

**“Trumpets: Prayers of the Saints”**

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**Revelation 8:2-13**

July 9, 2023

Today we’re starting a new series focusing on the very last book of the Bible: the Book of Revelation. For anyone, has Revelation ever felt like the boogeyman at one end of Scripture? You may glance over to it out of curiosity every so often, flipping to the back of the Bible, but then you read a little bit of it, like “A third of the sea became blood,” and so you say, “Well, that’s quite enough of that for one day.”

Honestly, that’s part of the reason we’re spending this time in the book: precisely because it can be so intimidating, even frightening. We’re going to be looking at a particular section of it, commonly referred to as the trumpet judgments, encompassing chapters 8-11. If you have a long memory, you may recall that about two years ago we spent some time in another section, actually the preceding section known as the seal judgments, chapters 4-7.

The reason we’re taking this approach, coming back to just a specific section of the book rather than the whole thing, is because, well, for one I want to keep coming back to Revelation, and you can’t really do an overview of Revelation every two years. But also because Revelation is the sort of the book that, if one were so inclined, you can spend a good bit of time talking just about the pretty parts of it, and that’s well and good, but it doesn’t attend to the sorts of things in Revelation that make it so intimidating. Hence just looking at one part of it, but in-depth as we do it.

Today we read about the first four trumpet judgments, described in quick succession—the last three are offered a bit more slowly. So as we come to this vision revealed to a man named John on the island of Patmos, may we do so with courage and faith, not in ourselves or our own understanding, but in the Lord Christ Jesus, in whom and through whom all things hold together. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*<sup>2</sup> And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. <sup>3</sup> Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. <sup>4</sup> And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. <sup>5</sup> Then the angel*

*took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

*<sup>6</sup> Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.*

*<sup>7</sup> The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.*

*<sup>8</sup> The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. <sup>9</sup> A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*

*<sup>10</sup> The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. <sup>11</sup> The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.*

*<sup>12</sup> The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise the night.*

*<sup>13</sup> Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in mid-heaven, ‘Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!’*

**Revelation 8:2-13**

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, we praise you and thank you, for we know our prayers do not fall on deaf ears. Be with us, we pray, in whatever struggle we may face today, and help us to see the work of your hand around us in setting creation right again. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Have you ever been to a church that made heavy use of incense? Maybe you grew up in a tradition like that. You go in and you know it’s a different setting. Maybe it was burning at the entrance, or maybe it was put in a little round oval thing on a chain or a rope, and the priest would swing it while going up and down the aisle. You know what I’m talking about? I was tempted to burn some patchouli today, but then y’all might get the wrong idea, thinking I just came from Bonnaroo or something.

They say smell is the sense most strongly connected to memory, so for some, that smell of incense can bring up cherished memories, painful memories—because any number of us could claim pasts with the church that are cherished for some, painful for others—but at the very least just a strong association with a setting of worship.

My old youth pastor used to have this phrase when someone would share with him something in their lives, a door that had opened, a struggle that had been resolved. And he’d say, “Hmm, smells like God.”

The scene that's described here in Revelation 8 smells like God to me. Our passage opens with a vision of worship, like a heavenly throne room. There are seven angels standing before God, and they're given seven trumpets—and each time one of them blows a trumpet, it ushers in some kind of reckoning, hence the term, “trumpet judgments.”

But in this scene there's another angel, almost playing the part of the priest: holding a golden censer. A censer is that oval-looking thing on a rope with incense. An angel is holding the censer and was given a “great quantity of incense,” to do what? “To offer with prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne.” So imagine this throne room, with a powerful smell, but there's a haze to the space, because so much of the incense has been burning, all as part of this offering on the altar before God.

A hazy, heavenly throne room might be a fair image to start with in this look at this puzzling, challenging, frightening book. The colors are vivid, but it's still hard to make out just what we're looking at.

John of Patmos, the writer of the book, does his best to describe the visions he is shown, but he's limited by the very constructs of language. You'll find he says “like” a lot, as in it's “like” this, or it's “like” that. You see John, potentially the same John who was one of the twelve disciples but it doesn't really specify, appears to have been exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey, and he's given a series of visions, which he then writes down to share not just with Christians but more specifically with *persecuted* Christians.

It's thought that this was all written down toward the end of the first century, in particular during the rule of a Roman emperor named Domitian. That time featured one of the more severe waves of persecution the church faced.

That background might help us remember that one way to think about the Book of Revelation is in terms of three “S's”: suffering, sovereignty, and salvation. Suffering: the suffering of the faithful through persecution, or by others through God's judgment. Sovereignty: the power and reign of God ruling over all constantly—there is never a moment in which the outcome isn't sure. And finally, salvation: the assurance of deliverance for those who persevere.

Point is, it's meant as a word of comfort to a persecuted church, to help them make sense of the horrible things happening to them, and that's important to remember because things get there real quick.

John doesn't waste any time jumping into what happens when the trumpets blow. After that scene of worship and incense and prayers of the saints, we get four trumpets right off the bat. The first angel blows his trumpet, and with hail and fire, mixed with blood, destroying a third of the earth and a third of all vegetation. Then the second trumpet blows, and something like a great

mountain of fire is thrown into the sea, and the sea became blood, destroying a third of life within the sea. Next the third trumpet, and a star falls from heaven, spoiling a third of the freshwater sources. Then the fourth trumpet, and a third of the sun, moon, and stars were struck, darkening a third of the light they all gave.

After that an eagle starts shouting while it's flying around "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about blow!" If you were keeping score, you'll remember there were seven trumpets. The first four did nothing less than cut out a third of the earth, vegetation, sea creatures, fresh waters, and stars, turning the sea to blood while we're at it, and now this eagle comes along saying, "Yeah, it's going to get worse." And you read a passage like that, just like you read a lot of parts of Revelation, and you have to wonder, "What are we supposed to make of that?"

Well, folks have been wondering that for a long, long time. If the Bible were like the NCAA Tournament when the books were getting chosen for it, the Book of Revelation was one of the bubble teams, because it was close to not being included at all. On that topic, you might refer to a note Pastor Mark put together for the bulletin on the formation of the Bible.

But on the chance any of us are under the impression that Revelation has always been recognized as a helpful book, well, not so much. And on the chance any of us are under the impression that Revelation has been interpreted in even a remotely similar way across the centuries, well, not even close. This is painting with a broad brush, but very generally speaking, interpretation of this book, with all its apocalyptic imagery and cryptic language and visions and all that, has fallen into three camps. Different scholars use different nomenclature, but for the most part, this catches a lot of it.

First is the so-called "preterist" camp, "preter-" meaning "before" meaning that the images and events in Revelation point to things that had happened in the past, helping the church make sense of recent history, in particular persecution under the emperor Domitian or about thirty years prior under the emperor Nero. The second is the "futurist" lens, meaning it's anticipating events that will happen in the future—sometimes that could mean the far-off future, as in the end times, other times that could mean the future from the time when it was written. Finally, the third is called the "idealist" view, not "idealist" as in being devoted to one's principles, but "idealist" in that it's the broad strokes, the "ideals" that are being described in Revelation, are the important part, and all the images and events throughout the book are meant to refer to some of the broader struggles the church will face.

So when it comes to these trumpets being blown, are they an attempt to make sense of a series of disasters that had in the past: a great wildfire, a volcanic eruption, a meteorite or a comet, and an eclipse? Are they predicting specific disasters that will take place at the end times? Or are

they more metaphorical references to the sort of calamities that will befall the earth over time, all within the sphere of God's sovereignty and plan?

Depends on who you ask. I tend to favor that last one, the "idealist" understanding. I think when we treat Revelation like some Da Vinci Code puzzle to be solved, it gets problematic for spiritual health and discipleship. We can get more consumed with figuring it out than letting Scripture have its effect of shock or concern but ultimately assurance. But, and this is something I just love about Scripture in general. The second I become too comfortable in considering the more metaphorical approach, this book draws me to consider more directly what is to come. But then the second I become too consumed by what is to come, the sequencing gets all weird, and this book draws me to consider how a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Christian would have heard it.

(That's something I love about Scripture in general: the second you think, "Oh, I've got a good handle on this; I know exactly how this is all connecting together," the Word of God defies you. This is living and active. This is the witness to Jesus the Christ, the Lord, the Savior, the Alpha and Omega, and we should never think we've learned all there is to learn.)

So when it comes to a text like today, it means we should take a troubling passage and let it be troubling. We shouldn't be entirely comfortable with the notion that a third of vegetation, a third of the waters, and a third of the stars being blotted out, even just metaphorically. The scope of the judgment of the Lord—and when we think "judgment," think less pointless punishment and more "setting right that which has gone horribly askew," a process that usually isn't entirely pleasant—but when we think of the judgment of the Lord, it is cosmic in scope. The Lord's concern is with creation in its entirety.

But let's remember too that John is seeing all of this within this smoky, hazy, incense-filled throne room. It smells like God. And all these trumpets sounding are directly following what? The smoke of the incense rising with the prayers of all the saints. It's as if God sees, God knows, God hears the cries of the saints, and what does he do? Goes about setting things right cosmically in a way that to us can sound volatile or violent.

It suggests that the saints were praying for some pretty heavy stuff. Not suggesting that the saints were praying for a volcano to erupt, and God like a genie said, "Your wish is granted," but it does suggest that the burdens the saints were carrying, their cries, were cosmic in scope. They raised their prayers, their cries to the Lord, and the Lord responds by going about setting things right in the heavens and the earth.

And it makes me wonder: are our prayers too small? Or are they like the prayers of the saints going up with the incense of the throne room, the sort of prayers that in sum bring out the cries of the church and the cries of all creation? Is the concern of the church in line with all that

God is concerned with? Or are our prayers too small? Do our hearts break for all that which breaks God's heart?

Years ago I used to do this prayer discipline that had prescribed prayers each morning and each night, more prompts really, and each day would feature different categories of things you might pray for. Like in one night's prayer, it might include a prompt for the church in Europe. And if you look at just that one night, you think, "Well that's kind of random; why just Europe?" But then the next night, it's the church in Africa; the next, the church in Asia. And over the course of a week, among other things, you've been invited to pray specifically—or as specific as you can get praying for a church in an entire continent—for the church all around the world.

But perhaps to illustrate the point, I haven't done that particular discipline in quite some time. So are my prayers too small? What do I pray about? Well, I pray for my family. I pray for those I know in ill health. I pray for you. I pray for our church. I pray for our city. And it's good to pray for your family and your church and your city. God invites us to do precisely that; his concern is with something even as detailed as the number of hairs on your head. But are my prayers too small? Or could they be like the prayers of the saints offered up with the incense in the throne room? Do they smell like God?

I love what our Missions Committees put together each year. You may remember last August, and we'll do it again next month, we handed out a monthly prayer calendar, with a different mission partner in our community and abroad for each day, inviting us to pray each day for a different partner, and if you did that, you'd find yourself lifting up in prayer a pretty broad range of brokenness within the world.

There's a point later in the Book of Revelation, after much trial, tribulation, and cosmic upheaval, at which a new heaven and a new earth come about, and the one seated on the throne, Christ himself, declares, "See, I am making all things new." The scope of God's concern is cosmic. The scope of his salvation has no limits. "See, I am making all things new."

It means that when we look upon the world in all of its brokenness, not just immediately within our families or within our community but in the headlines from around the globe, we should see nothing outside the scope of God's concern and nothing over which Christ is not saying, "See, I am making all things new."

Are our prayers too small? What would happen to your faith, to our lives, if our prayers smelled like God instead?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.