

Revelation 8 (revised)

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8:1-5 The Seventh Seal The interlude between seals six and seven is over. The narrative can pick up where it left off with the last seal. This is the natural way those first hearing it read would understand the resumption of the seal vision. But just when they would expect the activity that accompanied the other seals, a hush comes over the scene in heaven. The opening of the seventh seal will allow further revelation, and that will come, but the sudden silence adds an ominous note of what is to come. Naturally, some teachers interpret this as the lull before the storm, a view justified by a few OT examples. I think there is another reason for a half hour of silence.

Seven trumpets are distributed to seven angels. It is certain that they will be blown and more of what is coming will be shown, probably more unveiling of divine judgment as in the opening of the other seals by the Lamb. With this suspense, in the first reading of Revelation in the first century, there was not much difficulty holding the congregation's attention. Silence in heaven – among all who incessantly praise, and do so loudly – that is quite a surprise. The trumpets have not yet been brought to the lips of the angels.

This mention of one half hour is odd. It appears nowhere else. Within Revelation when a very short time is being communicated, it is usually *one hour* or *a single hour*¹ (All of this is so deliberate we ought to be rejoicing!) So John has not used the usual way of communicating a short time. That leaves the possibility that a literal half hour would be recognizable to the Jewish members of the churches receiving this prophetic letter. I did not say that there is predicted here a literal time frame in heaven; I speak rather of what these words would echo in the minds of those Christians.² In 8:3 another angel, not one of the seven, stood at the altar with a golden censer. The spices within would be burned and the resulting smoke would rise before the Lord, just as it did in the temple. This is the ritual upon the golden altar of incense. Back when there was a temple, the people would wait outside while the priest offered the incense. The wait would be about half an hour. In Luke 1:21 when Zechariah was delayed in

¹ In Greek the same words are used in 17:12 where the ESV has *one hour*, and later in 18:10,17, & 19, where the ESV has a *single hour*.

² See the footnote on p.137, Johnson.

the temple, the people wondered about the delay; perhaps they worried. In Jewish lore, when things were quiet in heaven, it meant God was listening to the prayers of His people. So the silence in heaven (8:1) could be a way of showing how seriously the Lord took the plea of the souls under the altar in 6:10. Revelation 8 broadens this; note that the incense symbolizes the prayers of the saints (5:8), but here in 8:3 it is the prayers of *all* the saints. Our prayers rise to God. The prayers of all His children are heard.

A Central Theme The mention of prayers connected to the incense offering in v.3 is repeated in v.4. That is not an accident. In this way, the altar, combined with the prayers offered there, is being highlighted as a major element in the narrative. That altar, that incense, and those prayers are not a secondary thread in Revelation. In 5:8 each angel of the 4 and 24 holds a golden bowl full of incense: *“And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints”* (5:8). In 6:10 we hear a prayer, prayed loudly: *“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* This prayer is not vague; we have the words. The prayer came from *“the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”* (6:9). It rose from martyrs whose blood had been poured on the ground at the base of the altar.³ Note: *“I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain...”*

The symbolism becomes more dramatic. Two things happen next. The angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth. That means that what happens on earth is God’s response to the prayers of saints from that altar. They had suffered death at the hands of those who dwell on the earth. To maintain the parallel with the incense in vv.7 & 8 something was *thrown* on the earth and sea. The Lord’s presence was indicated by *“peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”* This can come only from the throne. It was introduced that way in 4:5. In chapter 8 an earthquake has been added to the list.⁴ The saints

³ Leviticus 1 speaks of blood thrown against the sides of the altar. It would dribble to the ground. But Leviticus 4:7 says the priest will pour *“all the rest of the blood of the bull ... at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.”* Note that Revelation speaks simply of the altar (singular) which in this case would be the altar of burnt offering. Both altars appear in Leviticus 4:7. That is history. In Revelation there is but one altar; that is apocalyptic vision.

⁴ The addition of **earthquakes** The Presence of God is accompanied with awesome and terrifying sights and sounds. It harkens back to Sinai (Exodus 19:16ff) where there were

suffered, they prayed, God heard, and on the earth came the vengeance they prayed for.

The relation of prayer to God's action in judgment shows up again within Revelation. In 14:18 an angel came out from the altar – from which the martyrs pray – *“and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, ‘Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.’”* Though it was an angel who called for the sickle to cut and gather grapes to go into the winepress of wrath, that order came from the altar. The significance is that God is still answering the prayers of His people. Later in Revelation when the final series of seven judgments occurs, we read in 16:7: *“And I heard the altar saying, ‘‘Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!’’”* By this repetition Revelation makes clear that the Lord heard the martyrs' prayer in 6:10. The saints will indeed suffer at the hands of those who dwell on the earth, but God has provided wonderfully for the future of His saints and remembers their prayers.

The Seven Trumpets 8:6 – 9:21

The Lamb opened every seal. With the trumpets, it is angels that blow and some action ensues on earth. It may appear that Christ's role is reduced in the trumpets. This is not so. In 8:1-5 nothing is given as a result of the Lamb opening the seal. All the activity is in heaven and was simply preparatory to what would follow. The seventh seal did have action which would impact the earth: seven trumpets were distributed. That means that all that happens with the seven trumpets is traced back to the Lamb opening seal seven. The seven trumpets are the seventh seal, or to say it the other way, the seventh seal is comprised of the seven trumpets. In this way we see that the action and control of the Lamb extends to all that transpires in the trumpets. The angels are His agents; they do not take over from Him.

thunders, lightnings, darkness, trumpet blasts, *“and the whole mountain [Sinai] trembled greatly”* (Exodus 19:16-18). *“At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens’”* (Hebrews 12:26). As I prepare these notes in October, 2011, another deadly earthquake has hit eastern Turkey. The locations of all the churches named in Revelation were in western Turkey. In that part of the world they knew what an earthquake could do.

In 8:6 the angels prepare to blow the trumpets. As in the account of the seals, the first four move quickly. As in the seals there is a large difference in the last three from the preceding four. The judgments intensify. In the fifth seal the activity of Satan comes to the forefront for the first time since John was called to heaven. Trumpets 5 & 6 each have more words than the first four combined. The object of judicial destruction in one to four is earth, sea, waters and heavenly lights. These are the environment of man who lives on the earth, who travels and fishes the sea, drinks of earth's streams, and depends on the sun, moon and stars. In seals one to four the focus is divinely ordained human death from human conflict. Now in four trumpets, all human agency is bypassed as the world around man suffers judgment from heaven. This is not surprising; the original curse included the earth itself (Genesis 3:17-19). Creation has long groaned in labor pains without delivery (Romans 8:19-23). The new heaven and the new earth are not yet here, and the curse of God is increasingly executed on creation as sinners persist in idolatry and resolutely refuse to repent (9:20,21).

Trumpet blasts in Scripture Note the valuable review on trumpets in Scripture in "The Triumph of the Lamb" on pp.140 & 141. Trumpets attend the coming of the Lord. Trumpets sounded the fall of Jericho before its walls came down, so trumpets can also be warnings; they call for repentance.

8:7 Trumpet one Since earth and trees are mentioned, and since the second trumpet relates to the sea, this passage takes us back to 7:1, "*...that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.*" Those judgments in 7:1 are now released. Things are being thrown on the earth and the sea. This reveals a divine hostility against this corrupted original creation. The judgment is in response to the prayers of the saints (8:3,4). Thus the angel filled the censer with fire and *threw* it on the earth (8:5). God will still have His creation back. He will say, "*Behold, I am making all things new*" (21:5). We must not forget man's close connection to the physical creation. One way to punish sin is to curse the things that sustain the sinner.

There is more. The ingredients of this imposed suffering are hail, fire (mixed with blood) bringing a conflagration of a third of the earth, trees and all the grass. The fraction of one third is an obvious increase over the one fourth of 6:8. The imagery is still that of limited disasters, but the specifics hark back to the plagues on Egypt. There the judgment was on the nation which persecuted God's people. "*... The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God*" (Exodus 2:23). In Revelation 8 the judgment is in response to the

prayers of God's murdered people. Note the similarity and the downward motion:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field, in the land of Egypt." Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire *ran down to the earth*. And the LORD *rained* hail upon the land of Egypt. There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail. (Exodus 9:22-26)

When this prophetic letter was read in the churches of Asia, many would catch the likeness to God's dealings with Egypt, and they knew that those plagues were the prelude to the wonderful deliverance that followed. The likeness of these trumpets to the time of the Exodus would produce a note of encouragement in the context of God's repeated poundings on the world of man. *"Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment"* (Exodus 7:4).

8:8,9 Trumpet two The first trumpet had blood mixed in with hail and fire. How those can be combined is not something that should concern us. This is apocalyptic. It is not history, nor is it a specific prediction of future events. The hail and fire (probably lightning) in Exodus *is* history, the descriptions there are literal happenings. The impression the Lord was giving in the trumpets is of direct divine judgment on man, the reward of sin. That judgment will be just as real as it was when Israel groaned in Egypt. God's judgment is so terrible that the impression these images create is not an exaggeration. After all, *"the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!"* (2 Peter 3:12).

Blood was a frightful element in the ten plagues on Egypt. The sea is supposed to be water. If it is anything else, it is disaster, but for a third of the ocean, not just a river, to be blood is sickening to contemplate.

... And all the water in the Nile turned into blood. And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. (Exodus 7:20,21)

Mountains might slide into the sea from an earthquake, but earthquakes do not toss mountains around. No power on earth can throw a mountain, but God can; the *throw* language of 8:5 is repeated. Later in the sixth trumpet, the miseries imposed are called plagues. Those familiar with the OT could sense the plagues as early as the first trumpet. These are not the plagues from the bowls of Revelation 16.

In Revelation we should be aware of what some scholars call “the divine passive”. In 6:2 a crown *was given*; in 6:8 they *were given* authority, etc. The Giver is not identified. It is the Lord. So here in 8:8 a mountain *was thrown* (passive). This is the *Lord God Almighty* in action. These words in 4:8 were not flattery from God’s creatures but their sincere recognition of the power of the Lord.

8:10,11 Trumpet three This is the first trumpet to mention human death explicitly. Previously, the text was holding our attention to the environment on which man’s life depends. Now a star will affect man’s water supply on land. The water of the sea was first; then this judgment moves inland to affect the water supply of those who have never seen the sea. We need not worry how one great star could fall in such a spread out pattern that a third of all rivers are contaminated while two-thirds are not. Apocalyptic should not be read through the lens of the laws of physics. The point is that all around gives way, even the water supply, but God’s judgment is still presented as restrained. Because it is not yet total, room is left for repentance. The King James used the word wormwood in Jeremiah 9:15: “ ... *I will feed them, even this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink.*”

8:12 Trumpet four Some brothers look for a way for these judgments to be literally fulfilled as described. That is not a good grasp of apocalyptic, and here it is not a good grip of science. If we lost one third of our sunlight the earth would freeze over. The Lord Who made these heavenly lights can speak of reducing them. The imagery of dire judgment has now extended to the climate. Man is not having the happy life he hoped for without God.

8:13 The milestones: three woes The terrible judgments on the first four trumpets are now to be followed by three more called *the three woes*. These are simply the last three of the seven trumpets. For those hearing Revelation read, these signposts help them to stay with the developing narrative, and its increasing horror. *Woes* always introduce tragedy or desolation.

What is ahead What follows in chapter nine is demonic torture (trumpet five), and a huge marauding army on a killing spree (trumpet six). Things are coming to a head! We are not surprised when it says, “... *that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets*” (10:6,7). We would expect in the seventh seal that God would finish off the wicked, but when the third woe is announced, here is how it begins!!!:

‘ “*Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever"* ’
(11:15).

Evidently the God of supreme justice is also the God of amazing grace. This little preview should make us attentive to the interlude that is found in chapters 10 & 11. As with the previous interlude, just what it means is a matter of controversy among believers. That is not a mandate to withdraw, because these interludes instruct us as to our duty.