

When the Trumpets Sound

Revelation 8:1-9:21

By [Derek Thomas](#)

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.

Reading the book of Revelation is like turning over the pages of a coloured picture-book which we might expect children to read. Realizing this helps us to understand that the genre here is different from that which we find, say, in the letters of Paul. The principles we adopt in reading Revelation have to be different from those we might employ elsewhere. It is the admission that the Bible contains many different styles of writing: letters, biographies, travel documents, architectural descriptions, poetry, proverbs, parables, sermons, teaching material, *and* something which we sometimes call *apocalyptic writings*.

Revelation is an example of apocalyptic writings where the symbolic use of colour and number become enormously important. The style is as different as a cartoon is from a newspaper editorial, though both might be alluding to the same issue, or event.

John is eager for us to see that what we have in Revelation is not a book of history written in advance s written in such a way that we might readily identify fulfillments of its "prophecies" at various points in the historical timeline. One of the ways we see this is in the use that is made within the book of the number seven. We have noted it before in the *seven letters* written to *seven churches*, followed by a vision of Christ opening *seven seals* of a scroll. Now, in this section, we are introduced to *seven trumpets*. Later we shall read of *seven thunders*, followed by *seven bowls* of wrath. Finally seven aspects of God's final victory bring the book of Revelation to its close.

This repetitive nature of the number seven offers us a clue as to how Revelation is to be read. It is offering us several glimpses of the same picture from different perspectives. There is a *cyclical* nature to the book that offers us repeating glimpses of the work of Christ in the unfolding of his providential purposes. He shows us how the reigning Lord Jesus Christ brings the purposes of God to fulfillment in salvation and judgment from several different angles. The story is told several times, and on each occasion the camera seems to focus on something different.

Seals and Trumpets

There are some structural similarities in the opening of the seven seals (6:1-8:5) and the sounding of the seven trumpets (8:6-11:19). Just as the four opening seals, or the four horsemen of the apocalypse were grouped together (6:1-8), so are the first four trumpets (8:6-13). The opening of the fifth seal gave us a glimpse of heaven where we saw the saints secure beneath the altar of God, crying for justice (6:9-11). Likewise, the fifth trumpet views the same scene, this time from the perspective of heaven rather than from the perspective of earth. Instead of seeing the saints secure beneath the altar, we are looking down on the earth, seeing the doom and despair of those who dwell on the earth (9:1-11). The sixth seal was followed by terrible judgments (6:12-16) just as the sixth trumpet will be (9:13-21). Before the seventh seal and seventh trumpet (8:1-5; 11:15-19), there is an interlude (7:1-17; 10:1-11:14).

The opening of the seals and the sounding of the trumpets point us to the same great reality but from different perspectives. The seals view the unfolding of the redemptive purposes of God from the point of view of the Lord's own people, those who are sealed; the trumpets view the same reality, but from the point of view of the unsealed, those who are *not* the people of God. The opening of the seals bring great consolation to the people of God. The sounding of the trumpets bring great woes upon those who are not the people of God. The seals are comforting; the trumpets are warnings.

In the Old Testament, trumpets announced an alarm that holy judgment was to be engaged against Israel's enemy, or against Israel as God's enemy. Thus, Joshua against Jericho (Joshua 6), or Gideon against the Midianites (Judges 7), or the Babylonians against Israel (Jeremiah 4).

The Joshua/Jericho pattern is particularly interesting because in that story it was the seventh sound of the trumpet that brought upon Jericho the final cataclysmic destruction

of the city walls.

Trumpets were also used in the wilderness period as signals for marching, battles and festivals ([Numb. 10:1-2](#)). Perhaps the most prominent use of trumpets was to announce the beginning of Rosh-Hashanah, or New Year's Day ([Numb. 29:1-6](#)), or year of Jubilee ([Lev. 25:8-9](#)).

But the New Testament, too, with its references to the Second Coming as accompanied by the sound of trumpets add to the significance of the trumpets in Revelation 8 and 9. "For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" ([1 Thess 4:16](#); cf. [Matt. 24:31](#); [Isa. 27:13](#))

Together these images create expectations of war, a new beginning, of final release from captivity, of cleansing from sin and its consequences. The trumpets signal the dawning of the kingdom of God in all its finality and fullness.

Just as in the case of the seven seals, the seven trumpets portray six trumpets depicting a series of happenings or calamities that will repeatedly occur throughout the history of the world (8:6-9:21), followed by seventh trumpet depicting the Day of Judgment itself (11:15-19).

There are three aspects to the unfolding of this vision, particularly in the sounding of the first six trumpets.

"Nature" – red in tooth and claw

In the first major section, John is given a pictorial vision of *the suffering of the created order* (8:6-12). The seven angels who are given the seven trumpets prepare to sound them. In the first four blasts there is a suffering that is let loose. The aim is not total destruction (only a third is affected); there is something partial, yet massive about the proportions of this judgment. The earth, sea and sky (8:7, 8, 10) are mentioned depicting that in view is the totality of the created order. The judgments, then, do not mark a termination point. They are not final, but precursors of the final judgment of God. The word "third" occurs thirteen times in vv. 7-12 indicating that these judgments are provisional in nature.

The vital thing to notice is that this curse is released upon the natural order:

hail and fire, the earth, trees, green grass 8:7

a huge mountain all ablaze, the sea 8:8

the sea 8:9

a great star, the sky, the rivers, springs of water 8:10

Additionally, the judgments are reminiscent of the plagues that befell Egypt when God showed His judgment and salvation in the deliverance of His people from bondage.

Trumpet Description, Revelation Exodus: First hail and fire 8:7 9:22-25; Second/Third the Nile turning into blood; 8:8-11 7:15-25 Fourth darkness over Egypt 8:12 10:21-23; Fifth locusts 9:1-11 10:12-15

The plagues in Egypt had a particular function: they were to demonstrate the Lord's sovereignty over all of the Egyptian deities (and there were many of them!). The use of Exodus-type language to depict this may give us a clue as to what is intended here in Revelation. The history of the world is one of the history of two seeds: the seed of the woman which culminates in the coming of Christ and His Second Coming in Judgment of the seed of the serpent ([Gen. 3:15](#); [Rev. 22:20](#)). Exodus portrays the Covenant God of Israel as the only true God; the Egyptian gods are powerless before him. So in the final book of the Bible, the rule and reign of God is portrayed in cosmic dimensions.

Are we, then, to interpret these events literally? In part, this does seem to be the intent. It certainly fits in with what the Bible, and especially the New Testament leads us to expect for this world order. Creation itself is judged. But there may also be some symbolic references here, too. Mountains, for example (the second trumpet, 8:8) are often used to describe kingdoms in the Bible ([Isa. 41:15](#); [42:15](#); [Ezek. 35:2-7](#); [Zech. 4:7](#)). Jewish readers familiar with this imagery, of a blazing mountain being hurled into the sea, would readily understand the literary allusion to the triumph of God over all the hostile kingdoms of the world. We are not simply to look for historical accounts of volcanoes or the like as fulfillments of this prophecy. We are also to anticipate far greater works of destruction in the collapse of every hostile force arraigned against the Lord.

Similarly, the "great star" of verse 10 may well allude to [Isaiah 14:12-15](#) where the fall of Satan is thought to be depicted, and referred to as "morning star." Here he is called "Wormwood" because of the bitterness he brings to all living water (an opposite story to the cleansing of the bitter waters at Marah at [Exod. 15:25](#)). It is a figure of speech used before in such passages as [Deut. 29:17-18](#)—where the allusion is to idolatry; [Prov. 5:4](#); [Lam. 3:15, 19](#); [Amos 5:7](#); [6:12](#)). Idolatry is that which naturally springs up in the mind fallen man.

Whatever the symbolic allusions may be, the main focus lies on the judgment that creation itself experiences. Something has gone radically wrong with the created order. John is telling us that in the natural order of things there is a curse at work that twists and misshapes. Since the Fall, creation has within it a principle of hostility at work. The Garden became for Adam a graveyard ([Gen 3:17-19](#)). Thorns despoil man's expectation of fruitfulness in labour. Creation (or Nature to cite Tennyson) is "red in tooth and claw." There is at work in creation, according to Paul, a "bondage to decay" principle from which it longs to be liberated. Creation currently groans under the weight of this decay, waiting for its rebirth ([Rom 8:21-22](#)).

An Army of Oppositor

A second feature of chapter 9 depicts *the judgment of the unsealed*. It is the result of

the blowing of the fifth trumpet. Verse 13 provides a prelude with its reference to an eagle flying in midair, crying, "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth" (other versions have "angel" here and not "eagle"). The three-fold repetition of the woe is Hebraic in form, signaling an emphasis that we are to sit up and recognize. Something of enormous anguish is to unfold in what follows in chapter 9 for which we need to prepare ourselves.

Covenant disobedience had been predicted in the Old Testament as punishable by the coming of Assyrians and Babylonians, whose language the Jews would not understand, and announced using the picture of an eagle ([Deut 28:49](#)). Prophets who lived through this judgment, like Jeremiah, picked up the metaphor: "This is what the LORD says: 'Look! An eagle is swooping down...'" ([Jer. 48:40](#)).

When the fifth *sea* was opened, our eyes were lifted up to heaven so that we could behold the saints of God praying before the altar of God (6:9-11). In the fifth trumpet, our gaze is fixed on those who are described as the great unsealed. The picture that follows is graphic: a star is given a key to the Abyss, the realm of the demonic. From it rises smoke like a giant furnace. From it arise locusts who are given a specific command not to harm the vegetation of the earth (the natural order, 9:4), but rather their focus of devastation is humanity. They are to harm those "who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (9:4). They are not allowed to kill, but only to torture, and that, for five months (the approximate life of a locust, 9:5). Their victims will long to die, "but death will elude them" (9:6).

It is impossible (even for literalists) not to interpret this figuratively (note the use of "looked like" in 9:7 when comparing locusts to horses in battle dress, which lends support for the interpretation of the third trumpet in a figurative way also). Whilst some interpreters see here a reference to a "good" (unfallen) angel, seeing a parallel picture in 10:1, it is hard not to pick up the allusion that Jesus makes to the disciples mission, whenever he said: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" ([Luke 10:18](#)). The entire allusion sounds like 12:9, where the Fall of Satan is described in this way: "The great dragon was hurled down— that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him." In that case, the picture here is of a fallen angel, an interpretation confirmed by the name given to him as the angel of the Abyss, "Apollyon" or "Destroyer" (9:11; note the repetition of "Abyss" in 9:1 and 9:11).

The picture helps us understand the spiritual dynamics at work in the world. We are not to look for an army of two hundred million tramping across the earth from the River Euphrates (9:15). The description of the locusts defy any natural order with which we are familiar (9:7-10). These are not real locusts!

John is being given a pictorial representation of a far greater reality: that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of far greater magnitude and potential threat ([Eph 6:12](#)). There are forces at work in this world that bring men and women into the most terrible bondage. They work among those who have not been

sealed to bring about utter futility: as John puts it elsewhere, "We know we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" ([1 John 5:19](#)). In far less dramatic terms, John in his epistle uses a word that conveys the idea of a mother rocking her baby to sleep, and is signaling that the devil cradles the world in his arms. Incomprehensible powers are released into human history of demonic proportions that are at one and the same time attractive and repulsive. John's description is curiously appealing and hideous: human faces, crowns of gold, women's hair are contrasted with lion's teeth and scorpion's tails. The Book of Revelation is teaching us to see that the world in which men and women live is both beguiling and brutal at the same time. The brutality is often masked by the onlooker in the form of denial; but its brutality is vicious and ultimately devastating. The whole world is in the grip of the Evil One.

The surrealist picture given is of an evil being (Apollyon) put in charge of an army of scorpions. Locusts wearing iron breastplates will ascend from the pit of hell. These seemingly insignificant creatures will swell in size so that they look like horses dressed for battle. The whirr of their wings will sound like the thundering of horses' hooves. They bare teeth that look like those of the lion, and in their tail is the sting of the scorpion. This hellish mass is directed by a king related to Satan himself.

The entire picture is reminiscent of Joel 2, including the references to the darkening of sun by the smoke that rises from the Abyss (9:2; c.f. [Joel 2:10](#)), but the primary allusion is again to the plague of locusts in the exodus story which also darkened the land ([Exod. 10:5,15](#)). Covenant disobedience had been threatened by a re-visitation of the plague of locusts ([Deut. 28:38-39, 42](#)). The fact that this smoke and the locusts emerge from the Abyss seems to indicate that the judgment of God upon the demonic realm is now being extended to include those who worship Apollyon. The locusts are forbidden to destroy the vegetation (9:4, in contrast to the Egyptian plague, [Exod. 10:15](#)). They are to harm only unbelievers, "those who did not have the seal of God upon their foreheads" (9:4; c.f. 7:3). Whatever the precise nature of the fifth plague, those who bear the seal of God are entirely safe from its effects, in much the same way as the Israelites were protected from the Egyptian plagues ([Exod. 8:22; 9:4,26; 10:23; 11:7](#)).

That the star "was given" a key to the shaft of the Abyss (9:1); that the locusts were told the extent to which they could wreak their havoc ("they were told..." 9:4; "they were not given power to..." 9:5; c.f. the command to the sixth angel to release those "bound" by the Euphrates River in 9:14-15 at a time that is fixed down to the very hour, day, month and year) indicates a Bible truth emphasized throughout, that God is sovereign over the totality of existence, including sin and Satan. The duration is to be "five months" (9:5, corresponding to the life-cycle of the locust, Spring through late Summer). Just as Satan is limited in his power over Job and cannot do anything except by God's express authority ([Job 1:12; 2:6](#)), so here the Lord is in total control.

It is vitally important to grasp the role Satan plays in this judgment. It is a mistake to focus our attention completely upon Satan. That would be his desire, but it would prove a fatal mistake on our part. The One in control of all things is not Satan, but God.

Satan's powers are curtailed, as we have seen. Satan holds no power independently of God. Satan is "God's tool" though he never has nor will admit it. In his malevolence, Satan is irrational; he has lost his grip on reality. Like Hitler in the bunker, he cannot believe that the war is over though at this point in redemptive history the decisive battle was yet to be fought. In allowing him some rope, God uses him to execute judgment on a fallen world. God uses Satan in much the same way as a man might make use of a savage dog which hates him to drive unwelcome visitors off his estate.

But where is the judgment? If we glance at this world with its God-defiant audaciousness, where are the judgments of which these passages speak? Where is the fire and brimstone? But we seriously misunderstand the nature of the judgment if we think this way. Paul's answer to this very question is: these expressions of defiance are the judgments! God gives them over to shameful lusts, is his answer ([Rom 1:26](#)). The very expressions of ungodliness in the world are the evidence of the curse. Those who deny the existence of God's judgments in this world are experiencing it! God has abandoned them to their folly. God does not destroy man, even in hell. Hell will be a confirmation of man's choice: to live with the consequences of his own choice. As C. S. Lewis once put it: "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked from the inside."

Judgment but no Repentance

The third feature of this section is the blowing of the sixth trumpet. It alludes to the *impenitence of the unsealed*.

It builds on something that was a common fear in the latter part of the first century: that the Romans Empire would be attacked by the Parthians from beyond the Euphrates (9:13-21, esp. v.14). The mention of the altar (9:13) reminds us of the context of these trumpets. They are the answers to the prayers of the saints for retribution and justice (6:10), whose prayers rise to the altar of God (8:3-5). Allusions to the plagues of Egypt reminds us how "Egypt" becomes synonymous with all that is evil in much the same way that "Babylon" also does. It is not surprising, therefore, that the sixth trumpet should now depict in Old Testament language a vision of the judgment that will come upon "Egypt." The Old Testament passage in question is Jeremiah 46 where an army of horsemen from the north (Babylon) are depicted in terms of serpent-like locusts, wearing breastplates and standing by the Euphrates River ([Jer. 46:2, 22-23](#)). This same picture will be taken up again in the depiction of the sixth bowl (16:12).

The number of troops under the command of these four angels is two hundred million (9:16), a general number indicating a vast quantity. Since 10,000 is a biblical way of expressing a vast number ([Lev. 26:8](#); [Numb. 10:35](#); [Deut.32: 30](#); [33:2,17](#) etc.), this number may a way of expressing 2 x 10,000 x 10,000. The allusion is to Jeremiah 46 where the number of troops are said to be innumerable ([Jer. 46:23](#)). The monstrosity of the picture is added to by mixing metaphors, describing them as like horses, lions and snakes (9:17-19). Plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur come out of their mouths (9:18). This time, in contrast to the fifth trumpet, death is brought upon "a third of mankind"

(9:16; c.f. 9:6).

The cause of the judgments is now expressed: the sins of murder, magical arts, sexual immorality and theft of which a summary concept is idolatry (9:20-21). The list is surprisingly similar to [Jeremiah 7:5-11](#). God will not be silent about our sins. [Romans 1:17-32](#). There is no such thing as atheism.

The rest of mankind did not repent (9.20; c.f. 21). The rest, here, are the rest of the ones who were not marked with a seal and who did not die. Despite the expectation that judgment might lead to reformation, these do *not* repent. It provides the basis for seeing that there is such a thing as retributive judgment in which the purpose is not to convert, but to condemn. Even in the face of the most terrible judgments, there is no repentance. Men love darkness rather than light. It is not that they do not know; it is that knowing they refuse to acknowledge it, and turn to idolatry instead. Man's idols are his greatest crimes against God. False worship is the ultimate expression of man's rebellion.

One of the consequences of these visions of seals and trumpets is the expectation of evil that this world can expect. In one sense, the progressive nature of these seals and trumpets would seem to indicate an increasing presence of evil and hostility in the world. Those interpreters who expect the latter days of this New Testament era to be accompanied by times of great blessing and glory are forced to interpret these visions along *preterist* lines, that is to say, *along lines which insist on their fulfillment in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 A.D.* The interpretation adopted here, however, is one that views the *progress* of the gospel in parallel with increasing hostility.

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