trumpets about to sound according to verse 6.

The First Trumpet (8:7)

8:7 The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

In response to the sounding of the trumpet held by the first angel, a scene of desolation is spread abroad upon the earth caused by hail and fire mingled with blood. The judgment seems to be directed to vegetation, and a third part of the trees and all the green grass are burned. The tendency on the part of the expositors has been to read into this judgment a symbol of divine chastening rather than literal hail and fire. The obvious parallel, however, is found in the tenth plague in Exodus 9:18-26. Inasmuch as in the account of Exodus there was literal hail and fire, and the result of the judgment here is the burning up of the third part of trees and all the green grass, there is no solid reason for not taking this judgment in its literal sense.

The only problem which seems to remain is the meaning of the term "blood." Here we have another helpful suggestion from the plagues of Egypt. The hail was of such character according to Exodus 9:19, 25 that it destroyed not only vegetation but also men and beasts who were caught in it. Whether or not blood was actually included in the hail and fire cast on the earth, the result was bloodshed of man and beast, though the main burden of the judgment seems to be that of destroying vegetation. If, however, it is held that the hail, fire, and blood are merely symbols, the result and meaning are almost the same, as the obvious implication is that of a similar destruction to what would have been caused if hail and fire had fallen on the earth.

This judgment, great as it is, is only the introduction. Six more trumpets are to sound. In addition to the judgment mentioned in verse 7, some manuscripts add an additional phrase after the word earth: "and the third part of the earth was burned up." That which is implied in the Authorized Version is thus given explicit mention. There is little justification, however, for commentators to try to designate which portion of the earth is thus judged.¹⁸¹

As in the case of the seals, the first four trumpets form a special unit in contrast to the last three trumpets. Alford states,

It has been before observed, that as in the case of the seals, so here, the first four are marked off from the last three... It is in the kind of the exercise which their agency finds, that these four trumpets are especially distinguished. The plagues indicated by them are entirely inflicted on natural objects: the earth, trees, grass, sea, rivers, lights of heaven: whereas those indicated by the two latter are expressly said to be inflicted on men, and not on natural objects: cf. ch. 9:4, 15.¹⁸²

The Second Trumpet (8:8-9)

8:8-9 And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and the third part of the sea became blood; and the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed.

At the sound of the trumpet held by the second angel, another great judgment falls on the earth, this time dealing with the sea. John, in his vision, sees a large object compared to a great mountain burning with fire which is cast into the sea. A third part of the sea becomes blood, a third part of the creatures of the sea die, and a third part of the ships are destroyed.

As in the interpretation of the other trumpet, the tendency of expositors is to give a symbolic meaning to this great judgment. It is not impossible, however, to suggest a reasonable literal interpretation. It is earlier indicated in the sixth seal that the stars from heaven fall and that there are various disturbances of this character during this period. It may be that the great mountain, instead of being a symbol of a government,

as is sometimes the case in Scripture, is actually a large object falling from the heavens. Again there seems to be a parallel to the plagues of Egypt. Just as the River Nile and all other bodies of water in Egypt were turned to blood when Aaron stretched out his rod over the waters of Egypt, so this object apparently had a similar effect upon the sea. Though some believe that the sea becoming blood is the language of appearance, that is, that the sea through some chemical change turns blood-red, the natural effect is devastating in that the judgment destroys a third of the ships and a third of life in the sea. The probability is that all life and all ships are destroyed in one portion of the earth, the area nearest to the impact of the great burning mountain.

The interpreter of these and later judgments is constantly faced with the problems of how far to take the literal and the symbolic. The point of view here being expressed is that these judgments should be interpreted literally insofar as this can be reasonably followed. To make the mountain a form of human government, the sea the Roman Empire, and the ships that are destroyed the church or organized religion, is to read into the passage far more than is justified. Though all questions cannot be answered, the unmistakable implication of these judgments is that God is dealing in righteous wrath with the wicked earth.

The Third Trumpet (8:10-11)

8:10-11 And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters: And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.

When the third trumpet sounds, John witnesses a great star burning like a lamp falling upon rivers and fountains of water. It is named "Wormwood" and apparently causes the water to be bitter, resulting in the death of many. In interpreting this third trumpet, expositors have had a field day in assigning symbolic meaning to the components of this judgment. If the meaning is symbolic, there is no clear indication as to the interpretation of this judgment except that the great star can be assigned to some personage such as the Antichrist or Satan himself and the waters could be regarded as symbolic of the peoples of the earth.

It seems preferable, however, to view this with a reasonable literalness, as in the case of the second trumpet. The star seems to be a heavenly body or a mass from outer space, understandably burning as it enters the atmosphere of earth, and falling with contaminating influence upon the rivers and waters. The reference to wormwood seems to draw the parallel of the experience of the children of Israel at the waters of Marah (Exodus 15:23-25). There the tree cast into the bitter waters made them sweet. Here the wormwood cast into the sweet water made it bitter. Such also is the contrast between Christ on the cross atoning for sin and making that which is bitter sweet and Christ coming in judgment which turns the vain hopes and ambitions of men into bitterness and despair. The result of this trumpet is to inflict a divine judgment from God upon men themselves.

The Fourth Trumpet (8:12-13)

8:12-13 And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise. And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!

In contrast to the first three judgments having to do respectively with land, sea, rivers, and fountains of water, the fourth trumpet relates to the heavens themselves. As John witnesses the scene, he sees a third part of the sun, a third part of the moon, and a third part of the stars darkened, an eclipse that extends to a third part of the day and a third part of the night. The symbolic interpretation of verse 12 usually regards this prophecy as portending a disruption of human government and society extending to a third part of the earth. Here again, however, it is probably preferable to interpret this literally as extending to a disruption of light from heaven as a solemn warning of other judgments which were yet to fall upon the earth. J. B. Smith comments:

It is of considerable interest to note the progress--one third of the green trees and grass, one third of marine life and shipping, one third of the waters, and one third of the heavenly bodies. Food is destroyed; distribution is crippled; water supply is limited; production is hampered.¹⁸³

This interpretation is given support by the next verse, which indicates that the first four trumpets are not only judgments in themselves but warnings of the last three trumpets which will be far more severe in character. John records that he both beheld and heard the loud voice of an angel pronouncing a triple woe on the inhabitants of the earth because of the three trumpets which were yet to sound. In the best manuscripts, "eagle" is substituted for "angel." Whether announced by an angel or an eagle, the effect of the trumpet is much the same. The earth is warned of judgment to come. The trumpet judgments, which have their beginning in this chapter, confirm the predictions of Christ and the Old Testament prophets of the coming time of tribulation far worse than anything the human race had ever experienced before.

The first four trumpets deal with aspects of the physical world which are taken more or less for granted. The beauty and benefit of the trees, the luxury and growth of green grass are seldom occasions for thanksgiving to the living God. In a similar way, men are prone to take for granted the blessings of water, whether it be the beauty of the sea, the majestic flow of great rivers, or the pure fountains and springs which abound in the natural world. These too are gifts from a loving God to an undeserving world, and they come under the blight and judgment described in the second and third trumpets.

Still another area of blessing from God is the light of the sun, moon, and stars. The handiwork of God in the heavens is mentioned frequently in Scripture as a reminder of God's power, sovereignty, and wisdom. David, in writing Psalm 19, declared, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." The very presence of these aspects of nature so essential to human life and existence is referred to by Paul in Romans 1:20 as manifesting God in His eternal power. The Prophet Jeremiah spoke of the sun and moon as tokens of God's faithfulness to His promise to the nation of Israel and as symbols of their continuance as long as the earth endures (Jer. 31:35-36). These very tokens of blessing and revelation of the glory of God are affected by the fourth trumpet. So dramatic are the judgments and so unmistakably an evidence of the power and sovereignty of God that blaspheming men on earth can no longer ignore the fact that God is dealing with them. Fearful as these judgments are, they are only the beginning of God's dealing with the earth; and as indicated in a special announcement, three great woes are still to fall. Though it is difficult in this day of grace to imagine such catastrophic judgments, the Word of God is plain, and men are called everywhere to avail themselves of grace before it is too late.

176 W. G. Scroggie, *The Book of the Revelation*, p. 167.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

178 Henry Alford, The Greek New Testament, IV, 630.

179 C. A. Blanchard, Light on the Last Days, p. 58.

180 Cf. J. B. Smith, A Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 138.

181 Cf. the view of Walter Scott that the "western part of the prophetic earth is here designated" (Exposition of the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 185).

182 Alford, IV, 634-35.

183 Smith, p. 140.

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