

THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

A sermon based on Revelation 8, 9 & 11:15-19

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Introduction

The book of Revelation is like the Himalayas and reading it is like climbing Mt Everest. There are spectacular mountains and breath-taking views, but there are also long deep valleys. In fact, the book of Revelation alternates between mountains and valleys. At one moment you are taken up to the heights of heaven, and then you are plunged back down to the sobering realities of life on earth. Again it's like the Himalayas with their lofty peaks and grand vistas. But that's not the whole story. There are also deep valleys where people often live in poverty, misery and disease. And not only are the Himalayas a mountaineer's paradise, they are also a place where wars are fought and lives are lost. Think of the terrible war between India and Pakistan that has been grinding on for decades. Or think of the Maoist uprising that has been tearing Nepal apart in recent years. That's the Himalayas – the beautiful and the ugly, the mountains and the valleys, the highs and the lows. And so it is with Revelation – it alternates between highs and lows, mountains and valleys, heaven and earth. . . until we finally arrive at the Bible's Mt Everest, the heavenly Jerusalem at the end of Revelation. At last we are left on a mountain top from which the story never again descends. But we are not there yet. We still have to cope with some long and deep valleys.

What we have in the big picture of Revelation, we also have in the smaller picture as we tackle the seven trumpets of Chapters 8-11:

1. In chapters 8 and 9 we descend to the valley of this world, with the first six trumpet blasts.
2. And then with the final trumpet we are back on the mountain, in heaven itself at the end of chapter 11.

So in the sermon this morning we are going to do some serious mountaineering. We will descend to a deep valley, and then we will scale the steep mountain on the other side.

I. First we must enter the deep dark valley of the first six trumpets. But before we do, let me ask you a quick Bible knowledge question. As this section was being read earlier in the service what did it remind you of? What part of the OT sprang to mind when you heard of hail and locusts and water turning to blood? Full marks if your answer is the ten plagues in Egypt in the book of Exodus. Now during those plagues what was happening? Was it the judgment of God on Pharaoh and his people for enslaving the Israelites for 400 years? Yes, it was. Was it also a warning to them that if they didn't repent, if they didn't let God's people go, there would be worse judgments to come? Yes, definitely. Were these plagues also a sign to the Israelites that they would soon be set free? Yes, absolutely. So there you have it. These plagues were at the same time judgments and warnings and signs of hope for a better future. It is the same in Rev. 8-9. These plagues are the judgments of God, but they are also warning and they are signs of a better future for God's people. Now let's look at each of the trumpet judgments in turn. The first four are in chap. 8, the next two are in chap. 9. The trumpets in chap. 8 have to do with the natural world. The trumpets in chap. 9 have to do with the supernatural world.

A. We begin with the natural world of chap. 8. As Paul Barnett has pointed out: "Through the newspaper and television we see awesome cyclones, torrential flooding, engulfing mudslides, storm-driven mountainous seas, surging volcanic lava, and fiercely raging bushfires. The forces of nature unleashed in the world sometimes assume apocalyptic proportions." (p. 86). These are precisely the kinds of events that are heralded by the first four trumpets:

B. When the first trumpet is blown a third of the earth, trees and grass are burned up. Now we must remember that this is not a literal event, nor is it a single event. It is not a datable event. These are the kinds of disasters that are likely to occur in our world between the first and second comings of Christ. And it is this kind of disaster to which Australia is especially prone. Think of the horrendous bushfires that ravage our country nearly every summer, e.g. the Great Alpine Road, Canberra in 2003, the great Tasmanian fires of 1967, and the recent Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (2009), when 173 people lost their lives. But it's not only in Australia. There are also terrifying bushfires in California. In the ancient Mediterranean world, they would have known them too,

especially in places like Greece and southern France. The first angel has sounded a warning that can still be heard.

- C. Then the second angel sounded his trumpet and “Something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea.” (v. 8). The ancients would have identified with this one very quickly. Not long before the book of Revelation was written Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD with terrifying force. The Bay of Naples was transformed in an instant and the city of Pompeii was completely destroyed. Today it has been excavated and still stands as a ghostly reminder of that horrific day. Disasters of the sea are still common today. In 2005 there was cyclone Katrina that devastated the city of New Orleans. The year before it was the tsunami that struck the coastlines of Asia. Again the second angel is still sounding his trumpet. It’s a warning call to all men everywhere to repent.
- D. With the third trumpet the star Wormwood falls from the sky on a third of the rivers and the springs of water. This one is harder to figure out. In Israel there are many species of wormwood. They all have a strong bitter taste. So the plant became a symbol of bitterness, sorrow and calamity. This would certainly seem to be the case here. Sorrow and calamity of whatever kind are bound to continue through the history of the world till Christ returns. If there is anything literal here then it would have to be that “many people died from the waters that had become bitter” (v. 11). Polluted water supplies – drinking water that in one way or another has become poisonous – is a major problem in our world today. But it is just one source of calamity, sorrow and bitterness. The third angel’s trumpet is still sounding. Will we heed its warning?
- E. Then with the fourth trumpet a third of the sun, moon and stars were darkened. A third of the day and of the night were without light. The effect would seem to be due to a giant volcanic eruption, like Vesuvius in 79AD or more recently like the eruption of the Indonesian island of Krakatau in 1883. The explosion was so loud that it could be heard in Western Australia. The smoke and ash were so thick that the surrounding area was plunged into darkness for the next two-and-a-half days. The entire island virtually disappeared from the map and caused a giant tsunami in which thousands of Indonesians were killed. Now it’s beginning to reform as the “child of Krakatau” – a rather ominous development

after the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. It's an apocalyptic horror that could occur again. The fourth angel continues to sound his trumpet. Are we listening?

- F. Then come the two trumpet blasts of chapter 9. Here the emphasis falls not so much on natural forces as on supernatural powers that are unleashed on to the human scene:

With the fifth trumpet it again seems that a volcano has erupted. It spews lava and smoke into the air like a gigantic furnace. Again the sun is darkened and the sky is blackened. Then out of this smoke come hordes of locusts. The thought of a literal locust plague is terrifying enough. In the 19th century in Algeria a locust plague was so severe that it wiped out the country's food supply to such an extent that 20,000 people died. But this is no ordinary locust plague and these locusts are no ordinary locusts. This chapter says three things about these particular locusts:

- (a) It gives a vivid and lurid description. These are not friendly creatures. Picture them in your mind as I read vv. 7-10:

⁷ *The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces.*

⁸ *Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth.*

⁹ *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.*

¹⁰ *They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months.*

- (b) So who are they? The secret is out in the next verse. There we are told that they had a king. He is the angel of the Abyss. In Hebrew his name is Abaddon, meaning Destruction. In Greek his name is Apollyon, meaning Destroyer. No prizes for guessing his identity! It has to be Satan. And if Satan is their prince then the locusts have to be the demonic hordes. The locusts are demons.

- (c) And what do these locusts do? They don't harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree. In other words they don't eat

normal locusts' food. Rather they were to "harm those 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." (vv. 4-5). You will notice that there is something different here. In other plagues a third of the earth or the sea or humanity is affected. But that is not the case here. These locusts are to target a particular group of people – those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads, i.e. those who do not belong to Jesus.

(d) Now there is a very sober lesson here. In case you didn't know, life without Christ is no picnic. In Revelation the devil not only accuses believers, he torments unbelievers. He puts them through spiritual and sometimes physical torture. Think of people who are addicts – to alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography. Do they live fulfilled lives? Are they satisfied with their lot? Or do they live in agony and in torment? I don't think I have to answer that question. But it's not only a matter of addictions. There are other afflictions as well. Chronic hardships, diseases, enmities, insecurities – all of these are the kinds of tortures inflicted by the locusts of trumpet 5. Again, if you are suffering this kind of torture and agony, have you heard the trumpet sound? Are you heeding the warning?

Then we come to the sixth trumpet which calls for the release of the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates (v. 14). These don't seem to be particularly friendly creatures either. They are evil beings who have been restrained until now. Again they are associated with the demonic. They have been kept ready for zero hour. Under their command are 200 million mounted soldiers riding fire-breathing, snake-tailed horses rampaging out of Mesopotamia. Again to take this literally would be ridiculous. And yet you can't let it mean just anything. The scene seems to answer a very deep and haunting question. Why can't human beings live in peace? Think of the history of the world over the past hundred years. In WW1 there was an atrocious loss of life. Even though Australia at the time of the war had a population of only five million, about 300,000 Australian soldiers were killed. This is horrific by anyone's standard. But it was all for a good cause. You see, WW1 was hailed as the "war to end all wars." But then just over 20 years later there was another war, WW2, in which about 50 million people were killed. But it wasn't over yet.

Then came the Korean War where a further five million people were killed. And then of course came Vietnam and Afghanistan and Bosnia and the list goes on. Will we never get it right? Is humanity that bad? Well, yes we are. And it gets even more sinister than that. Behind all the human depravity there are also demonic forces at work. Why is there never any lasting peace in the Middle East? Why can't Arabs and Israelis ever get along? Is it because they are worse than the rest of us? Not at all. The devil and demons have a stake in this as well. And so does God. The sound of the sixth trumpet is also a warning blast. When the world is at war does anyone hear the voice of God?

So with these six trumpets we have a very symbolic and yet very realistic picture of what the world is like between the first and second comings of Christ. The sad and sober picture is that it is marked by natural disasters, by torments, and by wars. In case you're wondering just watch the news or read the paper. The events of Rev. 8-9 are with us on almost a daily basis. How will we respond? How do we react? As C. S. Lewis once said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. This is his megaphone to a deaf world." The question is: Are we listening? According to Revelation the two-thirds majority that survive these plagues don't seem to get the message at all. As we read in vv. 20-21:

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

What a terribly sad comment this is. No matter how great the natural disaster, no matter how painful the torment, no matter how destructive the war, when it's all over people's lives continue as they did before. Nothing has changed. Life goes on as normal. People still give no thought to God or to their own eternal souls. How sad! Because after this trumpet there is no second chance. The day of opportunity is over. Now there are no more warnings – only the final judgment.

II. But now at last we come out of the long dark valley that has taken us to the depths of the earth and even to hell itself. Now we scale the next

mountain. With the seventh trumpet we are once again in heaven. We have left the physical world of natural disasters. We have left the supernatural world of the devil and his demons. Now we have entered the world to come:

A. We are welcomed by loud voices in heaven which proclaim:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

Now at last the prayers of the saints have been answered. Now finally the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer has been fully answered: “Your kingdom come.” What we have praying for all our lives, now it’s here. The kingdom has arrived. Hallelujah!

B. But this last trumpet also heralds the last of the three woes which began with trumpet 5. The coming of the kingdom is not good news to everyone. Now the warnings are over and the judgment has come. As the 24 elders put it in their song:

"The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Those who destroy the earth – the devil and his demons – will be dealt with. And the dead will be judged. For those who do not repent and believe God’s wrath will come – not just on a third of them but on all of them. Then it will all be over. For them doomsday has come. For them there will be no mountain peaks, only the deep dark valley of damnation.

But for those who are Christ’s, for those who have turned from their sins and believed in the Lamb, the outlook is totally different. Their future will not be bleak but as bright as heaven itself. Listen again to the song of the elders:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."

The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great."

And what is that reward? We are told in the very next verse where we see heaven opened.

Conclusion

So there you have it. The contrasts could not be clearer – the reward of heaven on the one hand and judgment and destruction on the other. Or can I put it even more plainly than that? We all have our eternal destiny. What will it be – the glorious mountain of heaven or the horrible valley of hell? Where will you spend eternity – with God and his angels or with the devil and his demons?

In the world all around us God is sounding his warnings loud and clear. There are trumpet blasts everywhere! Is he getting through to you? Will you listen? Will you take heed before it's forever too late?

Amen