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 Revelation 8:6–9:21
 Fifteenth Message
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THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we resume our studies in the Book of Revelation after a break of nearly a year. Last summer we looked at the seven seals. Over the next four weeks we'll look at the seven trumpets. Both the seals and the trumpets represent God's judgments upon his enemies. Everyone agrees on that, but that's about as far as the agreement goes. As for how and when the trumpets have been or will be fulfilled and what all the imagery means, on these matters there is much disagreement.

Revelation is simultaneously a book of great complexity and of great simplicity. But to most people the book is anything but simple. This was true for me for many years: whenever I read Revelation I felt hopelessly lost. But there is hope from two quarters: paying attention to the book's structure and to the book's nature as a sequence of visions. Revelation is one of the most carefully structured books in the Bible; confusion abounds when we lose sight of where we are in the flow. Revelation is a narrative of the visions shown to John; allowing these visions to remain just that, to remain pictures, helps understanding. If we try to tie these visions down too tightly to history, they prove elusive and confusing.

The opening of the first six seals was a noisy business. The four horseman released by the opening of the first four seals rode out in response to a thundering cry, "Come!" The opening of the fifth seal showed the martyred saints crying out with a loud voice for God to bring judgment. The opening of the sixth seal brought a terrifying earthquake. We expected the seventh seal to be noisier still, to be climactic. But instead of noise, the opening of the seventh seal brought a half-hour of silence in heaven. John next saw seven trumpets given to the seven archangels, but they did not blow them immediately. Instead John saw the prayers of the saints offered up to God. These prayers included the prayers of the martyrs shown in the fifth seal, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10). It also included the prayers of God's people still on earth. Revelation shows us what their prayer is: the simple prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). All was quiet as God listened to the prayers of his suffering people. The angel who had offered the prayers of the saints then filled his censer with fire, the same censer which had carried those prayers, and hurled it to earth with cataclysmic results: the thunder, lightning and earthquake that throughout Scripture herald God's appearance. Only now are the angels allowed to blow their trumpets. It is clear that the trumpets are to be understood as God's response to the prayers of his people. God has heard their prayers and he will not keep silent. He returns their prayers to earth with devastating results.

A. Trumpets

The vision of serene silence had been shattered by the theophany. Now it is shattered again seven times by seven trumpet blasts. Revelation is a multi-media book, full of images, sounds and smells. Too often we neither hear nor imagine the sounds. The piece of music we

have just listened to, the *Tuba mirum* from Berlioz' *Requiem*, conveys something of the terrifying sounds of these trumpet blasts.

Revelation is full of the language and imagery of the Old Testament. To understand the trumpets we first need to turn there to see what trumpets represent. Trumpets feature in numerous settings in the Old Testament, at least three of which are significant to the context here in Revelation. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan River they found a city blocking their entrance into the Promised Land. The city was brought down not by the military prowess of the Israelites, but by seven priests blowing seven trumpets as they marched around the city seven times on the seventh day, leading the ark of the covenant and the people in holy procession. In Revelation the saints are bound for the New Jerusalem, but a city blocks their way. There is not room for both Babylon and the New Jerusalem, the city of man and the city of God. The one must fall to make room for the other. The sixth trumpet precipitates the collapse of a tenth of the city (11:13), but this is just a warning of its impending total collapse. When the seventh trumpet is blown the ark of the covenant is seen in heaven. The seventh trumpet develops into the seven bowls, the seventh of which brings the collapse of the entire city, indeed the collapse of all the cities of the nations (16:19). The next two chapters (17-18) describe the Fall of Babylon in greater detail. With Babylon destroyed the way is clear for the New Jerusalem to descend from heaven.

The second significant use of the trumpet was to proclaim the coronation of the king. For example, when Solomon was anointed king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, "they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, 'Long live King Solomon!' And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound" (1 Kgs 1:39-40). When the seventh trumpet is blown a great cry goes up in heaven,

**"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
 and of his Christ,
 and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15 NIV)**

whereupon the twenty-four elders burst into praise.

The third significant use of the trumpet is as an alarm call, a warning of God's impending judgment upon a sinful nation. See, for example, the text on the cover of the bulletin,

**Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy hill.
 Let all who live in the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming.
 It is close at hand —
 a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and blackness.
 Like dawn spreading across the mountains
 a large and mighty army comes,
 such as never was of old**

nor ever will be in ages to come. (Joel 2:1-2)

This alarm call is echoed by other prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. Though the trumpet blast is an alarm call, it carries with it a call to repentance. The Day of the Lord is at hand, but it is not too late; there is still time to repent. The first six trumpet blasts carry this same call to repentance.

Here then is the general meaning of the trumpets. They are God's judgments upon a world in rebellion against him, but carrying also a call to repentance. They accomplish the collapse of Babylon, the world city that must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem. They herald the proclamation of God's universal kingdom. And in all respects they are God's response to the prayers of his people.

Like the seals, the first six trumpets are God's judgments against a rebellious world. But God increases the pressure: the seals brought destruction to a quarter of the earth, the trumpets bring destruction to a third (fourteen times in 8:7-9:19). God's judgment is devastating but it is not yet total; that stage will be reached with the bowls.

So much for the general meaning of the trumpets. What sense can we make of the individual trumpets?

B. Trumpets 1-6

The first four trumpets form a set, just like the first four seals and the first four bowls. It is more helpful to think of these four trumpets as four portrayals of God's judgment rather than four sequential acts of judgment. The four trumpets affect the four realms of the created world: the earth, the sea, the fresh water, and the heavenly bodies. There is no realm that is unaffected. The imagery is drawn, as we might expect, from the Old Testament, especially from the narrative of the plagues of Egypt: hail, waters turned to blood, the sun darkened. Those plagues, though they were ecological disasters affecting the natural world, were targeted against Pharaoh who held God's people in captivity. God had heard the cry of his people in Egypt (Exod 3:7; 6:5) and swung into action to liberate them. The plagues were God's warnings to Pharaoh to let his people go. Similarly, the trumpets show that God has heard the cry of his people and is doing something about it. He will judge their oppressors and win their liberty.

After the first four judgments John heard an eagle, or perhaps better a vulture, flying in midair, crying 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!" (8:13). "Woe!" is a common expression in the Old Testament prophets, warning of God's imminent judgment. The first four judgments have been terrifying enough, but are as nothing compared to the terror of the three remaining trumpets. The first four trumpets targeted the four realms of the created world. The last three will target "the inhabitants of the earth." This phrase is used repeatedly in Revelation to describe those who are opposed to God, those who are at home in the present world order, those who live their lives with no reference to God. Though they pay no attention to God, he is about to shake their world.

The fifth and sixth trumpets unleash judgments that are terrifying almost beyond description: a vast army of locusts and a vast army of cavalry. Again the imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, this time principally from the book of Joel. The prophet Joel warned of God's impending judgment upon his people, likening it to a swarm of locusts and a mighty army of horsemen. In the Ancient Near East the most terrifying natural disaster was the locust swarm. This was the year that Brood X cicadas emerged throughout the Midwest after

17 years underground. I was in Indiana in May just as they started to appear. The numbers were unfathomable: up to 1.5 million per acre, that's a billion per square mile; trillions in Indiana alone. Fortunately, these cicadas were relatively benign, other than the noise of the mating calls of the males. Locusts are not benign. Their swarms can number billions and stretch tens of miles. They consume everything in their path. In 1954 fifty swarms invaded Kenya, the largest swarm estimated at 10 billion insects covering 200 sq km.¹ Locusts can eat their own body weight every day; that's 20,000 tons per day for that one swarm. In the biblical world there was no more powerful image of total devastation than a swarm of locusts.

The locusts emerge from the Abyss, unleashed by a star fallen from heaven. This fallen star is familiar Biblical imagery for Satan. The Abyss is the antithesis of heaven, the realm of the chaotic forces who are opposed to God and his people. The locusts are portrayed as demonic, Satanic forces who wreak havoc on earth. Their ruler is the angel of the Abyss, Satan himself, named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both names mean Destroyer. That's what Satan is: a destroyer. He can never be constructive; he has no creative power. His work is limited to seeking to destroy that which God has created.

Does this mean that Satan is an independent agent, able to work his mischief according to his own plan? Not for a moment! Notice that Satan is given the key to the Abyss, and that the locusts are given their power and their orders. Who gives Satan the key? Who gives the locusts their authority? The verbs are deliberately put into the "impersonal" passive: literally, "it was given to him" (9:1), "it was given to them" (9:3), "it was said to them" (9:4), "it was given to them" (9:5). Who is the unseen authority behind these verbs? These "impersonal" verbs are a frequent device employed by John to remind his readers that behind everything is God. It is God not Satan who calls the shots. It is God who is always in control. He is sovereign even over the chaotic forces from the Abyss. He is constantly subverting Satan's destructive efforts to his own greater purposes, which are ultimately constructive. It is because it is God who is calling the shots that he can order the locusts to harm only those who do not bear God's seal on their foreheads. Those without God's seal are the same as the inhabitants of the earth. God's people are off-limits; they are protected. Satan and his demonic forces cannot harm them. It is because it is God who is calling the shots that he can order the locusts not to kill the rebels, but only torment them. So great is their torment, though, that they will long to die. God, in his sovereignty, uses Satan's destructive nature to work destruction upon those who are opposed to God.

With the sixth trumpet God steps up the pressure. A cry is heard from the altar. This is the altar beneath which the martyrs had cried out, "How long, O Lord?" (6:10). This is the altar upon which the prayers of the saints had been offered up to God (8:3-4). Again we are being told that God is responding to the prayers of his people. His response is to release four angels. Again God increases the pressure: unlike the locusts the angels are ordered to kill not just harm. The agent they use is an enormous army of 200 million horsemen which comes pouring across the Euphrates River. Again the imagery is from the Old Testament. The Euphrates was the direction from which God brought judgment upon his people: the Assyrians upon Israel, and the Babylonians upon Judah. An army coming from beyond the Euphrates could mean only one thing to someone familiar with Biblical imagery: God's terrible judgment. This would also be a terrifying image to people in the Roman Empire at the end of

the first century. Beyond the Euphrates lay the Parthians, the only neighboring people that Rome failed to conquer. They were a fierce people who repeatedly launched attacks across the Euphrates into Roman territory.

These are the events unleashed by the first six trumpets: one-third devastation of all four realms of the natural world, and one-third devastation of humanity through locust plague and invasion. The devastation is limited to one-third, warning of total judgment yet to come. But the warning is unheeded. The rest of the people, that is the two-thirds not killed by the sixth trumpet blast, still did not repent. They respond to these latter-day plagues just as did Pharaoh to the earlier plagues in Egypt, hardening their hearts against God's warnings.

C. The Message of the Trumpets

When do these events happen and what do they look like? I have been deliberately vague on the details of these six trumpets. Probably I've disappointed some of you: you were hoping I would identify the locusts or the army of 200 million. Many preachers devote individual sermons to each of the fifth and sixth trumpets, going into great detail about John's descriptions of the locusts and the horsemen. I have deliberately covered all six trumpets at once. This is not just because I want to finish this series before 2010. Today I want us to see all six trumpets as a set, and in these four weeks I want us to see everything from the first vision of the seven trumpets at the opening of the seventh seal through to the blast of the seventh trumpet as a set.

If you want to know what individual elements of the trumpets vision mean, you can turn to the commentators. The good ones will identify the great wealth of Old Testament allusions. Many will try to tie John's visions down to history, but they'll each tell you something different, and you'll be none the wiser as to how the trumpets fit into the flow of John's visions. You'll find the commentators differ as to when these events occur. Preterist commentators believe that the trumpets depict God's judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70 or upon Rome in the fifth century. Historicists think they describe God's judgments upon the corrupt medieval church. Futurists see them as God's future judgments during the Great Tribulation after the church has been raptured out of the earth. All three agree that the trumpet judgments follow chronologically after the seal judgments. All three agree that the judgments are not happening today: for the preterist and the historicist the judgments are in the past; for the futurist they're in the future. The only relevance for today is in getting our timetables and charts filled in correctly.

If you've been following my series on Revelation, you'll know that this is not how I understand the book. I read the book as a revelation of what is going on throughout history. The chronology is very simple: the kingdom of this world must become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem. The dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades itself, must all be removed to make way for the new heavens and the new earth in which all is holy and God dwells with his people. At some point the great cry will go up, "It is done!" (16:17). Meanwhile, God's people follow the Lamb in faithful witness, they are opposed by Satan and his forces, and God sends repeated warnings of judgment.

You might find it helpful to think of Revelation as an art gallery. Each vision is a picture hanging on the wall. The pictures are grouped together into rooms. These rooms in turn are grouped together into

wings of the museum. Chapters 4-16 form one wing of the gallery; we enter the wing at chapter 4 and will not leave it until chapter 16. The subject matter of the paintings in this wing is "the things which must take place" (4:1). Entering the first room we see two massive paintings, each depicting a throne and someone upon the throne who is worshiped. The first shows God worshiped as Creator. The second shows the Lamb standing as though slain, worshiped as Redeemer. In John's day at the end of the first century, the eyes of the world were on the emperor in Rome. But John's eyes are lifted to see the true ruler of the universe. These two pictures must stay with us as we tour the other rooms in the gallery.

In the second painting there is a scroll sealed with seven seals. We find that this painting, while hanging in the first room, is also the doorway into the second room, the room of the seven seals. The things which will happen must happen because the heavenly throne is occupied, but the key to the way in which they will happen is the Lion-Lamb who conquers by being slain.

In the room of the seven seals hang paintings depicting terrible judgment. The painting of the seventh seal contains seven trumpets, and forms the doorway into the third room, the room of the seven trumpets. The paintings in this third room are to be understood in the context of that doorway. The trumpets are God's response to the prayers of the saints. They are a new set of seven, but also form the seventh of the previous set.

It is more helpful to allow John's visions to remain pictures in our imagination than to try to translate those visions into events at any particular point in history. This does not make the message of Revelation remote. Far from it! It is by tying the visions too closely to history that the book is made remote. If I believe that the trumpets describe events in the distant past, be it the first, fourth or fifteenth century, or in the indeterminate future, then the visions have no meaning for me today. But if I allow the trumpets to remain pictures of devastating judgment then I can see them being fulfilled throughout history: whether it be Jerusalem in AD 70, or Rome in the fifth century, or Europe in 1348 when the Black Death killed a third of the population, or World War I. But this lack of historic specificity doesn't allow me to make the visions mean anything I want them to mean. My imagination must be well-furnished with Biblical imagery. Then I can allow John's visions to form biblically-rich pictures in my mind, which help me understand what is going on in this world throughout history.

The Book of Revelation is a pastoral letter, written by John to seven churches for whom he cares but with whom he cannot be present during his exile in Patmos. How might these six trumpets have been read in these seven cities? Like all good pastoral counsel, Revelation comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. For all seven churches, John lifts their eyes above the earthly horizon, above the plane of visible realities, to show them the unseen realities of what is happening and must happen.

Two of the churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, were already suffering for their faithful witness to Jesus. The vision of the trumpets shows that their prayers are being heard, that God will bring judgment upon those who persecute them. They are assured that the targets of God's judgments are not they, but the inhabitants of the earth, those who do not bear God's seal. Those who oppress them may seem invincible and sovereign, but their operations are circumscribed by God. The vision of the trumpets gives these two churches courage to endure.

For the other five churches, the message of the trumpets is not so positive. Two of the churches, Pergamum and Thyatira, were struggling with compromise. False teachers within these churches had persuaded at least some of the Christians that they could have an easier life by diluting their Christian distinctives, by becoming more involved in the surrounding world. John warns these churches that they have their eye turned in the wrong direction. Their compromise is motivated by a fear of Roman hostility and opposition. But it is divine judgment not Roman judgment which they must fear.

Two churches, Ephesus and Sardis, had the outward appearance of vitality, but it was a sham. Ephesus had a passion for truth but had lost its first love. Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but was dead. Both churches were in a false state of complacency, confident that their quest for doctrinal purity and their reputation for thriving life marked them as healthy churches. To each church Jesus promises that he will come, but it is clear that this coming will be in judgment. Revelation is a warning to these churches to shake them out of their complacency, to remind them that they are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, to remind them that the church is about Jesus. Just because they have a reputation for life does not guarantee that they will be immune from judgment.

The final church, Laodicea, was far ahead of Ephesus and Sardis in its complacency. Confident of its own resources, the church boasted that it needed nothing. But it had forgotten that it needs Jesus. Comfortable and complacent in its own self-sufficiency, I suspect this church had ceased to pray for Jesus to come.

Compromise, complacency, comfort. The trumpet blasts should be heard in these five churches as warning calls not as reasons for confidence. It is only the victor in each church who is promised a successful pilgrimage through to the promised blessings of the New Jerusalem. The victor is the one who heeds what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The churches are not to think smugly that they are immune when God comes in judgment upon his enemies. Those churches which in one way or another have lost sight of their identity as a colony of heaven, as the followers of the Lamb, will find that when Jesus comes to them, he does so in judgment.

In all the many books I have read on Revelation, one sentence stands out. Commenting on the trumpets, G. B. Caird writes, “The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat.”² With the trumpets we stare death in the face. Revelation challenges all that it is not the first death which matters but the second death, not death at the hand of the Romans, but death at the hand of God. The churches must beware lest in their efforts to avoid judgment at the hands of the Romans, they fall into the judgment of God.

Fortunately, judgment is not God’s last word. The awful events unleashed by the six trumpets fail to bring repentance: “The rest of mankind...still did not repent of the work of their hands” (9:20). But the sixth trumpet is not over until the pronouncement that the second woe is ended (11:14). Immediately prior to that, “the rest... gave glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). What is it that finally makes idolatrous mankind pay attention to God? In 10:1–11:13 we have an interlude in the sixth trumpet wherein God shows John his purposes beyond judgment, his purposes to bring salvation to an earth hostile to him. That’s what we’ll look at the next two weeks.

Meanwhile, Revelation should encourage us to pray. Earlier we sang,

Hear Thou the prayer Thy servants pray,
Uprising from all lands today,
And o’er the vanquished powers of sin,
O bring Thy great salvation in.³

Is that your prayer? Do you long for Jesus to come, and for God to bring his kingdom to earth? Do you long that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven? Or are you too busy doing your own will? Are you too comfortable here on earth? Would you rather that Jesus not appear soon? These are some of the troubling questions that Revelation raises.

Our Lord has instructed us in how to pray. Let us close by offering up this prayer, confident that God hears and responds, confident that such a prayer changes history.

Our Father, Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

1. Hussein Sanchez-Arroyo, 1997. “Largest Swarm.” Chapter 27 in *University of Florida Book of Insect Records*, 2001. Online: <http://ufbir.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

2. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 113.

3. John H. B. Masterman, *Almighty Father Who Dost Give*, 1922.