

The Seven Trumpets | Revelation 8:2-11:19

Welcome to the second week of the second part of our community journey through the *Book of Revelation* – the last, and perhaps most complex, book of the Bible. As we just heard in our reading, today we’re looking at what’s known as **the story of The Seven Trumpets** – which, whether or not you’re a fan of a brass section, according to what we just heard, doesn’t *immediately* sound like music to our ears. But like we were reminded last week, before we unpack the symbolism and significance of *this* story, we need to stay grounded in the reality that the *Book of Revelation* isn’t intended to instill fear, but *inspire faith*. You see, as the last book of the Bible, the *Book of Revelation* is not some final cryptic set of *predictions* about future events, but an imaginative *retelling* of God’s activity in the world, written in the form of first-century apocalyptic literature. Which, as New Testament scholar Scot McKnight suggests, we need to learn to read more like C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* or J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* – epic stories steeped in imagination, inspiring our faith in what is *most* true, good, and beautiful. And I need to first give the caveat today that we’re covering a lot of *Narnia*-like ground this morning across four chapters of *Revelation*, where we’re gonna focus on the major themes and message of the story. Yet, for any keeners out there who are ever eager to dive deeper into these texts, I’d be happy to point you to books or podcasts that can help us grow even further in understanding God’s message through *Revelation*.

Now, last week, Tom Loewen taught us about the story of *The Seven Seals* – a sobering story about the destructive effects of sin. But through the *seventh seal*, revealed God’s response to sin, being limitless grace and mercy, washing away sin through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. And this now brings us to the story of *The Seven Trumpets*, which tells a similar story but from a different angle. Where the question at the heart of *The Seven Seals* was: *Who can stand in the face of sin’s judgment?*

The answer being: *Those who receive the limitless grace and mercy of Jesus*. The question at the centre of the story of *The Seven Trumpets* is: **How can followers of Jesus share this good news with others?** (specifically, so they'll turn to Jesus in repentance to receive his grace and mercy). And perhaps, based on our reading thus far – or maybe, from your own personal experience with the church – you're already pretty sure you know the answer: *By sounding the trumpets of judgment to let people know what's coming to them!* And if you've ever wondered whether *that's* the answer the Bible – or *Revelation* – intends to provide, the epic story of *The Seven Trumpets* may just have a surprising twist in store!

As we heard in the reading, this story-cycle begins with a heavenly scene, where, after the seven angels are given the seven trumpets, another angel performs an incense ritual on the heavenly altar before God. And this moment is critical to helping us understand the interpretive key to what happens with the seven trumpets. You see, the story says:

Then another angel with a gold incense burner came and stood at the altar. And a great amount of incense was given to him to mix with the prayers of God's people as an offering on the gold altar before the throne.

Revelation 8:3 (NLT)

While this is a spectacular and supernatural scene in the heavenly throne room, what we want to notice is that at the centre of the image are the *earthy* and *intimate* prayers of God's people, with the angel simply assisting in bringing the prayers, longings, and heart-cries of real people before God so they can be heard and responded to. And this is a moment where we need to look back to the story of *The Seven Seals* to understand which prayers in particular the angel is offering, where in **Revelation 6:9-10**, we read last week:

[Those who had been martyred] called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

Friends, this is the prayerful cry of those in Revelation 6 who were killed because of their faith in Jesus. You see, the reality was, at this time in church history, nearly every member of these churches to whom John was writing would've known someone who had died as a result of their allegiance to Jesus, making this a very heart-felt and legitimate cry for God to do something in response – to bring justice to the worst evils. But in the midst of their prayers, it's worth noting that, in the same way the angel *mixed* the prayers of God's people with incense, *their* prayer was its own *mix* of a desire for both justice *and* vengeance. A prayer "cocktail", if you will, that helps us begin to see and understand the implications of what happens as the trumpets are blown.

As review of what we heard in the reading, as the first trumpet was blown, "***hail and fire mixed with blood***" (8:7) rained down on the earth, burning up portions of creation. Then with the second trumpet, "***something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea***" (8:8) bringing chaos to sea creatures and ships alike. Next, the third trumpet told of "***a great star, blazing like a torch, [that] fell from the sky***" (8:10), a symbol of evil gaining power to infect the world with bitterness and death. Then with the fourth trumpet, "***the sun, moon, and stars [were] struck... so that a third of the day was without light***" (8:12). Cue the fifth trumpet where, the "***star that had fallen... was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss***" (9:1). And then what happens from there is where John intentionally paints the kind of picture sci-fi movies are made of (which we *intentionally* passed over in our reading this morning), unleashing the worst of our imaginations with demonic locusts having the sting of scorpions, terrorizing the world under the leadership of their king called "***Destroyer***" (9:11).

And while none of these images or symbols are meant to be taken literally or speculated as current events, the sad reality is we don't have to simply imagine or even look that far in our world to encounter equally horrific evils anytime we're reminded of the

destructive sting of missiles or the torturous terror of famine in places, these days, like Ukraine or Palestine.

And this then brings us to the sixth trumpet where a voice declared, “***Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates***” (9:14). Although the Roman Empire was the most vast and powerful of its day, the Euphrates River represented its eastern most edge and boundary, separating the Romans from the Parthians. And in spite of the apparent “eternal strength” of Rome, Rome also lived with insecurity and an undercurrent of fear that one day the Parthians would cross the Euphrates and come from the east to destroy them. And here, these *four angels* actually allude once again to the *four horsemen* of chapter 6, unleashing Rome’s worst nightmare “***to kill a third of the world’s people***” (9:15).

And friends, at this point, if you’re about ready for a break or an interlude from all this trumpet-blowing disaster and destruction, I gotta tell ya, I couldn’t agree with you more...

Now, two last things to note about the trumpets, though, before we see what happens next. First, is that, to a first-century Jewish listener, all of these disasters would’ve sounded very reminiscent to the story of the plagues of Egypt when God sought to rescue his people from slavery. With water turning to blood, hail falling from the sky, darkness covering the land, and locusts coming to terrorize – both as God’s compassionate response to the evil and injustice of human slavery, and also, as an apparent effort to bring Pharaoh to repentance.

And second, is to note the constant refrain of “***one-third***” – *one-third* burned up, *one-third* destroyed, *one-third* turned bitter, *one-third* without light, *one-third* killed. That whether the story of *The Seven Trumpets* depicts a combination of the natural judgment and consequences of sin or/and a mix of God’s revelation to show people what answering their prayers for vengeance would actually look like, the judgment and destruction depicted here is

fractional. Not total. That according to the book of *Revelation* – contrary to popularized beliefs – God letting the world come to total disaster is *absolutely NOT* part of his plan for the world.

And so, that brings us all the way back to the question at the centre of the story of *The Seven Trumpets*, being: *So, what then will inspire people to actually repent and turn to Jesus?* And at this point in the story, we're still left wondering, where after the first six trumpets of judgment and vengeance have been blown, we read (**Revelation 9:20 NLT**):

But the people who did not die in these plagues still refused to repent of their evil deeds and turn to God.

That like Pharaoh in Egypt, even after terrifying plagues of destruction, brought on by prayers for judgment and vengeance, those who remained still didn't repent. Still didn't see or understand their need for Jesus. Still didn't see Jesus for who he was and the role he could play, not only in their lives personally, but in our world together, to re-make things as they're meant to be. Because as it turns out, according to the story of *The Seven Trumpets* – or at least the *six* we've heard so far – judgment and vengeance alone don't turn people to Jesus.

Now, as Tom taught us last week, with all three story-cycles in *Revelation*, after the first six of seven, there's an interlude designed to catch our attention and redirect our expectations from where we thought the story was going. Where, now at the beginning of chapter 10, a new angel appears on the scene, unlike any we've seen so far, "***robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars***" (**10:1**). And this angel is holding a scroll – again, a symbol of human destiny – a new scroll that is about to re-write everything we've seen so far, as the angel declares (**10:6-7 NLT**):

There will be no more delay! When the seventh angel blows his trumpet, God's mysterious plan will be fulfilled.

That after six trumpets of judgment, what's coming *next* is now *God's plan*. That the *seventh trumpet* is going to be *God's trumpet*. That in light of all the disaster and destruction caused by sin and *our desire* for vengeance, the time has come for something mysterious to take place in order to actually fulfill what God always intended and is up to in the world – a mystery that is also intended to include and involve everyone everywhere who chooses to follow Jesus and wants to be part of sharing his good news with others, to see the world respond and turn toward him.

Now, while we don't have time to get into the volumes of symbolism packed into these next dozen verses in chapter 11 – and I must be clear, I'm providing a summarized overall interpretation of the arc of the story – we now come to the moment the entire story of *The Seven Trumpets* has been waiting for, the interlude that ultimately answers our question, where John is shown an image of a restored “**temple**” (11:1) and “**two witnesses**” (11:3).

And this is what John most wants to reveal to the churches he's writing to. To the Jesus-followers in Asia Minor who are trying to stay faithful to Jesus in a world that wants little to do with him. Because this *temple* and these *witnesses* are a picture of *the church* and *its people*. A picture of *them*. A picture of *us*! A picture of followers of Jesus alive in the world – a world sometimes ravaged by destruction and death – but for followers of Jesus who long to share his good news with others so that the world will eventually repent and turn to him.

And while it says these witnesses will live with a Spirit of incredible power – the likes of which could bring plagues of judgment and fires of vengeance on those who oppose them (11:5-6), just like we saw with the first six trumpets – instead, the witnesses choose to live their lives in a way that results in a sacrificial fate, where we read in **Revelation 11:7**:

When they complete their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the bottomless pit will declare war against them, and he will conquer them and kill them.

As our imagery from *Revelation* only intensifies (and we'll learn more about the "beast" and the "war" next week), what John is alluding to here is the kind of sacrificial life and testimony that followers of Jesus are called to. The kind of life that then sets the stage for God's plans to finally be fulfilled through the seventh trumpet. The kind of life that, most of all, *looks like Jesus* by laying itself down in the face of its enemies – even the most "beast-like" enemies we could encounter in this world. Meaning, that when it comes to answering the question: *How can followers of Jesus share his good news with others in a way that actually inspires people to turn to him?* The answer is: *By living – and sacrificing – exactly like Jesus!*

Not by calling for judgment or longing for vengeance, but by living lives of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice, exactly as Jesus did – for him, even to the point of death on the cross! And all with the same hope and trust in resurrection that Jesus had – which these two witnesses in *Revelation 11* also experience (**11:11-12**) – just like Jesus. And in the end, it turns out it's this Jesus-way and Jesus-life that makes the way for the seventh trumpet to finally be blown and for the story to go where it was always meant to go in the first place, where in **Revelation 11:15**, one of the most important verses in the entire book, says:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices shouting in heaven: "The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever."

That in response to the sacrificial witness of followers of Jesus giving up their lives with mercy and grace – and through the hope of God's miraculous resurrection – this is what eventually leads to the full arrival of God's kingdom in the world. To the world being re-made the way God always intended, including in **Revelation 11:13 (NLT)**, seeing "**everyone... [giving] glory to the God of heaven**". To the world finally seeing Jesus for who he is and turning to him together to experience the fullness of his kingdom on earth as in heaven!

You see, according to the story of *The Seven Trumpets*, it turns out the answer to the question, “*What inspires people to repent and turn to Jesus?*”, is not judgment or vengeance as the first six trumpets made us think, but instead, by being examples – living witnesses and testimonies – of the self-sacrificing love and mercy of God that has been shown to us in Jesus. Or as scholar **N.T. Wright** summarizes it:

Suffering and death, like that of the Jesus whom the church worships and follows, [is] the ultimate prophetic sign through which the world [is] brought to glorify God.

And friends, perhaps even before the last 20 minutes of working through the complex *Narnia*-like story of chapters 8-11 of *Revelation*, you already knew this in your heart. I mean, just think: How many times has being judged or avenged by someone else helped you see things their way? Helped you change your mind or want to live differently? Quite the opposite, like Pharaoh, it usually only causes us to be more stubborn and stuck in our ways. Or like the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Romans calling them to stop judging, saying: ***Can't you see that [God's] kindness is intended to turn you from your sin? (Romans 2:4 NLT)***

I think about how this is true in parenting. That while part of my responsibility as a parent is to guide and correct my kids' behaviour – encouraging them to change or *repent* when they do wrong – if or when I'm harsh, unkind, or try to punish them until they see things my way, whether or not this modifies their behaviour, it's unlikely to nurture the heart and character change I long to see in them. And worse, probably damages my relationship with them. Or as a hockey coach... And if you or your kids have played rep sports, we all know of experiences with coaches who think the only way to improve a team is to yell, swear, and belittle until players do what they want. But what happens in these situations? That even if the team's performance somewhat improves, very few players in that situation are going to grow in their love for hockey or want to “turn toward” having that same coach next year.

And in the same way, that's how the subversive and surprising story of *The Seven Trumpets* shows us that while God could potentially respond to the world's sin exclusively with the judgment and vengeance that even we sometimes long for, it's actually his kindness, mercy, and grace that ultimately woos the world into turning to him. And most important to this story, that that's what he's calling his followers – *his witnesses* – to do and be in the world God so loves!

So friends, what should we do in response to this story, especially if we want to be part of sharing the good news and inspiring more people to turn to Jesus?

This morning, I want to suggest three steps that I think can help us grow in being gracious, merciful, and kind followers of Jesus that are part of sharing his good news and inspiring people to turn to him through the witness and testimony of our lives.

First, by **praying more like Jesus** in order to align our hearts and our desires and our prayers with *his* heart and desires and prayers for the world, where Jesus said in ***Matthew 6***, “*This then is how you should pray:*”

Your kingdom come, your will be done... (Matthew 6:10)

That we would become people who constantly pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done as a way of letting go of our kingdoms and our will that are so often about *our way*. Because this prayer is ultimately *the prayer* that gets answered in the story of *The Seven Trumpets* when “*the world [becomes] the Kingdom of our Lord*” in 11:15. That this story reveals how God, in the end, ultimately answers Jesus' *prayers* in spite of whatever ours have been. So, we are invited to join in and grow in praying more like Jesus, to not only align our hearts with his, but to see our prayers ultimately answered as well!

Second, by **forgiving more like Jesus** – trading in our instincts for judgment and vengeance for unconditional grace and forgiveness. As Jesus continued to teach us to pray:

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive... (Luke 11:4)

Not forgive us *our sins* “as we judge.” Or forgive us *our sins* “as we hold grudges.” Or “as we seek revenge.” Or “pray for vengeance.” But to receive Jesus’ forgiveness for our sins *as we forgive others of theirs*. As we extend grace and mercy the same way Jesus has extended it to us.

And then third – simply, but not always easily – by **loving more like Jesus**, specifically by modelling the same self-sacrificing love that he has shown on the cross. As he said:

As I have loved you, so you must love... By this everyone will know you are my disciples... (John 13:34-35)

Because by his love shown through his followers, that’s the way world will ultimately come to know him. So out of Jesus’ self-sacrificing love, where do you need to stop demanding your way? Who do you need to stop judging or correcting, and instead, show how much you love them? How much you appreciate them? How much good you want for them? How much you have bigger “planks” in your own eye than the “specks” you see in theirs, so that they can begin to see – through you – the love and way of Jesus for what it truly is?

Friends, while the stories of *Revelation* are complicated, the invitation they reveal is not. That if we want to know how to share the good news of Jesus in a way that actually inspires others to turn to him, the answer is simple: To follow the Jesus Way as living witnesses to his grace, mercy, and sacrificial love. By praying for *his kingdom* to come and *his will* to be done, by extending *his grace and forgiveness* as he has forgiven us, and by growing in *embodying his cross-shaped love* – the same love that inspired *us* to turn to him!

Let's pray together...