

Commentary on the Revelation

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Chapter seven serves as a parenthesis; an interlude in the narrative will appear in the subsequent judgment-series serving to alert John’s readers to events that are either concurrent or in the future. We are told of God’s protective mercies on faithful Israel (the 144,000) and the chapter ends with a heavenly scene of triumph for the Church. The seventh seal marks the end of the parenthesis and the returns to the final judgment following the sixth seal answering the saint’s prayers of 6:12-17.

 - 1) The opening of the seventh seal, v. 1

As the seal is opened silence prevails, often silence in the Bible is associated with impending judgment (this would make sense in that the sixth and seventh seals deal with final judgment). The meaning of the half hour may be symbolic of suddenness since time is not kept in heaven. Says Mounce, “It is a dramatic pause which makes even more impressive the judgment about to fall upon the earth (179).” Hence, the silence is a foreboding judgment in itself.
 - 2) Parenthesis: the announcement of trumpets, v. 2

While the introduction of trumpets seems oddly placed, it likely serves as an anticipatory transition from the seals to a new series of judgments.
 - 3) The seventh seal judgment, vv. 3-5

This judgment is in response to the prayers of the saints for the exacting of just judgment. Thunder, lightning, and earthquakes are strikingly similar to the description of the last judgment in

11:19 and 16:18, and should be interpreted as such.

Parenthesis: Some have suggested that the seventh seal contains the seven trumpet judgments; meaning that the seventh seal is not a separate judgment. However, the shock of the silence of impending doom accompanied by crashes of thunder should likely symbolize tragedy upon a people already psychologically and physically disoriented.

2. The second cycle: the trumpet judgments, 8:6-11:17

In the seal judgments, the initial four focused on difficulties that reveal true faith, persevering faith, in the midst of tribulation. The focus of the initial trumpets is distinguished in that the emphasis is upon the unbelieving persecutors of the saints in the same period of time. Like the seals, the trumpets are divided into a four-two segmentation with the seventh trumpet following a parenthesis with a similar emphasis as the fifth and sixth. Thus, the trumpets cover the same time period as the seals (1-4: the post resurrection era and 5-7: the final judgment). Another unique feature of this cycle of judgments (1-6) is that they are executed by angels.

The second round of judgments or trumpet blasts tells us that God hallows His name responding to the prayer of His people (6:10) exacting His righteous judgments upon mankind. These judgments culminate in God's final exaction of justice.

Trumpets signaled prominent events in the history of Israel such as the imminence of battle (Judges 7:16-22), but, most significantly, in Jericho's demise (the seventh-day blowing of trumpets signaling its judgment). The partial nature of these judgments suggest that they are not describing the end of time events simply because they are not total and final (thus, it would seem the four judgments to follow depict the time after Christ's resurrection enthronement throughout the era before the final judgment). The initial four judgments deal with the created order (before the final destruction, God brings to the world reminders that it is not ideal, a deconstruction has happened, and more will until, the new creation or the restoration of Gen 1).

a. The judgments, 8:6-9:21

The initial five trumpets follow the sequence of the first five plagues upon Egypt. The plagues aimed to punish idolatry since each of them has to do with preservation by a particular god; the gods would fail just as the idols that enraptured several of the seven churches in the first century.

Trumpets

1. Hail, fire (8:7)
2. Sea to blood, death (8:8-9)

Egyptian Plagues

7. Hail, fire (9:23-25)
1. Nile, blood (7:20-21)

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| 3. Water (8:10-11) | 1. Water/ blood (7:19) |
| 4. Solar system (8:12) | 9. Darkness (10:21-29) |
| 5. Darkness, locust (9:1-11) | 8/9. Darkness, locust (11:1-10) |
| 6. Death angel (9:12-19) | 10. Death angel (11) |

- 1) The introduction, v. 6
With this verse, and those following, John returns to the parenthesis of v. 2 and now develops it.
- 2) The first trumpet, (destruction of vegetation), v. 7
Since the focus of the trumpets, in contrast to the seals, is unbelievers, not the persecution of believers, the vastness or scope of the devastation is broadened. As in the Egyptian plagues the focus is upon the destruction of food sources. Since the mention of “fire” is figurative in vv. 4:5 (also in 1:41, 2:18, 10:1, 19:12), it is likely here also. The result is famine as in the third seal (8:6).
- 3) The second trumpet (sea life and ships), vv. 8-9
“Mountains” in the OT often represent nations as the object of divine wrath (Isa. 41:15, Zech. 4:7). The “sea turning to blood” is likely rooted once again in the Egyptian plague episode, the destruction of marine life as a food source (Exod. 7:20-21). The destruction of shipping, commerce, also entails the loss of human life.
- 4) The third trumpet (contamination of water), vv. 10-11
In this plague, as well as the previous two, “fire,” in the form of huge ball (not a mountain as in vv.8-9), cast by an angel called “wormwood” or “bitter destroys” the portable water. “Wormwood” is a bitter herb that is used symbolically in the OT of divine judgment (Deut. 29:17-18, Amos 5:6-7).
- 5) The fourth trumpet (celestial destruction), v. 12
This judgment is similar to the sixth seal (6:12-13) though the scope of destruction is broadened. Darkness or darkening symbolically depicts divine chastisement. As such, it serves as a bridge to the demonic fifth judgment.

Transition, v. 13

The remaining three trumpets are set apart from the others by the designation “woes” expressive of their severity. The first two woes lead to the final one, the last judgment. What characterizes these final three is that they afflict unbelievers directly, as opposed to their environment, demons are involved in their execution, and the judgments are spiritual in nature.

There is a textual discrepancy in this verse, some manuscripts read “eagle” and others “angel.” Eagles are instruments of divine wrath in the OT (Hos. 8:1, Jer. 4:13). However, the broader context would favor angels (the two words in Hebrew are quite

similar in spelling). Further, eagles are only mentioned twice in the book (4:7, 12:14).

5) The fifth trumpet: The first woe (insect plagues), 9:1-12

a) The description of the locust plague, vv. 1-6

(1) The origin of the locust, vv. 1-2

The star in John's vision, similar to the one in 8:10, is a demonic angel; the ruler of this angel is Satan (v. 11). This destructive angel receives authority (keys) from heaven, in this case Christ. The devil's minions are subject to the sovereignty of God and the Lamb. "Darkness" in the Bible is symbolic of deception and spiritual blindness.

(2) The instruction of the locust, vv. 3-5

This "locust" infestation finds its OT reference in the Egyptian plagues; in both instances, God sent the plague upon ungodly peoples who had oppressed the people of God.

The object of the torment is not nature, as in the previous trumpets, but upon unbelievers, those with no ownership from God in a redemptive sense. The torment of the inflict seems to be prevalence of psychological despair and hopelessness (this is why believers are not subject to this trumpet; they have hope through the presence of the Spirit (the seal).

The limitation of the trumpet plague to a specific time frame, five months being the life span of locust, suggests that God has control over evil.

(3) The torment of the locust, v. 6

This verse is the evidence that the locust torment is psychological; people will lose hope and seek to end their torment in suicide. However, their fear of death will keep them from it leaving them in a hopeless, fear-ridden plight.

b) The description of the locust, vv. 7-12

(1) Their appearance, vv. 7-9

Locust in the appearance of battle horses is a clear allusion to Joel 2:4-9 with roots also in the Egyptian plague episode. As such, the primary function of the "locust" is to harden hearts of unbelievers.

Further, they have golden crowns (false royalty), faces of a man, long hair, long teeth, plated coverings (armored), and wings (speed). These are formidable, though figurative, creatures (once incarcerated demons).

(2) Their weapon, v. 10

They possess a scorpion-like ability to sting and torment.

(3) Their lord, v. 11

The angel that controls these demonic creatures is likely Satan himself (his Hebrew and Greek names are given, “the destroyer”). The two names not only express his character; they explain his function. Says Mounce, “To name the king of the underworld Apollyon would be a cryptic way of saying that an emperor such as Domitian who like to be regarded as Apollo incarnate was in reality a manifestation of the powers of the underworld (198).”

Normal locusts have no leader (Prov. 30:27), depending on their numbers to simply overwhelm; these are not normal locust!

c) The notification, v. 12

This verse tells us that one woe-vision has been described and two visions remain. However, the point is not on linear sequence, but upon successive visions.

6) The sixth trumpet: The second woe (deception), vv. 13-21

Once again demonic activity is specified. In this case, demons are sent to harden unbelievers to ensure through deception so that their judgment is certain. This trumpet is an escalation of the preceding one, each dealing with death suggestive of John’s literary pattern of repetition to make a point.

a) The instruction, vv.13-14

The voice from the altar, the scene being heavenly, may either be Christ Himself or a delegated angel. Four is a numeral implying completeness (a perfect place) and horns imply strength or power.

b) The destruction, vv. 15-16

These angels were restricted from their destructive function until God determined the instance of their release.

The command is to release four demons (this is quite similar to the fifth trumpet [9:1-3]). These demons are at the Euphrates River (invasion into the land of Israel was always from the East as armies followed the Fertile Crescent to move westward). From the time of the Genesis account, the East was where evil would come (from the casting from the garden to the building of the tower to reach heaven of Babel, it was to the East people were sent or built).

c) The description, vv. 17-19

The grotesque delineation of these demonic forces only

adds to the destruction they exact. From the image of Christ as judge (Rev 1) a sword, meaning judgment, came out of His mouth, here “fire.” This is judgment of punitive kind delivered by Satan’s minions on unbelievers (Satan is the arch mimic of Christ, but not righteous).

The repetition of “fire, smoke and brimstone” (v. 18) is likely an allusion to the Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction (Gen. 19:11-13) since that is the only other place in the Bible where this exact phrase occurs. Their destruction, like in Sodom, was upon idolaters, persecutors, and moral compromisers. (*The woe judgments have a direct parallel with the bowl judgments later in the book.*)

The serpent-like tails of these ugly beings link them to Satan, “the serpent.” Satan is the emissary of the Lord to judge God’s enemies, he being the chief one. The way the demons do their work is through deception (i.e., false teachers).

d) The consequence, vv. 20-21

These verses explain why the ungodly did not repent; they were more attached to their behavior than to God. The sins they loved (murder, sorceries, immorality, stealing) are associated in the Bible with idolatry.

Applications

1. The judgments in the second series, as noted above, have a different focus than the seal judgments. Here the judgments are aimed particularly at unbelievers. What is abundantly clear from the book is that judgment awaits those who refuse to find their solace in Christ’s redemptive mercies. While unbelievers are often portrayed in our media sources as the blessed, happy, and successful people, the truth is that it is all hallow being without any enduring qualities. What does this tell us about the wisdom of believers who act like unbelievers? Is it wise to pursue their values?
2. Silence has a foreboding quality about it; we dread the emptiness of it and seek to fill every waking moment with sounds. We despair of an empty vacuum when we are left only with the emptiness of ourselves. Can you image what people will face who refuse the mercies of God? Can you imagine the experience of the loss of all the sounds that filled their ears and minds, when all entertainment is dissolved into nothingness? It will reveal the emptiness of their lives especially when the God of heaven stops them in silence and with no escape from it. Is this not a reason to tell people about their only hope before the silence comes and all that is before them is impending doom, the darkness of silence? Think how distressing it is when cherish loved ones treat us with silence and then think of what it will be like when God treats His enemies with silence, the silence of doom.
3. While the forces of evil appear to be rampant within our culture and the world such is not the case. The devil and his minions act only under the authority and permissibility of God. As odd as it may be, the devil serves the interests of God. God uses evil as

instruments to judge the unbelieving world. In effect, evil is at the service of God. When bad things happen to us, we should ask for what purpose God has allowed, even ordained, that this should happen. Is it not comforting to know that not even evil can hurt us in the will and permissiveness of God?

4. One of the devises of Satan is the use of deception; he employs this with nations and with individuals. This is consistent with his character in that he is a liar and duplicitous, having been since his first appearance in the biblical record. We have an enemy of our souls. What are you doing to identify the inroads of deceptive thinking and action? Are you availing yourself to the provisions of God to detect such serious issues personally, in your family, in your business?
5. There is a world that is much larger than the world we see; it is the spiritual realm. Like the world we live in there is good and evil; these clash as our passage indicates. In fact, the unseen world is more vast than this one. Fortunately, it is not blighted as this one. Though it is beyond our understanding, it is a world of delight and beauty and evil forces clashing with angels of God. What Revelation teaches us is that God the Father and His Son is sovereign over it all. Evil will not prevail, though our lives seem unprotected. Christ through His victorious death and triumphant resurrection now rules over both realms. Are you not rejoicing that one is supreme over all the things we do not understand? That the one who controls the seen and the unseen profoundly and unconditionally loves us. Are we not afraid of the unseen, the dark? Always remember that light and darkness are the same to God; He is the great controller and comforter.
6. The seal and trumpet judgments are unfolding now in a shadowed illustrative manner of what will happen in the end of time. The Bible is relevant to every generation of believers because what we experience are repeated shadowed events that occur repeatedly throughout the lives of all who have lived since Gen 3 and until Rev 21-22. What happens today is a shadowed anticipation to teach us to be dependent upon God. The seals and trumpets were important in the instruction to the seven churches. They needed to know that the persecution they were experiencing for their testimony unto Christ is normal in our calling to suffer with Christ and for Him (His suffering is a picture of what we can anticipate until our triumph comes). They needed to know that victory has been secured in Christ and evil should not be feared for evil faces defeat someday. Do we not need to be reminded of that also? Victory has been won even if our lives are full of “trumpets” for now, even if our lives end as our Lord’s in seeming defeat. Resurrection triumph awaits us, though for now the shadows of the trumpets are all about us
7. Our passage teaches us that what we call disastrous events are to be viewed within a complex and incomprehensible plan of God, even though we may never understand how my pain, loss, or sorrow could ever be from the hand of God who “works all things accord to the counsels of His good pleasure.” The Bible asks a question of us and it goes like this: “He who spared not His own Son, will He not give us all things freely? We have every right to believe that if God would do the greater for us, He will have it within His power to do the lesser. Life has “seals” and “trumpets,” but God is painting a tapestry for His glory out of our lives more beautiful than anyone can imagine, except those who have gone into His presence before us. Does this not fill you with hope? Does this not only explain your burdens, but lighten them?