

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation
Study Guide on Revelation 8-9—Week 6 (Sunday, Oct. 11)

Background: The interlude of chapter 7 has ended. The time has come for the seventh seal to be broken, and the reader expects that perhaps God will finally destroy his enemies and create all things anew. However, after a period of silence another series of seven begins (this time trumpets), which will be followed by several unnumbered visions, followed by seven bowls being poured out, followed by many other events. How should we understand the timing of these visions? Some have talked of their “cyclical” nature; others have talked about recapitulation or overlapping; and some have used the analogy of a symphony, in which themes are repeated with variations. John seems to be narrating similar events over and over, emphasizing different aspects with each new image.

The series of the seven trumpets is much like the previous seven seals and the future seven bowls of wrath. Each begins with four similar events, followed by a fifth that focuses the series, then a sixth followed by an interlude before the seventh.

Text: After the dramatic silence in 8:1 but before the first angel blows his trumpet, another angel plays the role of a priest offering incense to God (8:3-5). The incense mingled with the prayers of God’s people reminds us that God hears and answers prayer. The prayers appear to be answered when the angel casts burning coals onto the earth as a prelude to the sounding of the trumpets.

The trumpets, like the seals, bring with them divine judgments on earth. The first trumpet brings destruction on the land, the second on the oceans, the third on the fresh water, and the fourth on the sun, moon, and stars. These events remind the attentive reader of the plagues of Egypt and the story of the bitter water in Exodus 15:22-25.

A short break occurs after the fourth trumpet (8:13), giving emphasis to the next two trumpets and the disasters that will target humanity. The fifth trumpet looks back to the fifth seal (6:9-11): those who have God’s mark on their foreheads are spared the torture. Once again, the reader thinks of the plagues, as locusts come up out of the Abyss (9:1-5), the place where evil angels and other evil spiritual beings are kept (see 2 Peter 2:4). As was the case with the sixth seal (6:16), people desire to die but must instead face their punishment (9:6). The unusual description of the locusts looks back partially to Joel 1-2, and their five-month rampage is long but not eternal. People still have time to repent. The king of the locusts, the angel Apollyon (Abaddon in Hebrew) may have reminded John’s first readers that the emperor Domitian, who was persecuting Christians, liked to be regarded as the god Apollo incarnate.

The sixth trumpet leads to the release of four angels who lead two hundred million soldiers to kill one third of humanity. The riders with the colorful breastplates and the fire-breathing horses with lion heads and snakelike tails are meant to be terrifying. The fact that they come from beyond the Euphrates River is also horrific, since Israel’s enemies most often came from there (Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians), as did Rome’s enemies (Parthians).

The theme of the seven trumpets is that people refuse to repent, even after they witness the destruction of the heavens and the earth, the agony inflicted on people, and even large numbers of human deaths. Just as only the firstborn in each family in Egypt died, here only a third of humanity dies. The other two thirds could repent, but instead they continue in their idolatry, murder, magic, and sexual sin. The reader senses that there is still more to come.

Discussion Questions

1. It may surprise us to read about the half hour of silence in 8:1. How do you think the silence affected John? And how does it affect you as you read about it? Is there a place in worship today for silence? Why does silence feel so awkward?
2. During the silence the prayers of God's people were ascending to God (8:3-4). What do you think they were praying for (see 8:5)? Do you think it would have been difficult for these persecuted Christians to believe that God would answer their prayers? Is it difficult for us to pray when it appears that there is no hope? How do we continue to pray in those circumstances?
3. Why do you think John envisions judgments similar to the plagues in Exodus? What are the similarities between the Israelites in Egypt and the Christians in the late first century?
4. This week's passage shows God sending various punishments on people to get them to repent. How do you like this aspect of God? How does God show people the consequences of sin? Do you know people who had to face pain and sorrow before they turned to God?
5. What causes people to become hardened and resistant to God's warnings? Is our culture similar to that of the people who did not repent (see 9:20-21)?
6. It is interesting that the horrible locusts had faces that looked like humans (9:7). Some think that John is thereby suggesting the human origin of sin. Whether or not that is his intention here, it is certainly true that much of our trouble is of our own doing. Is it possible that most pain and suffering in the world is directly or indirectly the result of human sin? How so?