



Revelation - Chapter Eight

Summary of Chapter Eight

This chapter begins with the opening of the seventh seal. When it was opened by the Lamb there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. John saw seven angels standing before God and seven trumpets were given to them. Then he saw another great angel who offered the prayers of the saints before God. That angel took a censer, filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there was thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. This is then followed by a series of trumpet blasts that bring about judgement on various aspects of creation.

The first angel then blew his trumpet which brought about hail and fire, mixed with blood, and it was thrown upon the earth. This burned up a third of the earth, trees, and all of the green grass. Next the second angel blew his trumpet and something like a great mountain which was burning with fire was thrown into the sea turning a third of the sea to blood, killing a third of the living creatures in the sea, and destroying a third of the ships.

The third angel blew his trumpet and a great star named Wormwood fell from heaven on to a third of the rivers and on the springs of water causing great distress because it turned the drinking water bitter. The fourth angel blew his trumpet and a third of the sun, moon, and stars were struck so that their light would be darkened. Then John heard an eagle warning of the severity of the final three trumpets which have yet to sound.

IV. Revelation 8:1-11:19 - The angels and the trumpets: warnings of coming wrath

John reveals a brief vision of God's heavenly temple, focusing on a golden incense altar, and opens a new cycle of seven visions, each of which is introduced by an angelic trumpet blast. Fiery devastation descends from God's altar in response to his people's pleas. It despoils the entire environment inhabited by rebellious humanity: land and sea, rivers and springs, lights in the sky overhead – yet divine restraint and forbearance delay the final cataclysm, prolonging the opportunity for repentance.

Visions of woe initiated by the last three trumpets disclose intensified demonic activity and global violence as the consummation approaches, at which time 'the kingdom of the world' will have 'become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ', and every rebel against his reign will endure eternal condemnation and punishment.

IV.a Revelation 8:1-5 - The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer

Like the just-completed cycle of visions associated with the Lamb's breaking the scroll's seven seals, a sevenfold vision series begins with a glimpse into God's heavenly sanctuary. As seven angels stand ready to sound warning trumpets, the incense altar from which smoke rises, symbolising the prayers of the suffering church, is the source of a succession of fiery judgments cast from heaven to the earth, devastating, but still restrained, foretastes of final judgment to come.

¹ When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Revelation 8:1

An interlude promising the sealing and safety of God's servants (Chapter 7) has delayed the opening of the seventh seal. When Jesus, the Lamb, opened each of the first six seals John either heard or saw something. When the seventh seal was opened, however, he saw nothing and heard nothing for there was silence in heaven, sustaining the suspense. Yet God's patience in delaying judgment should not be mistaken for indifferent slowness; refer to Luke 18:1-8 and 2 Peter 3:4-13.

The brief period of silence in heaven, about half an hour, displaces ceaseless praises by living creatures (4:8), elders (5:9), angels (5:11-12), and the church triumphant (7:9-10). The contrast to what John had just witnessed and what he heard with millions of beings singing their praises to God must have been quite astonishing and dramatic. Although it lasted only 30 minutes, it must have seemed like an eternity to John, watching and waiting in silence for something to happen.

Silence is appropriate in anticipation of the Lord's coming judgment: <<*Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire. On that day I will punish all who leap over the threshold, who fill their master's house with violence and fraud. On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills*>> (Zephaniah 1:7-10), and: <<*Be silent, all people, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling*>> (Zechariah 2:13).

² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

Revelation 8:2

Seven angels stand ready to sound seven trumpets, initiating limited judgments that warn of coming destruction: <<*The word of the Lord came to me: O Mortal,*

speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel; and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people; then if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; their blood shall be upon themselves. But if they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand>> (Ezekiel 33:1-6), and: <<Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near>> (Joel 2:1), and summon rebels to repent (9:21). Jesus provided a similar description pointing to the time of his Second Coming: <<And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other>> (Matthew 24:31).

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.

Revelation 8:3-5

At the end of the half hour comes the expected reference to something John saw (v.2), suggesting that far from being over, the seventh seal is only beginning. What John saw is reminiscent of what he saw in the preceding chapter in connection with the sixth seal: first a group of angels - four in one instance, seven in the other and then another angel who in some way determines their course of action, probably because he is greater than they. This parallel confirms the notion that the half hour of silence did not bring the series of seals to an end, but that the seventh seal is still playing itself out.

The earthly OT sanctuary had two altars, one for bloody sacrifice in the courtyard and the other for smoky incense inside, adjacent to the veil into the Most Holy Place, as described in Exodus 27:1-8 and 30:1-10. John sees only one altar in heaven, fulfilling both functions (6:9). The altar, traditionally the place of God's mercy, ironically becomes here the very source of divine judgment. John's vision thus dramatises the Jewish view that mercy and judgment are not two contrasting sides of God's character, but are the same thing. This can be seen in the instructions given for the preparation for the Day of Atonement: <<**He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, so that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy-seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die**>> (Leviticus 16:12-13).

As incense was associated with the prayers of all the saints in the earthly sanctuary: <<Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice>> (Psalm 141:2), and: <<Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense>> (Luke 1:8-11), so it is in John's visions; refer to 5:8. Here, though, John makes it quite clear that it is a great quantity of incense that is to be offered with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. Not only martyrs under the heavenly altar (6:9-10) but also suffering saints on earth cry out for justice. Therefore fire from the altar, from which the saints' prayers rose before God, will be flung to the earth in judgment, indicating that the judgments to follow answer the prayers of the saints.

That there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake provides a distinct contrast to the silence that was seen in heaven following the opening of this final seal. Phenomena that John saw in heaven (4:5) now make their appearance on the earth, framing the account of the seven-sealed scroll and the opening of its seals, and suggesting that the series is now at an end. Alternatively, it is possible that these phenomena are intended to introduce the new sequence of seven angels blowing their trumpets, a sequence that will end in much the same way in 11:19.

The great storm is under control in heaven because it comes from the very throne of God, but when the angel unleashes it on earth, it brings only turmoil and chaos. The terrible toll of the fire from the altar and the resulting thunder, lightning and earthquake are set forth sequentially in the next four chapters, as the seven angels introduced in v.2 begin to blow their trumpets.

IV.b Revelation 8:6-11:19 - Angels sound seven trumpets

Revelation's third sevenfold series, with a second interlude in 10:1-11:14, portrays judgments sent from heaven in response to the saints' prayers. Judgments revealed by the first four trumpets harm the same spheres that will be destroyed when the first four bowls are poured out (16:1-9): earth, sea, rivers and springs, and sky. The damage done with the trumpets is limited to a third: God restrains his wrath, while giving foretastes of total devastation to come if rebels ignore his warnings.

Woes introduced by the last three trumpets are increasingly severe (v.13, 9:12 and 11:14). Futurists generally see these trumpets and plagues as signifying actual calamities to be suffered by unrepentant unbelievers during the great tribulation. They may be either supernatural judgments or symbols for events caused by man, such as nuclear, biological or chemical warfare.

IV.b.i Revelation 8:6-9:21 - The First Six Trumpets

John now introduces another major sevenfold action. As with the seven seals, the resulting judgements of the first six are recorded simultaneously, followed by a break in the proceedings, then the result of the seventh is revealed.

As the seven angels blew their trumpets in turn, devastating effects were seen. The first decimated a third of the land, the second a third of the sea, the third trumpet saw a third of the drinking water supplies destroyed and the fourth brought a reduction in natural light to the earth. At this point a flying eagle gives warning to the inhabitants of the earth that greater woes are still to come.

The fifth trumpet saw a devastating swarm of strange locust-like creatures released that will torture unbelievers for a period of five months. The sixth trumpet saw the release of four angels and their army, who are authorised to kill one third of the earth's population of unbelievers. However, despite this great devastation, the remaining unbelievers still did not repent and turn to God.

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.

Revelation 8:6-7

At the first trumpet blast hail and fire, mixed with blood, are hurled from the heavenly altar to the earth, consuming a third of the earth and its trees, and all green grass: <<*for indeed our God is a consuming fire*>> (Hebrews 12:29). This reproduces the seventh plague on Egypt: <<*Then Moses stretched out his staff towards heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt; there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation*>> (Exodus 9:23-24). It is also reminiscent of OT prophecy: <<*With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgement with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulphur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him*>> (Ezekiel 38:22).

The first four seals (6:1-8) signified the Lamb's power to use human aggressors to punish persecutors of his people. Here God's providential rule makes use of human combatants' military strategy of ruthless defoliation to call rebellious nations to repentance: <<*If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls*>> (Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

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.

Revelation 8:8-9

The second trumpet reveals something like a great mountain, burning with fire, being thrown into the sea, turning a third of the sea to blood and killing a third of the living creatures in the sea and destroying a third of the ships.

The prophet was given a vision of Babylon as the destroying mountain: *<<I am against you, O destroying mountain, says the Lord, that destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burned-out mountain>> (Jeremiah 51:25).*

Volcanic eruptions such as Vesuvius and bloody battles on the Mediterranean Sea show the Lamb's sovereignty over another sphere of human life. The first plague on Egypt turned the Nile to blood: *<<Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt>> (Exodus 7:20-21).* The imagery echoes Jeremiah 51:25 and 51:42, where God announced that he would make Babylon, Zion's destroyer, a *<<burned-out mountain>>* and cover it with the sea, as recently noted.

Destroying a third of the ships would cause severe economic disruption as most trade goods, including basic food supplies, were transported primarily by ships, especially within the Roman Empire itself.

Although the book of Revelation makes no link between its Sinai imagery and *<<the curse of the law>>* (Galatians 3:13b), it is still true that John views the throwing of the fiery mountain into the sea as an act of God's grace on behalf of God's people. Hard as it may be to accept, because God is not perceived as the author of destruction, this is the case with each of the first four trumpets. They are God's answer to *<<the prayers of the saints>>* (v.3b).

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.

Revelation 8:10-11

At the third trumpet, a great star, named Wormwood, fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, which embitters and poisons a third of the rivers and springs, i.e. the sources of drinking water, just as the Nile's bloodied waters became undrinkable: *<<And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river>>* (Exodus 7:24). Besieged cities could be driven to surrender by sheer thirst: *<<The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah, all his power, how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?>>* (2 Kings 20:20), *<<This same Hezekiah closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of*

David. Hezekiah prospered in all his works>> (2 Chronicles 32:30), and: <<*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High*>> (Psalm 46:4). If v.10 is understood literally, it may represent a great meteorite falling to earth.

Wormwood is a plant native to Europe, Asia and North Africa, with a bitter-tasting and poisonous extract and is referred to by the prophet: <<*Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!*>> (Amos 5:7). Therefore John writes: A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

Wormwood is also the name given by CS Lewis to the nephew of Screwtape, as an agent of Satan in The Screwtape Letters. However, the star called Wormwood in John's vision is no satanic messenger. Rather, it is the personification of something God threatens to do to God's people when they allow themselves to be deceived by false prophets: <<*Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: 'Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, And make them drink the water of gall; For from the prophets of Jerusalem Profaneness has gone out into all the land'*>> (Jeremiah 23:15 NKJV). Given the mischief of the Nicolaitans and Jezebel, the situation in Asia Minor in John's day was similar to the one lamented by Jeremiah.

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.

Revelation 8:12

The darkening at the fourth trumpet of a third of the sun, moon, and stars, obscuring their light for a third of the day and likewise the night, resembles the ninth plague on Egypt: <<*Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.'* So Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had light where they lived>> (Exodus 10:21-23). Since stars remain in the sky, this judgment, if taken literally, apparently precedes the shaking of heaven and earth portrayed with the sixth seal (6:12-14), although comments on 6:13 offer another view. The means causing this darkness may be billowing smoke from burning cities, but the ultimate source is the Lamb's reign.

¹³ 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 8:13

And I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in mid-heaven. Eagles were often described as flying in heaven, e.g. <<*Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles in the heavens; they chased us on the mountains, they lay in wait for us in the wilderness*>> (Lamentations 4:19), and one of the four living creatures, at least, was described as having a face like an eagle (4:7).

Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth. The last three trumpets signify escalating judgments on rebellious humanity as the end approaches.

The first four judgments are differentiated from the more terrible ones that follow in two ways: first, they affect primarily the natural world rather than the inhabitants of the earth; second, each affects only a third of the earth, trees and grass, the sea, sea creatures and ships, rivers and springs of fresh water, and the sun, moon and stars, respectively. The limitation to one-third leaves room for an even more terrible destruction to come, whether in connection with the last three trumpets or the later visions.

The four areas affected – earth, sea, fresh water and sky – made up the whole of the human environment as the ancients perceived it. These four spheres were what Jews and Christians acknowledged as God’s creation.