

# REVELATION

## Study 6: The Seven Trumpets

In our previous study, we looked at the things John saw as the Lamb began to break the seven seals of the scroll – the scroll that he had received from the right hand of the Almighty God. We also examined how the cycles of seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls are interconnected, and we emphasized that we should seek to understand their theological significance rather than trying to decode them as if they were literal descriptions or predictions of specific events in history.

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss what John sees next as he shifts his focus to the seven angels with the seven trumpets, and we are going to discover the actual message of the scroll that has now been opened. We ended our last study by asking, “What is needed in order to bring God’s kingdom here on earth?” Well, as we are about to see, the theological significance of the seven trumpets and the bitter-sweet message of the open scroll come together here in these next four chapters to reveal the answer.

### **The Seven Trumpets**

*Revelation 8-9*

The seven seals have been broken, but before the scroll is opened, John’s focus shifts to the seven angels who have been given seven trumpets. Now, throughout the Bible, the blowing of a trumpet is a symbol that is used to warn people that the Almighty God is about to come and administer his judgement upon their land, nation or empire.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, these seven trumpets can be understood as warning judgments. They are an intensification of the judgements described in the breaking of the seven seals, but they are still not total in their affect upon the earth.<sup>2</sup> They are portrayed as judgements that are “restrained in hope that the wicked will be warned and repent (9:20-21).”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Read Isaiah, 27, Ezekiel 33 and Joel 2.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that the seals affect a quarter of the earth (6:8), and the trumpets affect a third of the earth (8:7-12; 9:18).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 40

As the first four angels blow their trumpets, they unleash warning judgments upon the land that are meant to remind John's audience of the plagues that God sent upon the oppressive empire of Egypt in the Exodus story. John describes hail being thrown upon the land, the sea turning into blood, the water being undrinkable, the land becoming desolate and darkness covering the land.<sup>4</sup>

These warning judgements are also portrayed as a form of de-creation. John uses language from the creation account and describes the destruction of the land, the trees, the living creatures, the seas, the sun, the moon, the stars and even the day and the night. It is a very intentional way of saying that God's shalom (harmony) is being disrupted and order is turning back into chaos.<sup>5</sup>

As the fifth angel blows its trumpet, it unleashes a plague on the people of the land much like the last plague in the plagues sent upon Egypt. Similar to the passover story in Exodus, John describes a destroyer who is given the authority to torment all of the people in the land who do not have the seal of God's protection upon their foreheads.<sup>6</sup>

Then the sixth angel blows its trumpet, and it releases the four horsemen from the first four seals. John sees an army of what sounds like two-hundred million cavalry troops coming from the east of the Euphrates River. This numerous army<sup>7</sup> kills a third of the people in the land and actually plays on a lingering Roman fear of a sudden attack and invasion from the east.<sup>8</sup>

As John describes the death and destruction portrayed by the blowing of these first six trumpets, we are told that they do not lead the nations to repent. Just like Pharaoh in the Exodus story, these warning judgements (plagues) do not lead God's enemies to humble themselves before him. All of this disorder and chaos that is unleashed upon the land does not lead people to turn to God. And this is what we mean by trying to understand the theological significance of these judgements. The big message that is being communicated through the seven seals and even more so through the seven trumpets is that God's judgements alone will not lead the nations to repentance and faith.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Read Exodus 7-11.

<sup>5</sup> Read Genesis 1.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. (Exodus 12:23)

<sup>7</sup> Read Psalm 68, Isaiah 5 and Daniel 7

<sup>8</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, 835

<sup>9</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 82

It's important to remember John's first-century audience and the implications of this message. God's people who are being persecuted are crying out to God in hope that he will avenge their innocent blood and bring judgement upon their enemies (6:9-11). However, as we learn from the seven trumpets, that sort of judgement is not going to be what leads the nations to turn to God.

Something else is needed in order to bring God's kingdom here on earth.

And it's at this point that John stops the action and provides another interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet in order to reveal what that something else is.

## **The Scroll**

### *Revelation 10*

John now sees another angel who comes down from heaven with the open scroll in his hand. The rainbow that John sees over its head reminds the readers of God's covenant with Noah<sup>10</sup> – a very comforting reminder in the midst of so much de-creation that has been portrayed in the trumpets. John also describes this angel as being wrapped in a cloud and having legs like pillars of fire – two images that would remind John's readers of God's presence with his people in the Exodus story.

It has been made explicitly clear that judgments alone do not lead the nations to repent (9:20-21), and so John is told that there is no need to write down the details of the seven thunders. Richard Bauckham elaborates on the exclusion of the seven thunders when he says:

“The process of increasingly severe warning judgments is not to be extended any further. It is not that God's patience has run out, but that such judgements do not produce repentance. So the series of judgements affecting a quarter of the earth (6:8) and the series affecting a third of the earth (8:7-12; 9:15) are not, as we might expect, followed by a series affecting half the earth. No doubt the seven thunders would have been such a series.”<sup>11</sup>

And so, the seven thunders are to remain sealed, but John is told that it is now time for him to take the scroll and to reveal its message – it is now time for John to receive and to reveal God's plan of how he will bring his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>10</sup> Read Genesis 8-9 and also Ezekiel 1.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 82

John receives the scroll that has been opened by the Lamb, and he is told by the angel who gives him the scroll that he must eat the scroll and proclaim its message to all the nations on earth. This eating of the scroll seems bizarre to many of us today, but again this is something that John's first audience would have immediately recognized and understood.

John's audience would have understood that John has received a commissioning from God much like the commissioning of the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's commissioning, he saw a vision of God's throne (Ezekiel 1), and then God opened a scroll (Ezekiel 2) and commanded Ezekiel to eat that scroll (Ezekiel 3). Ezekiel ate the scroll and described it as being as sweet as honey in his mouth. And after he ate the scroll, he was told to go and proclaim God's message to the people of Israel.

John's commissioning follows that same pattern. John sees a vision of God's throne (Revelation 5), and then the Lamb opens a scroll (Revelation 6-8). John then receives that scroll from an angel and is commanded to eat it (Revelation 10). He describes it as being as sweet as honey but also bitter. And after he eats the scroll, John is told to go and proclaim God's message to the people.<sup>12</sup>

The eating of the scroll symbolizes John receiving this new prophetic message from God. The (OT) prophets that preceded John, like Ezekiel, had proclaimed the message of God's coming kingdom. John has now received a revelation that reveals the mystery of how the seven churches (and us) are to play a role in the fulfillment of those prophecies – the bringing of God's kingdom here on earth.

It is at this point in the Book of Revelation that the main content and message of the book is given to him. Everything that John has seen and heard up to this point in the book has simply prepared John's readers for what he is about to reveal to them. It is now time to discover the message of the scroll that has been sealed for all these years. It is now time to reveal to the churches the role that they are to play in the coming of God's kingdom here on earth.

## **The Two Witnesses**

### *Revelation 11*

The content of the scroll is revealed in the story<sup>13</sup> that is described in the eleventh chapter of the book. John sees a vision of God's temple and is told to measure it. He is told to not measure the

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<sup>12</sup> The chain of revelation from God to Jesus to an angel to John to the people corresponds to the chain described in Revelation 1.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bauckham describes it as a story that is more like a parable and should not be taken as a literal story or an allegory.

area outside of the temple nor to measure the city surrounding the temple because that is going to be trampled on by the nations for a limited period of time.

Some interpreters think that this is a reference to a specific future event that will take place, and then there are others who think that this is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. However, John is most likely just following the teaching of the other apostles in the way that they used this image of the new temple as a symbol of God's new people – the church.<sup>14</sup>

This vision is meant to encourage the first-century Christians that even though they are being trampled on by the Roman Empire, God has put a limit on what the nations can do to his people.<sup>15</sup> And no nation, not even Rome, will be allowed to destroy the church itself. So what is the church supposed to do during this time of tribulation and being trampled on by their enemies? The rest of the story in chapter eleven tells us.

John describes two witnesses who are granted authority by God and who are commissioned to prophecy during this period of time that the nations are allowed to oppress God's people. There has been all sorts of debates and speculations about who these two witnesses are, but John refers to them very clearly as the two olive trees and the two lamp stands.

This means that the two witnesses should not be viewed as two specific people or the future reappearing of two of God's ancient prophets. The two witnesses in this story are simply symbolic representations of the church as a whole – all of God's faithful people, Jew and Gentile together.

The two witnesses in the story prove to be faithful witnesses to the truth about God, but they are eventually trampled on and killed by a horrible beast that rises from the abyss.<sup>16</sup> However, God comes and vindicates his two witnesses and brings them back to life<sup>17</sup> which leads to many among the nations finally turning to the one true God as the Creator and King of the universe.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Some examples 1 Corinthians 3:16, Hebrews 3:6 and 1 Peter 2:4-5.

<sup>15</sup> The temple is measured and distinguished from the outer court and city. Therefore, the extent to which the nations can do their trampling is measured and limited. Also, the time period of 42 months and 1,260 days is equivalent to 3 1/2 years. It's half of 7 which is a way of saying 'not forever'.

<sup>16</sup> Read Daniel 7.

<sup>17</sup> Read Ezekiel 37.

<sup>18</sup> The 7,000 that are killed in Revelation 11:13 and the rest that are saved is an intentionally reversal of the 7,000 that are saved and the rest that are killed in Elijah's witnessing role in 1 Kings 19:18. The church will be more effective than the prophets before them.

## What is the Point of the Story?

The point of the story is to reveal the prophetic role that the churches have been given in bringing God's kingdom here on earth. Like Moses and Elijah (or even Moses and Aaron), followers of Jesus are called to be God's faithful prophetic witnesses who speak courageously against all forms of idolatry, resist the empire and who live faithfully to the point of even dying a sacrificial death.

God's warning judgements through the seals and trumpets did not generate repentance among the nations. It is the Lamb's scroll that reveals the strange mission of the Lamb's army. The nations will repent and the kingdom of God will come when the nations see God's people imitating the loving sacrifice of the Lamb and loving their enemies instead of killing them. It is God's compassion and loving-kindness, demonstrated through his faithful people, that will move the nations to repent – not just his judgements alone. Richard Bauckham writes:

“The content of the scroll is not that the faithful Christians are to suffer martyrdom or that their martyrdom will be their victory: these things are already clear in 6:9-11 and 7:9-14. The new revelation is that their faithful witness and death is to be instrumental in the conversion of the nations of the world. Their victory is not simply their own salvation from a world doomed to judgment, as might appear from chapter 7, but the salvation of the nations. God's kingdom is to come not simply by saving an elect people who acknowledge his rule from a rebellious world over which his kingdom prevails merely by extinguishing the rebels. It is to come as the sacrificial witness of the elect people who already acknowledge God's rule brings the rebellious nations also to acknowledge his rule. The people of God have been redeemed *from all the nations* (5:9) in order to bear prophetic witness *to all the nations* (11:3-13)... This is what the story of the two witnesses (11:3-13) symbolically dramatizes.”<sup>19</sup>

As hard as it is for us to accept this reality, the message being conveyed here is that God is not in some sort of struggle to push back against oppressive empires in order to protect his people. In his desire to save people from all the nations, he patiently allows the nations to oppress his people. Think about that. God is not struggling to overcome the power of Caesar and the Empire. Their power over God's people is a power that he is allowing them to exercise. Yes, he could bring immediate judgement upon the land, but that will not lead to the result that he ultimately desires.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 84

God desires for all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth about who he is. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but desires that the wicked would turn to him and experience the life that he gives. He desires for none to perish and for all the nations to repent. This is the true heart and nature of our God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The question is, "Is this the nature of our heart as his people?"

You see, like many of God's people who were wanting the Messiah to bring God's kingdom by destroying their enemies and overthrowing the Roman Empire, we too can find ourselves wanting God to destroy our enemies and to establish his kingdom through executing his judgement upon those who oppose us. However, we must never forget that we are to follow the way of the Lamb.

Jesus did not launch God's kingdom by destroying his enemies. He launched God's kingdom by loving his enemies and dying for them. That is the mystery of how God's kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven. Again Bauckham writes:

"To be the witnesses who bring the nations to faith in the one true God is the novel role of God's eschatological people, revealed by the scroll that only the Lamb has been able to open. If we ask how the prophetic witness of the church is able to have this effect, which that of the Old Testament prophets did not, the answer is no doubt that it derives its power from the victory of the Lamb himself... The witness of his followers participates in this power when they too are faithful witnesses even to death... In fact, the way that Christian martyrdom, in the early centuries of the church, impressed and won people to faith in the Christian God, was precisely thus. The martyrs were effective witnesses to the truth of the Gospel because their faith in Christ's victory over death was so convincingly evident in the way they faced death and died."<sup>20</sup>

The message of the scroll has been revealed. The kingdom of God will overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the power of our faithful witness to the point of death.

After the message of the scroll has been revealed, the seventh trumpet sounds and John hears that the kingdom of God has finally come on earth. The people and nations who trampled upon God's people but did not repent eventually reap the wrath of God's final judgement. But John's readers are left wondering about what to make of that beast who wages war against God's witnesses. This terrible beast and the war that is waged against God's people is where John shifts his focus next.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 87-88