

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

The Trumpets (Revelation 8 to 11)

The Revelation of Jesus Christ contains a number of parallel sections. Each, with the exception of the last, spans the entire New Testament period, from the first to the second coming of Christ.¹ (See the introductory notes). Before we survey the contents of chapters 8 to 11, it is helpful to note the intentional parallel between the opening of the seals, the blowing of the trumpets and the emptying of the bowls. This is not to say that we have to find a correspondence between the first seal, the first trumpet and the first bowl, the second seal, trumpet and bowl etc. It simply means that we are being given important *perspectives* on events in the present age. In each we see judgment coming upon those who oppose God and his people, we see God's people suffering but secure, ultimately vindicated and rewarded. Each seems to build up to a climax and then the sequence starts over again. Michael Wilcock comments on this parallelism:

The difference between the two scenes actually confirms their unity. They are two sides of the same coin . . . In a word, the two scenes (seals and trumpets) are parallel. The breaking open of the seals shows what will happen throughout history, up to the return of Christ, with particular reference to what the church will have to suffer. The trumpets, starting again from the same point, and also declaring what will happen throughout history up to and including the return of Christ, proclaims a warning to the unbelieving world . . . As each scene ends, having traced history through to its end and beyond, the drama returns to the same beginning and retraces the same course through the next scene.²

Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)	Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:18)	Seven Bowls (15:5-16:21)
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3
4	4	4
5	5	5
6	6	6

¹ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 22.

² Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 88-9.

7	7	7

In chapter 6 and 7 we saw four horsemen rushing onto the scene in quick succession. With the opening of the fifth seal, there is a dramatic change of scene and pace and the subsection is slightly longer. The opening of the sixth seal signals a judgement. The great day of the wrath of him who sits on the throne and the Lamb has come, and who can stand. There is then another change of scene (several commentators refer to this as an interlude) before the opening of the seventh seal. We see a vast company of those who are sealed. Whether there are two companies or just one that is viewed in different ways, we are meant to understand that these are the saved. They have suffered but their suffering is now over forever; they are in God's presence, the Lamb is their shepherd and leads them to springs of living water and God wipes every tear from their eyes. Significantly, the imagery used here is similar to that used in chapter 21-22 (21:3, 4, 22, 23; 22:1, 17) where the picture is expanded.

In chapters 8 to 11, the seven trumpets sound. "The first four trumpets are sounded in rapid order. The fifth trumpet introduces a longer sub-section. So does the sixth. After the sixth and before the seventh, we have a lengthy 'interlude,' as it is called, in chapters 10 and 11. This parallels an interlude that comes between the sixth and seventh seals in chapter 7."³

Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)	Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:18)
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6
Interlude (Rev 7)	Interlude (Rev 10:1-11:14)
7	7

Please remember, we should not ask, "What happens next?" but "What did John see next?" Bruce Metzger comments, pertinently, "The sequence in which John's visions are presented does not allow us to turn the book of Revelation into an almanac or time chart of the last days."⁴ Metzger makes another important observation about the

³ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 192.

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press,

tantalizing effect of the stylized structure:

The purpose of the interlude in each of the cycles of seven seems to be largely dramatic. With the completion of the sixth in each series we hold our breath in anticipation of the end. But this dramatic writer does not allow the end to come with such rapidity. Each time he makes us wait before we see the seventh of the series.⁵

Understanding the Symbolism

We are about to see some bizarre scenes. Natural catastrophes and grotesque beings are unleashed. Just how literally should we take these depictions?

It is fascinating to read some of the popular, speculative and very imaginative theories about these chapters. For sheer entertainment value they are difficult to beat. Some believe that John was, in fact, seeing a modern war. Since modern-day instruments of war were unfamiliar to him, he could only describe them in terms of the known. Here, it is said, we have helicopters and tanks and some sophisticated amphibious weaponry.

But that misses the whole point of the book. When John sees locusts, armed like scorpions, shaped like horses, crowned like kings, with the faces of men, the hair of women, the teeth of lions, 'armour-plated', winged and moving with a deafening noise, attacking people instead of vegetation, he is not seeing fighter planes, bombers or ballistic missiles. He is seeing symbols, extremely frightening symbols, depicting judgment. If we want to regard these forms as descriptions of armoured vehicles and aircraft we must then apply that kind of interpretation to other symbols in the book. This would reduce the book to absurdity.

The pictures presented to us are frightening indeed but, as Brian McLaren suggests,

They're no more to be taken literally than phrases we might read in the paper today: "The election results were earth-shattering." Or, "The president's announcement sent shock waves through Congress." Or, "On September 11, 2001, everything changed."

We can easily imagine someone thousands of years from now, armed with an English dictionary but without much experience reading newspapers, writing this interpretation: "People in the twenty-first century believed that natural phenomena were caused by political events. For example, they believed that an election or presidential announcement could cause a shift in plate tectonics, resulting in earthquakes and tremors. Or they

1993), 71.

⁵ Ibid., 67.

believed a terrorist attack could create an ontological shift that would alter the fundamental nature of matter and energy, space and time.”⁶

Approaching the subject from a different angle, Bruce Metzger says much the same thing: “We must remember that the objects and the events in the vision are not physically real The descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of real occurrences. The intention is to fix the reader’s thought, not upon the symbol, but upon the idea that the symbolic language is designed to convey.”⁷

“Reversed Thunder”

After the interlude in chapter 7, one more seal is to be opened. If we were hearing the book read for the very first time, we may well have supposed that with the opening of the seventh seal, we had come to the end of the drama. After so much punishment had been meted out, and both great and small had faced the wrath of God and of the Lamb; after we had seen that innumerable multitude singing about their salvation and serving before the very throne of God, we could have expected some concluding remarks and the end of the book. But, as the seventh seal was opened, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. The dramatic effect of that sudden silence after all the noise and activity serves to heighten the horror of the next set of judgments. But there may have been another reason. John sees the seven angels who stand before God.⁸ They were given seven trumpets. They were poised to blow their trumpets, but first he saw another angel who had a golden censer. He came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints. These were offered on the golden altar before the throne. As if to underline the point, John observes that “the smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand.” Here are the prayers of God’s people ascending to him as a sweet smelling savour. Bruce Metzger asks: “Is it too fanciful to suppose, as some have suggested, that everything in heaven halts so that the prayers of the saints may be heard?”⁹

The angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth. Suddenly there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. The very prayers that were ascending to heaven are now having the most dramatic effect on earth. The poet, George Herbert, described prayer as “reversed thunder.” This is the title of Eugene Peterson’s book, sub-titled *The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. Peterson writes:

⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 178.

⁷ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 66.

⁸ According to Jewish tradition seven angels are distinguished from all the rest. They are Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Michael, Sarial, Gabriel and Remiel (Tobit 12:17; Enoch 20 [Greek Text]).

⁹ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 62.

While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were ranged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn't they have mental breakdowns? Why didn't they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar of God with a censer. He mixed the prayers of Christians with incense . . . and combined them with fire . . . from the altar. Then he put it all in a censer and threw it over heaven's ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were "peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake" (Rev 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force - in George Herbert's phrase, as "reversed thunder." Prayer re-enters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it.¹⁰

God has a plan for this rebellious world. And he has made its outworking dependent on our prayers. For centuries God's people have been praying, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray this prayer not only when we articulate these particular words but whenever we pray for the triumph of good over evil, the salvation of the lost or for the honour of God's name. We do not know how the course of history has been and will be changed by those prayers. Here and there we have examples. God lets us see in this or that particular instance what happens when his people pray. And there have been some remarkable answers to prayer. But how can we possibly know what might have been had we not prayed or what will be because we pray?

In all probability, there is no more "activistic" Christian than the person who spends time in prayer. In the words of Andrew Murray, "It is to prayer that God has given the right to take hold of him in his strength - the powers of the eternal world have been placed at its disposal."¹¹ Never underestimate the power of your prayers!

Horrifying Events and Monsters

As the seven trumpets sound we encounter the most horrifying succession of events and monsters. In intensity and in horror the description steps up a gear. Bruce Metzger summarises:

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: the Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 87-8.

¹¹ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1953), 16.

After the prayers of the saints ascend to God (8:4), an angel fills a censer "with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth" (8:5). Then - bang! Catastrophic consequences follow. Seven angels, one after the other, blow their trumpets, announcing hailstorms with fire and blood descending, volcanic eruptions, blood in the sea, blight on the land, the pollution of springs and fountains, eclipses of sun and moon with shooting stars, climaxed by an enormous plague of demonic locusts.¹²

I am not going to attempt to give you a detailed description of the events heralded by the trumpets. Instead I shall quote Michael Wilcock's précis of the contents. Then, secondly, I shall provide an outline. And thirdly, I shall make some observations that should help us to understand the major thrust of the section.

First, Michael Wilcock gives us a **succinct summary** of these chapters.

Fearful damage is done to the land and its vegetation, the sea and its ships, the waters which (people) drink and the light by which they see - their environment, commerce, resources and vision. But the damage is partial ("one third") not total; which seems to show that the trumpets are sounding not doom but warning. The majority of mankind is allowed to survive, being shown God's wrath against sin, and given a chance to repent. Paradoxically the miseries of (this scene) are really kindnesses. The seals showed the suffering church pleading for *justice* to be done but the trumpets show the wicked world being offered *mercy*. The offer is not accepted, and the world will not, in fact, repent (9:20ff), but let it never be said that God has not done all in his power, even to the devastation of his own once perfect earth, in order to bring (people) to their senses.¹³

Secondly, here is an **outline of the contents**:

THE BLOWING OF SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:2-11:19)

The place of prayer in the outworking of God's purpose (8:2-5)

- A. The first four trumpets: Judgment on the unrepentant (8:6-12)
 - 1. Horrendous hail (7)
 - 2. A huge mountain (8, 9)

¹² Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 63

¹³ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 95.

3. A destructive star (10, 11)
4. An unnerving darkness (12)

-- A huge eagle pronounces three "woes" (13) -

- B. The fifth and sixth trumpets: The judgment intensifies (9:1-21)
5. The fifth (the first "woe"): demonic locusts (9:1-12)
 6. The sixth (the second "woe"): fiendish cavalry (9:13-21)

INTERLUDE: VISIONS OF THE PROPHETIC ROLE (10:1-11:14)

The mighty angel and the little scroll (10:1-11)

The measuring of the temple (11:1, 2)

The two witnesses (11:3-14)

7. The seventh: the Inauguration of the kingdom (11:15-19)
The vociferous announcement (11:15)
The resultant worship (11:16-18)
The heavenly temple opened (11:19)

Thirdly, here are **a few observations** that should help us to understand the major thrust of the section.

The imagery used in this passage is derived largely from the Old Testament. It is then developed to depict the extremely serious nature of the judgments being meted out. The plagues in Egypt are clearly in view as John describes hail, darkness, the sea turned to blood and locusts (8:7, 8, 11, 12; 9:3). There are allusions to 1 Kings, Ezekiel and Zechariah (1 Kings 17:1 ff; Is. 14:12; Ezek 2:9-3:3; Joel 1, 2; Zech 4:4-14)

Each of the judgments is devastating but not disastrous. The point being made here is that, despite all these things, there is no repentance (9:20-21). The growth in the intensity of the plagues does not induce any change of heart. C S Lewis has said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains."¹⁴ And here is God shouting, but seemingly to no avail.

As in the previous section, the people of God are being opposed and persecuted. But here the opposition is depicted not just as antipathy but as fanatical hatred. In chapter eleven we read of "two witnesses." They make one think of Moses and Elijah. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 81.

with every kind of plague as often as they want (11:6; Ex.7:20; I Kings 17:1).

Remember Moses had to face Pharaoh and Elijah had to contend with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They were God's representatives in a hostile environment. As with Moses and Elijah, they were empowered. The authorities may not have liked them but they had to respect them. A Beast arises from the Abyss and kills them. Their bodies are left to lie in disgrace in the street of the city. The inhabitants of the earth not only gloat over them; they are so overjoyed that they exchange gifts to celebrate the demise of the two witnesses.

But they are raised after three and a half days and they hear a loud voice from heaven, saying to them, "Come up here!" As their enemies look on in horror, they are caught up to heaven in a cloud. At that very hour there was an earthquake signalling judgment.

In this section, there is a sharp contrast between "the inhabitants of the earth" and those who had "the seal of God on their foreheads." The inhabitants of the earth experience the brunt of divine judgment but those who bear God's seal are not harmed (8:13; 9:4). Craig Koester comments on "the reversed picture, in which the faithful are not endangered but protected, and the wider society is not in the position of passing judgment but of receiving judgment."¹⁵

He then makes a most significant observation that helps us to step back and see what is going on here.

Revelation depicts life under two forms of rule. The vision of the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4 and 5 showed a rightly ordered universe, in which creatures offered praise to their Creator and to the Lamb, who are worthy of power. But in Revelation 9, grotesque figures create a demonic parody of the created order, showing what conditions are like under the lordship of the king of the underworld., whose names Abaddon and Apollyon mean Destruction and Destroyer (9:11). Each of the winged creatures that attended the Creator had its own distinct face, one with a human face and another with the face of a lion, etc.; but the winged beings that accompany the Destroyer have a hideous collage of traits: lion's teeth protrude from human faces, while in front their chests are plated with iron and in back they have tails like scorpions. Where the elders in the heavenly throne room cast their crowns before God as they raised a harmonious song of praise (4:10-11), the demonic locusts continue to wear crowns on their heads as they raise a pounding and clanking roar, like chariots going into battle.

¹⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 100.

The judgment depicted here is not direct divine punishment, but a revelation of what it would mean for God to hand over the world to other powers. The horde of locusts that emerges from the hellish smoke is a plague reminiscent of the locusts that fell upon the Egyptians before the exodus (Ex 10:1-20) and of the locusts that the prophet Joel took as a portent of the day of the Lord's judgment (Joel 1-2). Unlike natural locusts, which attack plants and leave people alone, these locusts reverse the pattern by attacking people and leaving plants alone; and where natural locusts destroy with their mouths, these locusts inflict pain with their tails (Rev 9:3-5, 10). The result of their fiendish work is that the inhabitants of the earth no longer seek to embrace life and to escape the pain of death, but seek to embrace death and to escape the pain of life (9:6).¹⁶

The sounding of the seventh trumpet is highly significant. When I mistakenly believed that the book presented us with a lineal view of consecutive events, I can remember being puzzled by the seeming finality of the picture presented here (11:15-18). We are only half way through the book, and loud voices in heaven announce: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). Furthermore, as Leon Morris observes, when the elders refer to God, they describe him as "the One who is and who was" (11:17; cf. 1:5; 5:8). "There is no 'who is to come' this time for the coming is now present; this is the time of consummation."¹⁷ Morris adds, "A variation in the tenses of the Greek verbs may be significant. You have taken is perfect tense which seems to mean that God has taken the power permanently. This understanding is all the more likely in that the following verbs are all aorist, so that this one perfect stands out."¹⁸

Metzger comments,

Certainly this has all the appearance of the end of the age, with judgment of the dead and rewarding of the saints and all who fear God's name both great and small (11:18). If John had finished the book here, we would have considered it properly terminated. But since there are eleven more chapters, the author will now go back to an earlier stage and repeat some of the teachings that he had previously set before the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 149.

¹⁸ Ibid. The perfect tense describes an action that has been completed in the past, the results of which continue into the present. The aorist tense simply describes a past action. It is the "snapshot" tense that freezes the action in the past without necessarily referring to its duration or its consequences.

reader.¹⁹

Perhaps we should pause and sense the importance of this moment. This is the day to which sages and prophets looked forward. Daniel described a succession of earthly empires. They were represented by a huge, impressive statue. But then he saw a rock cut out but not by human hands and it struck the statue on its brittle feet. The entire statue, consisting of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, broke up and became like chaff on a threshing floor. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. Then the rock became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. Daniel explained to King Nebuchadnezzar:

In the time of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed . . . It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Dan. 2:34, 35, 44).

In amplification of this theme Daniel describes a vision that he had of "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven."

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and those of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13, 14).

Isaiah looked forward to the day when the government would be on his shoulders:

Of the increase of his government
And (of) peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this
(Is. 9:7).

When Jesus spoke to his disciples on the Mt. of Olives, he had these prophecies in mind. Listen to how these statements all tie up.

¹⁹ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 71.

Immediately after the distress of those days,
'the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies
will be shaken' (cf. Is. 13:10; 34:4).

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. (Mt. 24:29, 30)

Paul looked forward to that day. He said:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Rom. 8:18-22).

Paul uses two very interesting figures of speech here. He says, literally, that all of creation is "craning its neck" (we'd say "standing on tip toes"), eagerly awaiting the day when things are to be put right. He compares the present age to a labour ward. The whole of creation is in pain as the contractions come in waves - increasingly frequent and more intense - until the last thrust which brings about the birth of the new day

In another well-known passage, Paul tells us that "the end will come, when (Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor.15:24, 25).

Peter reminds us that we are to expect something cataclysmic. This is not merely a transition from one political order to another. It is not just a new chapter in human history. It is not some age of Aquarius - the dawning of a bright new day. Rather it is the point towards which history as we know it is moving. It is the end of the history of the fallen race and the beginning of eternity for the redeemed race . . .

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and

everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Pet. 3: 10-13).

This is what is being referred to here as the seventh angel sounds his trumpet. It has still to be described in greater detail, but there is a finality about the description in this passage. Loud voices in heaven and they announce:

The kingdom of the world
has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Christ,
and he will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 11: 15).

Once again we see the twenty-four elders rise from their thrones and prostrate themselves in worship.

We give thanks to you
Lord God Almighty,
the one who is and who was,
because you have taken your great power
and have begun to reign.
The nations were angry
and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and your saints and those who reverence your name,
both small and great -
and for destroying those who destroy the earth
(Rev. 11: 15-18; cf. Psalm 2).

One day the prayer that millions have prayed for centuries will be fully answered. The kingdom will come. How we look forward to that day!