

Revelation 8-9 Calling the world to repentance

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One of the pieces of advice that new public speakers are given is this.
Tell 'em what you are going to tell 'em,
tell 'em,

and then tell 'em what you just told them.

It's an acknowledgement that it takes a while for things to sink in.

I was reflecting on that advice

as I thought about the trumpets of Revelation 8-9.

Let me tell you, that as a preacher,

it's always easier to preach on God's love than his judgement.

But in Revelation, there are three cycles of God's judgement.

You have the seals, then the trumpets and then the bowls.

And after that you get to the final judgement.

And so you naturally think to yourself,

"Do I really need to preach judgement three times?"

and "How am I going to find different things to say each time?"

Well I don't think it's a sign that God's judgments in history
are going to come in three separate cycles.

It's not like the seals happen from 0-1000 AD

and then the trumpets happen from 1-2000AD

and then the bowls happen from 2000-3000AD

and then Jesus returns.

No. God's judgements in the seals, the trumpets and the bowls
are always happening.

So is John just repeating the same thing three times,

to tell us what he's going to tell us,

then tell us,

and then tell us what he told us?

Well no, I don't think it's primarily that,

though there may be an element of it.

The repetition certainly helps to drum the message in.

But the judgements are quite distinct.

The judgement of the seals comes through human action.

People make war and cause misery.

But the judgement of the trumpets comes through nature.

Natural disasters giving vent to the wrath of God.

And the bowls, well they are different

because instead of the judgement being partial,

it feels total and final.

It's like as history moves towards its climax with the return of Jesus that the judgements become more severe.

Our passage begins with the opening of the seventh seal.

The trumpets emerge out of the last seal.

And straight away there is silence in heaven for half an hour.

My mind is taken in two misleading directions.

I think of the one minute's silence on remembrance day.

As if the silence in heaven is a sign of acknowledgement of all the suffering the judgement has caused.

My other unhelpful tangent is to think of silence being golden.

It's not hard when you are locked down with kids

who are feeling like they can't get their energy out.

But silence in Revelation is neither acknowledgement of judgement, nor is it golden.

Rather, silence is an expression of God's judgement.

Perhaps the picture is of the soldiers

who first set foot in Hiroshima 75 years ago last week.

There was a deathly silence.

In the Bible, silence often functions like this.

The oft misapplied Psalm 46,

"Be still and know that I am God"

is not about quieting your heart and meditating.

It's about "Shut up with all your racket and be quiet before me!"

Be still!

The prophet Habakkuk cries out,

"The Lord is in his holy temple;

let all the earth be silent before him."

That's what silence represents in Scripture:
abject submission before the Lord Almighty.

After the silence, seven angels are given a trumpet each.
But before the trumpets are sounded,
an angel offers incense to God with the prayers of God's people.
Now you might not be too familiar
with the offering of incense in worship.
Basically you burn something that has sweet smelling smoke,
and wave it around and let the smoke waft around the building.
It's something that the Jewish people did at the Temple in the OT.
But like many of the OT worship practices,
we don't do them anymore
because the reality the symbol pointed to is here.
We don't sacrifice animals to pay the price for sin,
because the Jesus has made the real sacrifice.
He is the lamb.
And in the same way, we don't wave incense,
because it points to our prayers going up to God.
Instead of incense, we pray.
Then our prayers really go up to God.
But what is the connection between the prayers of God's people
and the terrifying judgements that come from the altar of God?
We know from reading the letters to the churches in Ch 2&3,
that these churches were being persecuted violently.
And so they were crying out to God for mercy
and for justice to be done to their oppressors.
I doubt that you've ever been in that position.
I know I haven't.
But we are a rarity in Christian history.
Our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and Sudan, China and North Korea,
Iran and Yemen,
are where most Christians have been for most of history.
Violently persecuted because the world can't cope
with people who don't conform to their ways.

So God's people cry out for mercy and justice.
And God answers their prayers
by sending judgement on their oppressors.
And the judgement comes from the sounding of the seven trumpets.

Why is the trumpet an instrument of judgement?
Most of the imagery in Revelation comes from the OT.
You will remember the story of the conquest of the city of Jericho.
It's all rather sanitised in children's story books.
But basically, after the Israelite army had marched around the city
sounding their trumpets for 7 days,
the walls fell down.
And God's people put to death everyone in the city
apart from Rahab and her family.
It was God's judgement on the evil of the residents of Jericho.
And so in Revelation, the trumpet sounds the note of judgement.

The first four trumpets are sounded,
and God's judgement pours forth.
Much of what happens
reminds us of the plagues of Egypt in Moses' day.
There is hail.
There is water turning into blood.
There is water becoming undrinkable.
There is darkness.

However amidst the judgement there is also mercy.
As each of the judgements is enacted,
we are told that its effect was only on one third of its target.
In Revelation, one third is a symbolic number, like all of the numbers.
It means that a proportion of people were affected but not a majority.
These judgements, terrible though they are,
are just a warning of what will come later for those who don't repent.
It's like Jesus said about the tower of Siloam.
"Do you think those people were worse sinners?"

No I tell you.

But unless you repent,
you too will perish."

So too in Revelation Ch 8.

Were the people who perished by drinking poisonous water
after it was polluted by something like a meteor falling from the sky,
were they worse sinners than the rest of humankind?

No, not at all.

But their demise is a warning to all humankind to repent.

There is direct application of that to our own situation.

We are in the middle of a pandemic.

Is it the judgement of God?

Yes most definitely.

It affects a proportion of people.

We don't really know who will be badly affected.

And that means that even the not very reflective amongst us
should have been given reason to consider their precarious mortality.

But we know that those who are badly affected
are not worse in God's sight than the rest of us.

The warning is a general rather than a specific warning.

It's not, "Victoria, you need to abolish
your obscene safe schools, abortion and euthanasia laws
or something worse will happen to you."

Much as it may be tempting to think that
when you know that those laws are an affront to God.

Rather it's "World, you need renounce your idolatries
and turn back to one true and living God.

This judgement though it seems severe
is only a foretaste of the judgement when Jesus returns."

New Zealand has escaped from the effects of coronavirus
almost unscathed so far.

Is that because they are somehow better than Australians?

No. They are meant to see what is happening to us,

and recognise that it's a sign from God that leads them to repentance.

The United States has been affected by the coronavirus far worse than us.

Does that mean they have more to repent of?

Not necessarily.

It's a sign to us of how powerless we are before the judgement seat of God.

Naturally at a human level there are reasons of leadership why one country is worse affected than another.

We could go into that.

But it's not the message of Revelation 8-9.

Our message is to take the warning of the future judgement to come.

As chapter 9 begins,

there are three more trumpets to be sounded.

An eagle warns the inhabitants of the earth, that these judgements are even more severe.

"Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels."

If you thought a pandemic was bad, wait for the judgements of chapter 9, because these are even more devastating.

How are the judgements of chapter 9 different?

Well we have two more trumpets sounded in chapter 9.

You have to wait for chapter 11 for the last trumpet.

The fifth and sixth trumpets are spiritual judgement.

Unlike the judgements of chapter 8 which were directed at creation, and people were affected because of our connection to creation, this time the people are judged directly.

And the nature of the judgement is demonic.

This is dark stuff.

As the fifth trumpet sounds,

a star that represents an angel comes to earth to open the gate between our world

and the world of demons locked up in hell.
This is the stuff of horror movies.
The demonic creatures that come up from hell are in the form of locusts.
But unlike locusts which only eat plants,
these guys were not to touch the plants,
but to only go for humans.
And humans they attacked with the sting of a scorpion.

But even in this horrific judgement,
there are signs of God's mercy.
Mercy on believers because the demons are told they may not attack us.
Whereas we might be caught up
in the judgements on creation of the first four trumpets,
once the judgements become spiritual in nature,
we are immune.
But even on the unbelievers there is mercy.
The scorpion demons are not given the power to kill those they torment.
The demons do not have any power
outside what God allows them to have.
They are only unleashed when God sends his angel to unlock the gate.
And when they attack,
they can only do what they are given power to do.
In this case they can torment but not kill.
And even their torment is circumscribed.
5 months is the lifecycle of a locust.
It's a picture of a time limited by God.
And these demons torment for only a limited time.

The sixth trumpet is sounded.
And it's even worse than the judgement of the fifth trumpet.
The judgement is again spiritual.
You can tell that
by the horror movie like nature of the demonic oppressors.
This time instead of locusts with a scorpion's sting,
they are horses with riders.

The horses have heads like lions breathing fire smoke and sulphur.
Their tails are like snakes to bite people.
And this time there is no limitation placed on them not to kill.
They are sent to kill.
But even here there is restraint.
This too is not the final judgement.
Though they can kill,
it's only a third,
a portion of humankind.

What is the response of human kind to these dreadful judgements?
You might think people would repent.
Jesus said when asked about the tower of Siloam,
"But unless you repent, you too will all perish".
Surely the sounding of these trumpets
would drive humanity to its knees.
Some people have said to me,
that they hope this would be a result of the pandemic.
When people are reflecting on the fragility of their lives,
in the face of calamitous judgements,
surely they will turn back to God.

It's interesting to reflect back on the Exodus story
from which much of the imagery of this vision is drawn.
Did the Egyptians repent?
They were given 10 very good reasons to repent.
They saw the holiness of God.
They saw the judgements poured out on those who oppose him.
So did they repent?
Well Pharaoh certainly did not.
He kept giving the signal that he was ready to repent.
He would make the right noises
right up until it was time to let the Israelites go.
And then his heart would harden.
And certainly the nation as a whole did not repent.

They continued their oppression of God's people
 right up until the day
 their firstborn sons were killed by the angel of death.
 And even after they allowed the Israelites to go,
 they chased them to try to bring them back.
 It was Pharaoh's decision, I guess.
 But had they decided en masse
 that they were going to bow the knee before the God of Israel,
 Pharaoh would have been powerless to do anything about it.

But you know there were some Egyptians who did repent.
 How can I tell?

Because they went with the Israelites when they escaped.
 No better definition of repentance than joining God's people.
 It's just mentioned as a one liner in Exodus.
 But it's there.

Ex 12:37-38 "The Israelites journeyed from Ramases to Sukkoth.
 There were about 600 000 men on foot, besides women and children.
 (Here's the important bit.)

Many other people went up with them,
 and also large droves of livestock both flocks and herds."
 The plagues of Egypt didn't cause national repentance in Egypt.
 They didn't cause repentance amongst the leadership.
 But there were individuals, almost skipped over in the story,
 who took the warning and joined God's people.

I take it that the story is the same in Rev 8-9.

Generally there was no repentance.

9:20-21 "The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues
 still did not repent of the works 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 take it this is telling us
that the judgements of God in response to the cries of his people
are not going to cause widespread repentance on earth.
I don't think it means that not a single person will repent.
Like in Egypt, there will be a minority who do respond.
But the widespread general response will be a hardening of hearts.
People will fail to repent.
Why is that?

One reason is that judgements are actions without words.
People can see the effect of the trumpet blast.
A meteorite hitting the earth and poisoning the water.
A pandemic cutting a swathe through the nations of the earth.
But they don't know how to interpret those signs.
What they need is someone to warn them in words.
Someone to tell them the significance of defying Almighty God.
Someone to tell them of the possibility of free forgiveness
by washing their robes
and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.
It's a tremendous privilege to be able to proclaim the message
that enables people to have the seal put on their forehead
that will keep them safe from the demonic judgements
unleashed by the fifth and sixth trumpets.
And ultimately keep them safe on judgment day
and bring them to the New Jerusalem.

These visions should give us a sense of urgency
to do the work Jesus has given to the church.
Go into all the world.
And that includes Hastings.
And make disciples of all nations,
baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But as well as a sense of urgency,
it should give us a sense of realism.

Often you get people who tell some exuberant story,
that if only we did x, y or z,
then the church would have explosive growth.
There would be mass repentance and turning to God.
Well there have been revivals in church history.
But the picture of Rev 8-9 is the general experience.
Even when people see the awesome power and holy judgements of God
mostly they don't repent.
The plagues make them bitter and not repentant.
So we want to approach our task with realism.
Realism is good.
Over exuberance leads to disappointment and giving up.
Realism enables you to go the distance,
serving God faithfully year after year,
meeting setbacks and disappointments with trust in our sovereign God.