

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part seven

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THE UNLEASHING OF THE BEGINNING OF GOD'S TERRIBLE WRATH ON THE FOLLOWERS OF ANTICHRIST

Revelation 8:1 - 9:21 - "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. [2] Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. [3] And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar 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 prepared to blow them.[7] The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon 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, and a third of the sea became blood. [9] 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 people died from the water, because it had been 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 might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night. [13] Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on 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 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 power like the power of scorpions of the earth. [4] They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. [5] They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. [6] And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.[7] In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared 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 breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. [10] They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. [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; behold, two woes are still 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, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. [16] The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number."

[17] "And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and 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 mankind 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, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound. [20] The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, [21] nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts."

Let's just recap where we are in this study. Last week we studied the two visions unfolded in Revelation chapter seven. The visions of chapter seven actually interrupted the opening of the *seven seals*. The first six seals revealed the course of this age leading up to the Tribulation and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The end itself was announced in the *sixth seal*. This sequence follows very closely the way Jesus Himself described the course of this age and the end itself in Matthew chapter 24, Luke chapter 21 and Mark chapter 13.

Then, after the end was announced in the sixth seal, and before further details of the Tribulation itself are given, chapter seven unfolds *two pictures of the church - one just before the Tribulation, as she is sealed and protected from the coming wrath of God - and a second picture, which is a scene of the church after the Tribulation is over, around the throne of God.*

Now **chapters 8 and 9** pick up the opening of the **seventh seal** which contains the horrific events of the **seven trumpets**. Remember, each of the sevens (seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls) continues **right up to and including the end**. The events **build in intensity** and in **speed** as the end approaches. The actual **wrath of God** (not to be confused with the persecution of the church by Satan and Antichrist) is not poured out until the **very end of the age - right before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in glory**.

1) SILENCE IN HEAVEN, THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS, AND THE BEGINNING OF THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD

Notice, as we've already said, the seventh seal contains no specific judgment. The **contents** of the seventh seal **are** the seven trumpets. In the same way, we will see that the **contents** of the seventh trumpet **are** the seven bowls. While many aspects of these visions shouldn't be pressed too far, this particular detail of the visions' unfolding is very important. It shows the **intensification** of events as the end approaches. Each aspect of the end doesn't **replace** the others, but is **added to** the previous events.

Verses 1-5 are a wonderful apocalyptic picture. Heaven is pictured in **stunned silence** at what is coming. The church has been praying as the end has been coming. What else could she do? She has been outnumbered by the forces of evil in the world. She has no military might or political clout. She has looked frequently helpless in the face of persecution and violence. So she has been praying. But those prayers weren't answered **right away: Revelation 6:9-10** - "**When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. [10] They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"**"

The point here is **none of those prayers was wasted**. None was missed or lost. John sees this picture of **prayers rising** - sometimes in great turmoil and anguish - then he sees **heaven listening and watching** - everything else is stopped and silenced (and remember the sheer volume and noise and praise and activity described by the multitude around the throne in Revelation chapter 4 and 5!) - then those same prayers are seen in their **effect** - this angel hurls his censer, filled with the **"fire of the altar"**(5) back down onto the earth.

What a wonderful visual picture of prayer **rising**, heaven **listening**, and then those same prayers powerfully **re-entering** this world's history at God's appointed time!

2) THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPETS

Perhaps the first thing to notice is the fact that the seven trumpets are divided into two groups: The first four trumpets deal with **plagues resulting in natural catastrophes (8:7-12)**. The second three are of a more deadly and dramatic nature, announced by the threefold "woe" cry of an eagle, falling specifically on **mankind (8:13)**.

The first two of these are recorded in **Revelation 8:13-9:21**. The seventh trumpet doesn't sound until **11:15** and, as we said earlier, brings us right up to the end - **Revelation 11:15** - "**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."**"

- a) **The first four trumpets - Revelation 8:7-12** - "**The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon 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, and a third of the sea became blood. [9] 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 people died from the water, because it had been 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 might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night."**

The general thrust of these judgments is felt in the realm of **nature**. These four plagues effect **vegetation (7)**, the **natural sources of water** - first the sea and then rivers (8-11), and finally the **solar system itself (12)**.

It is impossible to guess exactly *how* these things are going to occur (though many people still try). The important point seems to be the repetition of the fraction *“one third.”* This is repeated with each trumpet blast. These judgments, while severe, are not yet the *final* manifestation of God’s judgment. However these judgments actually take place, they will be *partial*, not *complete* in their effects.

Also, this list of plagues *seems* to intentionally parallel some of the plagues poured out on Egypt when God was dealing with the stubbornness of the Pharaoh: Exodus 7:20-21, 10:21 - **“Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. [21] 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....10:21....Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.”**

I believe this parallelism is intentional. We are meant to understand at least two truths as we study these first four trumpet judgments in Revelation chapter 8:

First, God is actually able to do what He says He will do in judging this earth. Certainly you and I, right now, are unable to *picture* or *imagine* all that these prophetic judgments contain. But we know God *can* do this because He already *has* done it.

Second, these judgments are only *partial* in scope because God is still merciful if people should choose to turn to God in repentance. I think this is actually hinted at, even as the later judgments of the Lord are poured out on the earth: Revelation 9:20-21 - **“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, [21] nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.”**

Here we learn that even God’s judgments are not purely *vengeful* but contain an element of *patience*. This is why they are poured out *gradually*. Certainly God *could* wipe out all opposition in one instant sweep of His strong arm - as He will at the very close of this age. But He chooses to reveal even His anger in stages. People have to stubbornly *choose* to continue in their rebellion against all reasonable evidence of their coming doom.

3) THE WRATH OF GOD Poured OUT DIRECTLY ON MANKIND

John sees an eagle sweeping across the sky, pronouncing the final three woes of the seven trumpets: Revelation 8:13 - **“Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!”**

Two of these trumpets will sound immediately. The final of the three (the seventh in total) will not sound until **11:15**. These final trumpets are described in much more detail because they lead up to the very end.

- a) ***The fifth trumpet and the star falling from heaven* - Revelation 9:1-11 - “And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star 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 power like the power of scorpions of the earth. [4] They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. [5] They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. [6] And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. [7] In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared 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 breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. [10] They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. [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.”**

We're not given the precise identity of just who is represented by the star falling from heaven in the first verse. We are only told he was given access to the bottomless pit. Later on, in **verse 11** we're told the beings arising from the pit have a king over them named **Apollyon**. Many people feel Apollyon is the **same** angel described in the falling star. John doesn't tell us.

Many people see a link between John's falling star and the words of the Prophet Isaiah - "**How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!**"(Isaiah 14:12). Or, this passage is also linked with Jesus' words in **Luke 10:18** - "**And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."**

These all point to Satan as a **possible** interpretation. The fact is, John isn't **told** the exact identity of this one who opens up the **bottomless pit**. We **do** know when Satan is positively identified in **Revelation chapter 12, verse 9** - "**And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.**"

Probably, the best rule of interpreting John's visions is to be dogmatic where the **vision** is dogmatic, and **less dogmatic** where the visions **don't** give specific details.

The predominant feature of the fifth trumpet is the plague of locust-like creatures (3-10). These words find their Old Testament counterpart in the prophetic words about the coming day of the Lord's judgment spoken by the Prophet Joel in **Joel 2:4-10**.

In John's vision, however, it is clear that these are not **mere** locusts. In a picture we cannot fully understand, this fifth trumpet reveals a plague of **locust-like** creatures, but which are clearly demonically driven and motivated. Unlike **actual** locusts, which attack crops and grass, but are otherwise harmless to people, these end-time creatures are specifically told **not** to attack "**the grass of the earth, nor any green plant**"(4), but only to attack "**...those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads**"(4). Again, we are constantly brought back to the sealing of God's people in the two visions of chapter 7.

These locust-like creatures, while **demonically** driven, are still, none-the-less, under the strict control of God Almighty. They were not permitted "**to kill them....**"(5), but only to "**...torment them for five months**"(5).

This torment will be so severe that people will be crying out to die - "**...people will seek death and will not find it....**"(6). Notice how these words echo the exact cry spelled out in the sixth seal in **Revelation 6:15-17** - "**Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, [16] calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, [17] for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"**

- b) **The sixth trumpet and the huge army of horse-like creatures - Revelation 9:13-19** - "**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, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. [16] The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. [17] And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and 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 mankind 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, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound."**

This plague carries the previous one to deeper levels of attack. These creatures not only **torment** the ungodly but "**...to kill a third of mankind**"(9:15). As we said at the beginning, these plagues intensify as the time of the Tribulation advances.

Again, it's important to remember that this is a **vision** John is seeing. Some things are **explained** to him and some

things are not. It would appear that these horses are not to be taken as *actual* horses. They have *"heads like lions"* and breath out *"fire, smoke and brimstone"* (9:18).

Then, in an interesting twist, these three elements coming from the mouths of these horse-like creatures become *three separate plagues in and of themselves* - Revelation 9:18 - **"By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths."**

Also, the fact that John says there were 200 million horse-like creatures in this army *tells* us these are not literal horses. There are not 200 million horses on the whole earth.

An *important* detail of this vision is contained in verses 14 and 15 - *"...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, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind."*

These 200 million creatures are said to be kept *"bound at the great river Euphrates."* Again, this is very interesting Old Testament symbolism. The Euphrates was typically understood as the *ideal boundary - the limit of the Promised Land to the east*. Beyond the Euphrates lay the hordes of pagan kingdoms and nations. Israel's *enemies* were constantly described as being located just beyond the Euphrates.

This imagery is picked up in John's vision and applied to the abode of these creatures who will sweep in torment over the earth. The key difference is that in John's vision, even these creatures are *tools of God's own use*. This is made even more explicit in 9:15 - **"So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind."**

As the vision makes clear, these angels are not *themselves* the instruments of destruction. They only *release* the army of creatures at the Euphrates. But mentioning these four angels - and the fact that they are kept with this specific mission, at this exact time - shows that God is in total control of the army of creatures they will unleash.

So we find this fascinating twist developing. In response to the prayers of the saints, God is acting. That anyone would find this surprising is strange indeed. It is the fulfillment of so much of the New Testament's message - Romans 12:19 - **"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."**

Faith in God's wrath is a vital Scriptural component of patient forgiveness of others in the Christian's belief system. And, in an unbelievable display of wisdom, He is actually using these demonically inspired creatures *to His own purpose*. These creatures of the last two trumpets are Satanically driven creatures whom God is using to destroy those who bear the mark of the beast and worship this world's Godless system. Those who are sealed with the mark of God are spared their foul work.

Before the seventh trumpet sounds, the flow of revelation to John is interrupted with other visions, which we'll get into next week. But notice that this interruption takes place in exactly the same point of the plot as it did with the seven seals. Two visions came to John *between* the sixth and seventh seals. Now, John will receive additional visions *between* the sixth and seventh trumpets.