

Hearing the Trumpets

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] us that we could otherwise never see. And we pray you will help us as we wrestle with these disturbing truths, that you would open our eyes, you'd open our ears to hear, our minds to understand, and our hearts to respond rightly. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So let's remember where we've got to in Revelation chapter 5. John saw Jesus kind of grasp the reins of history. Jesus seized control of human history. God had a scroll in his right hand on the throne, and Jesus was worthy, the only one who is worthy, to take the scroll. And he breaks the seals one by one, seven seals.

And as he breaks them, God's plan for the future can be unveiled. And so we've heard six seals so far. We had them last week. And we get to the seventh seal tonight. That's what we start with. So that's our first point on the sheets. The seventh seal is opened, and John hears silence before the throne.

We see that in verse 1. If we just look again. When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. It's just one verse, but this is a really central truth for us to take home tonight. Jesus said that one day every one of us is going to stand before God, and the books will be opened. The kind of record of all that we are and all that we've done will be made known, and will be judged. Now we live in a culture of sometimes called expressive individualism, where one of the key sort of themes that gets ingrained into us in our culture is that I have the right to decide who I am and how I'm going to live. I get to decide what's right and wrong in my own life. And that's so ingrained in us, in our culture, that we can find ourselves really pushing back against the idea that the God of all this, the God who made us, would one day judge us according to his standards for how we've lived, and that he will punish wrongdoing in his world. It's worth saying, though, that for lots of people in lots of times in our country and throughout the world today, it's entirely obvious to people that we can't just go around living like that, deciding that we get to decide what's right and wrong. That that's just, you can't run a justice system along those lines.

And so lots of people would say, people talk about a natural law, people talk about the idea that there is a moral fabric in our universe and in our world of right and wrong. And so we hold people to account all the time against that. Whatever they think about the rightness or wrongness of their decisions, we appeal to a kind of standard of right and wrong. And the prophecy here in Revelation forewarns us that on judgment day, when God opens the books, nobody is going to be having words with God. None of us will even be just turning to the person next to us and saying under our breath, isn't this a bit unfair or a bit harsh? Or what right has he got to judge me? No, John says that when God's goodness is revealed, his moral perfection on that judgment day, there will be silence.

We've all fallen short. It's the silence of awe because God is glorious. He's the glorious uncreated one. He made us out of delight and love to experience his glory, his brilliance. So it's not that God needs our praise from him, but he calls us to live a life of praising him and living for his glory because that's good for us and it's right because of who he is. And he created us as this kind of overflow of his generous love and deserves our thanks and praise and that we live for him. And the silence here, as well as being a silence of awe in God's presence, is a silence, I take it, of relief when the seventh seal is opened.

[4 : 18] That after all the cacophony of noise in our world, the cries of pain or the shouts of kind of power-hungry, greedy people, the day is going to come when God's judgment will silence everyone. And that is such good news for every victim in our world who will be able to kind of sigh in relief and say, at last, what was done to me is being revealed. And what's being revealed is that it really matters to God who made us.

And when we ask how will we fare in this judgment, the Bible is clear that our attitude towards God in this life will determine his attitude towards us on that judgment day. So that's verse one, this seventh seal is opened. And John, the writer here who's had this vision, he's going to bring us back in coming weeks, later in Revelation, to learn a lot more about that judgment day and what comes after judgment.

But before that, for the rest of tonight, what we get is an action replay. And it begins for us in verse six. So last week, we started the seven seals. And now what starts are seven trumpets.

And the key is they're describing for us the same events as the seven seals. So it's a bit like when you have a great goal in football, and you kind of can go on YouTube if you're a football fan, and you can watch the goal again from all the angles. And we had an example of this in rugby last week as Vander Moer scored this glorious hat trick for Scotland against England. And on the BBC, this was what you could do last week. You could watch it again and again, all from different angles, from like by the touchline, from by the corner flag, from behind the posts, as I'm sure many people in Scotland have done this week, including my next door neighbor who I watch the game with. Now in Revelation, God is doing something similar for us with spiritual reality. He's giving us all the angles on the truth that he reveals to us in this book. Seven seals, now seven trumpets, and then there'll be seven bowls.

Same events. So our second point is four trumpets blast, and John sees a world under judgment. So we start this in verse six, if you just have a look down. Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. And if you just look at verse seven, and then verse eight, and then verse 10, and then verse 12, each one starts with an angel sounding their trumpet. All through the chapter, we have echoes of Exodus, where God sent plagues of his judgment on Egypt because his people were enslaved there, and he wanted Pharaoh to let them go. And there were plagues of hail, and locusts, and darkness, and the river turned to blood. So the language here draws on those events to help us see that what's going on here is the judgment of God. And with these four trumpets, this chapter, it's creation that is suffering. In verse seven, it's the land with the first trumpet, hail and fire on the land. In verse eight, it's the sea. If you look at verse eight, the second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain all ablaze was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. So when are these trumpets being sounded? Well, just like the four horsemen of the apocalypse that we heard about last week,

[8 : 05] I think we're looking here at a heavenly perspective on life today. Life in every age, every generation, between Jesus' resurrection and his return, which we're waiting for. So I think that's why all through these chapters, John says again and again that it affects a third, a third, a third. I don't know if you notice that again and again. He's showing us that this judgment, these events, they don't bring complete judgment. That will come later. Rather, it's describing the way that creation today has become frustrated, and it's giving us the reason for that. It's because it's under the judgment of God.

In verse seven, the trees and the grass are on fire, and we might think of various events that would remind us of that. The Australian wildfires two years ago, or in southern Europe last summer, and now most summers, when we get these terrible fires. In verse eight, the sea is under judgment, and today we see that our oceans are volatile places, dangerous and polluted, overfished, dumping grounds for all kinds of waste. The third trumpet, in verse 10, affects fresh water, vital, of course, for life, as you get this harm to the rivers and the springs of water, and a bitterness, and people dying. And so again, we're not looking for specific exact fulfillment in our time and going, oh, that's it, that's exactly it. But where we see in our times, people fighting wars over supplies of fresh water, or we read scandals in the news about rivers that are polluted. Or we see in the news, you know, just last summer about the Kokovka Dam in Ukraine being bombed, and then, or however it exploded, and just pollution hitting the kind of agricultural lands of Ukraine. And then in the fourth trumpet, it's the sky that suffers. As we hear, a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. And I take it that may be about when we think of things like pollution clouds blocking the light in places, the smog of heavy industry, the haze that settles over mega cities, day by day, as in the morning, it kind of starts clear, and then by lunchtime, you can't see the sky. Or the clouds from nuclear explosions in our times. Revelation chapter 8 is describing how the natural world has become frustrated, it's become unpredictable, it's become dangerous. And we saw something of that last week with the four horsemen of the apocalypse last week. But a key insight in this chapter that is new is that these are trumpets. And in the Old Testament, you sounded a trumpet as a warning, so that people would take action. So the assumption here is that when these things, these kinds of things happen in our world, and we see them happening, they should be a wake-up call for humanity.

And this is so significant for us in the times we live in. When we look at the Christian faith, sometimes we can find ourselves asking if God is all-powerful and all-good, as Jesus has revealed him to be, why is the world in such a mess? And I think this is a really common misunderstanding in our times, because people tend to think in the kind of folk religion in our times that's sort of based on Christianity, but it's kind of moved away from it. We tend to believe in a kind of benevolent God who loves us, and we tend to think, oh, we're kind of essentially good. So then we expect the world to be a kind of happy place. And when we see suffering, even kind of suffering caused by natural disasters and chaos in creation, people find that so hard to sort of hold alongside hearing of God being good and powerful, that sometimes they even say, well, the Christian faith is not coherent to me. It doesn't cohere with reality. But chapters like this in the Bible give us a reason why creation can, we can experience it like that in difficulty. And it's disturbing, but it is certainly coherent. Why is the world in such a mess? I was reminded in a book I'm reading this week, just of the Black Death, just this week. In the 1300s, in Europe, almost half the population died in like a year. It's just incredible, isn't it, to think that people went through that. In a year, almost half the people died of the Black Death. Why does the natural world seem so chaotic with pandemics, diseases, natural disasters? Well, one answer to that is, here is evidence that we are in a world under the judgment of God. God's judgment is already breaking into human history. Now, what we mustn't do, what we really mustn't do, is see specific events around the world and think, oh, that's God's punishing specific sins those people must have committed. We can't do that. We can't look at a tsunami where people are tragically killed and think, oh, well, they must have done something particularly bad and God judged it. But what we can say is that humanity generally is under the judgment of God because we've all turned from God. We've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

And when we are reminded, through the world not being the way it really should be, it's like a trumpet sounding to us that judgment day will come. So we're to turn back to God now, while we have an opportunity to do that, while he would welcome us to take refuge in him, and that we wouldn't have to face him on that future judgment day, unforgiven.

So C.S. Lewis, the writer, put it like this. He said, we can ignore pleasure, but pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. See what he's saying? That as we go through life, there might be times that we enjoy good things and we think, oh, this is like a foretaste of what it would be like to be with God in all his goodness. I should turn to him. But people tend to enjoy good things and just kind of worship them and still ignore God. But when we suffer, here is an opportunity, God's megaphone to us, that the world isn't as it should be, because something has gone wrong between us and God, and we should turn back to him. And Jesus himself urged us, encouraged his followers, the crowds, to see the world like that. So when a tower, the Tower of Siloam, collapsed and 18 people had died, he said to the crowds he was with, Jesus said, it's not that those people were any worse than you, but repent now or you too will perish. So seeing something wrong in the world and taking it as an opportunity to get right with God. And so for us today, we can do that when we look at the world and we see climate change, for example, causing poverty and death and hardship around our planet and the planet's ecosystem kind of going off balance. See the marks all around us of a world that's under judgment. See these as signs that are a foretaste of coming judgment.

[16 : 24] To think to ourselves, for that to be happening in the good world that God has made, something's clearly gone wrong between us and God. And turn back to God while we still have time and his invitation is wide open to us. Any of us can do that today, turn back to God and be right with him. So we've heard about the seventh seal and then the first four trumpets. And then finally tonight, we're going to look at the two walls of chapter nine. These are actually the fifth and sixth trumpets. You see that in chapter nine, verse one and chapter nine, verse 13. But this eagle flies by and particularly identifies these trumpet sounds as wars. And the word war in the Bible tends to be a kind of sigh of sorrow or anguish about impending judgment. It makes sense to see these two wars happening in the same time frame as the first four trumpets. I think that's right. So describing something happening spiritually in our times. And in verse one, it's like a Pandora's box is opened. The fifth angel sounded his trumpet and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the abyss. And then in verse two, the angel puts the key into the lock of this door and turns it and the abyss is opened. Now the abyss is the home of demonic power. So who lets it out?

The star that comes from heaven is an image of an angel. And you kind of got to make up your own minds whether you think it's a demon. It could be a kind of fallen angel with the language of it's fallen from heaven. Or I think it's probably an angel, a good angel. Because we learn later in the book in chapter 20 that God sends an angel eventually, either this star or another angel, and they lock the door of the abyss forever. So that in the new earth, the future new creation, evil will not be there anymore.

So this is God giving permission for the demons to have a time period where they are allowed to be active. And what follows for the rest of the chapter is like a feverish nightmare. If you've ever had a fever and you kept kind of having like a series of very vivid, disturbing dreams, that seems to be the kind of flavor of chapter nine. The aim is to horrify us about the nature of evil. So the ominous smoke comes out of the abyss and it blackens the sun. And then we see these locusts arrive.

Locusts are a symbol of God's judgment in Joel and in Exodus in the Old Testament. Crucially in verse four, some people are safe if you have a look. They, the locusts, were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. That is the seal we heard about in chapter seven, the seal that marks every one of the people of God, every Christian. And whenever we read things like they were told, or in verse five it says they were not allowed, we're being reminded that demonic power is always limited. God has got Satan on a leash. This is a tension all through the Bible. Evil is a real force and evil is personal.

So the demons are led by the devil himself. You see that in verse 11, just further down it says, they had as king over them the angel of the abyss. So I take it that is Satan, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is Apollyon, that is the destroyer. But Satan can only act where God allows that to happen. And for the time that God allows it. So we see a reference to that in verse five, they were not allowed to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. So why does God allow Satan to have these areas of authority? I don't think we're given a complete answer to that. But one reason from these chapters is that even though Satan's motives are evil, God can use his schemes in a limited way as an instrument of his judgment. So God isn't responsible for evil. God is good and just and he's not tainted by other people's moral decisions. Later in Revelation, in fact, we're going to see him hold the demons to account and they will be brought to justice for the harm that they have done and that they intended. At the same time, God can use other people's and persons' evil intent for good purposes.

[21 : 19] And here, it seems to me they are an instrument of judgment. So when we ask the question, why does suffering happen in our world? We're seeing in these chapters that the answer is complex, the Bible's answer to that, why there's suffering. There are different truthful answers we could give to that question. Why is there suffering in our world? One answer is there is suffering in our world today because of human sin. The reason the world isn't the way it should be is because we are not the people we should be and we've turned from God and the world has come under a curse. But there's another reason you could give of why there's suffering in the world is because God is already judging the world.

Revelation 8, God has placed our world under judgment by his sovereign will because he is just and we've rejected him and because these signs will give us an opportunity to turn back while there's still time. But another answer we can give to why there's suffering in the world from Revelation 9 is because there is demonic power at work in our world. The devil is the prince of this world and he has power and he is at work to hurt and to harm. So chapter 9 is concerned with that third reality and it uncovers the nightmare horror of demonic power. The demons are kind of freakish counterfeits of God's angels who we saw in Revelation 4. So they wear crowns and it's like uncanny valley. They've got faces that disturbingly resemble human faces but then they have lion's teeth. They're powerful in verse 9 so it talks about them having these breastplates. They're not to be messed about with and they've got scorpion stings and wings that they fly with. And then in verse 16 he sees a vast army of them. 200 million of them verse 16. The number of the mounted troops was twice 10,000 times 10,000 I heard their number.

So this overwhelming cavalry in vivid armor and the horses can breathe fire and smoke and sulfur to kill in verse 17 and in verse 19 their tails are like snakes to injure and they're riding out against humanity. So what do we do with these images? Well first let's recognize that evil is a real force in our world. If you think about crime stories in our news or about addictions in our lives and the lives of people around us. The Bible here vindicates our sense that evil is real. It's a real force and it takes control of people in the world today. I remember some time ago chatting to a guy over lunch who wasn't a Christian, an older guy and I was asking about his family situation and he had grown-up children and he started talking about his son who was about the same age as me and he was talking about him and him growing up and what he was into and then he paused and his face kind of fell in sadness and he said to me, but then the demon drink got hold of him.

And here was a man who had seen alcoholism just ruin his son's life. He kind of lost his son who was still alive because of alcoholism and it was appropriate language to use of what had happened.

This is a non-Christian saying it's demonic. The Bible affirms that you don't mess about with demonic power. There's nothing trivial about it. Let's also allow this chapter to unmask for us how dangerous sin really is. Sin wears a mask of beauty and we tend to think of disobeying God as both alluring and harmless. You might think to yourself of is there an area where you're drawn to sin in your life because you think of it as alluring and harmless. We see here that behind that attractive package of sin there are powerful destructive demonic forces longing to lead us away from God's protection into spiritual death. And thirdly we need to be reassured that all through this chapter God is stronger than evil and he can protect us from evil. Run to Jesus Christ and you are safe from demonic power.

[25 : 52] The demon's power here is limited and God's people are protected in verse 4. So what's being described here is a kind of spiritual angle on spiritual death. Life without Jesus.

John isn't naive that if you are a Christian horrible things can happen in your life. You can experience the suffering of the world as a Christian. But it makes all the difference to know that you are in Christ and no one can snatch you from his hand and you know God is for you and you know where you're going. So Jesus urges us to hold on to him until he comes and here we're seeing another reason why. Because we need protection from destructive forces at work.

So we've heard the seventh seal and the four trumpets and the two woes. How do we respond this evening? Well a key implication of all that we're seeing here in Revelation is that we should pray.

And we saw that if we just turn back to the start of chapter 8. In verses 3 to 5 after the seventh seal is opened we see that the end will come. God's kingdom is going to come in response to the prayers of his people.

So in verse 3 you see an angel who has a golden censer standing at the altar of God and he's given incense to offer with the prayers of all God's people.

[27 : 19] And he presents the prayers of, do you notice, not just the martyrs or not just special Christians, but verse 3, the prayers of all God's people.

are brought before the throne of God. And that is what leads to the final judgment coming in verse 5 that we'll then hear about later in the book will bring the glorious future for our world.

And I was struck by this this week because sometimes I think it can feel a bit futile or a bit pointless to pray general prayers in the Christian life for brothers and sisters we don't know who were persecuted around the world to be protected and vindicated by God.

Or for God to bring justice to our world. Or for God to bring healing to people who were suffering. In a kind of generic way. We maybe would think, is God really going to do anything with that prayer?

Well John here says, yes, emphatically. As he sees the prayers of all God's people being brought to God and heard by God. And fully and finally answered on the day of God's judgment.

[28 : 26] When God puts the world right, our cries will be answered of, Father, your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. So could we be spurred on to pray like that?

In our home, personal, private prayer life. As well as when we're together. Our other key response to what we see tonight is to repent. To turn back to God.

Let's let the trumpets wake us up to reality. For at the end of chapter 9, back over the page, John tells us the insanity that people still refuse to turn back to God.

You see that in verse 20? The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands. They did not stop worshipping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood.

Idols that cannot see or hear or walk. And live by the fruit of that idolatry in verse 21. So chapter 9, if it's shown us one thing, it's shown us that we need Christ.

[29 : 27] We need a powerful savior against spiritual forces that we cannot control. And yet, how futile then to worship something else.

False gods that are no defense against these forces. Whereas God says, come to me and you will find perfect refuge from this danger. How can he offer that refuge?

Well, because of the key figure we've heard of so far in Revelation, the Lord Jesus, pictured as this lamb who has been slain for the world and is now standing.

The war that we deserve for our sin, he has already endured in our place. When he went to the cross, the door to the abyss was opened and the sun really was darkened for three hours.

The army of Revelation 9 was unleashed on him and took his life away. The plague of locusts that can sting like scorpions unleashed their fury onto him, the eternal sun.

[30 : 31] The horror of 200 million horses and riders galloping out from the abyss charged at him instead of us. People saw him cry out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And we hear from Revelation 9 that he was enduring the fire, the smoke, the sulfur from the abyss as he stood between us and the horror of hell's worst on the cross.

So that for each one of us who turns to him, he can place on us his seal of protection and share with us the joys of the new creation that's coming. Amen.