

A Call to Repentance: Revelation 8 - 9

Covenant Church
Sunday, May 26, 2019
Zack Phillips, Pastor

Revelation 8:2 – 9:21 (NRSV)

^{8:2} And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³ 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. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵ 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.

⁶ Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

⁷ 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.

⁸ The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in midheaven, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

^{9:1} And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit; ² he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like

crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces,⁸ their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth;⁹ they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.¹⁰ They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months.¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

¹² The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come.

¹³ Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” ¹⁵ So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. ¹⁶ The number of the troops of cavalry was two hundred million; I heard their number. ¹⁷ And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur; the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm.

²⁰ The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

1. Same Story From a Different Perspective?

Revelation 6:1 – 8:1 (Seven Seals) ¹	Revelation 8:2 – 9:21 (Seven trumpets)
• Seven seals opened: 4 + 3 structure	• Seven trumpets sounded: 4 + 3 structure
• A pause (“interlude”) between sixth and seventh	• A pause (“interlude”) between sixth and seventh
• Four horsemen	• Locust-horses and calvary
• “Four angels binding the four winds”	• “Four angels bound by the river Euphrates”
• “Destruction is limited to a quarter of the earth”	• Destruction is limited to a third of the earth
• “Death and Hades” appear	• The bottomless shaft (abyss) appears with its leader)
• Kings, general, free and slave, “seek death by asking the rocks and mountains to fall upon them”	• Earth-dwellers “seek the solace of death as a refuge”

¹ Many of these observations—including all quotations—are from Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Recapitulation in Revelation is “repetition with variation.” —Charles Talbert²

“[T]he story ‘seems over’ repeatedly before it finally is finished.” —David Barr³

2. From the Perspective of Unsealed People

Rev 9:4 [The locust-monsters] were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, *but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.*

3. A Call to Repentance

Rev 9:20-21 The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, *did not repent* of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. And they *did not repent* of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

(a) “Fire from the Altar”

Isa 6:5-7 And [Isaiah] said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding *a live coal that had been taken from the altar* with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, *your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.*”

“[T]he fire thrown on the earth from the heavenly altar aimed to purify humankind.” —Charles Talbert⁴

(b) Evoking the Plagues of the Exodus

Revelation	Exodus
Rev 8:7a (Trumpet 1) The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came <i>hail and fire, mixed with blood</i> , and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and <i>a third of the trees were burned up</i> , and <i>all green grass was burned up</i> .	Exod 9:23a, 25b (Plague 7) Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent <i>thunder and hail, and fire</i> came down on the earth... the hail also <i>struck down all the plants of the field</i> , and <i>shattered every tree in the field</i> .
Rev 8:9 (Trumpet 2) <i>A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died</i> , and a third of the ships were destroyed.	Exod 7:20b-21a (Plague 1) In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials [Moses] lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and <i>all the water in the river was turned into blood</i> , and <i>the fish in the river died</i> .
Rev 8:12a (Trumpet 4) 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 <i>a third of their light was darkened</i> .	Exod 10:21 (Plague 9) Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that <i>there may be darkness over the land of Egypt</i> , a darkness that can be felt.”

² Charles H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994: 37.

³ David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. Polebridge Press. Kindle Edition, loc. 2548.

⁴ Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 42.

(c) “Woe”

“Like its counterpart the blessing, a woe is more than just an announcement of fact. It is ‘negative promissory’ language, a corollary to the evangelical summons of ‘Repent!’ The prophet’s vocation is not just to declare the truth but to induce repentance.” —Joseph Mangina⁵

(d) The significance of one-third

Trumpet #1 (8:7) →	Hail and fire, mixed with blood, hurled to the earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1/3 of the earth burned• 1/3 of the trees burned• All of the green grass
Trumpet #2 (8:8-9) →	Something like a burning great mountain, thrown into the sea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1/3 of sea becomes blood• 1/3 of living sea creatures die• 1/3 of ships destroyed
Trumpet #3 (8:10-11) →	Great, blazing star falls from heaven	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1/3 of waters become bitter• “Many” die from the water
Trumpet #4 →	Sun, moon, stars partially darkened	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1/3 sun darkened• 1/3 moon darkened• 1/3 stars darkened

“The fraction is symbolic of the mercy of God. The calamity is not universal but leaves those who can learn from tragic events.” —Bruce Metzger⁶

Humility: Saying Only What We Can Confidently Say

“Even such power as God’s enemies exercise is only by dint of his permissive will. The four horsemen are ‘permitted’ to take peace from the earth. The demonic cavalry are ‘permitted’ to torment those who lack the seal of God. And in what is perhaps the most pregnant of these images, Apollyon the Destroyer is ‘given’ the key of the bottomless pit to release the forces within.” —Joseph Mangina⁷

“[T]his first tidal wave of violent imagery expresses the apocalyptic insight that the world’s suffering is *allowed* by God, but is more fundamentally a result of *sin*.” —Howard-Brook and Gwyther⁸

“**Judgment is ordered toward mercy**: thus the waters of bitterness (Rev. 8:10–11) will be sweetened by ‘the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (22:1).”⁹

⁵ Mangina, *Revelation*.

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 66. See also Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 42-43; in a similar vein, Mangina, *Revelation*.

⁷ Mangina, *Revelation* (citation omitted).

⁸ Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther. *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*. Bible and Liberation Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999: 142.

⁹ Mangina, *Revelation*.