

This morning we will continue our series of sermons on the book of Revelation. We will consider the word of the Lord from the second half of chapter 8. These verses deal with what happens on earth when the first four trumpets are blown.

Let me first remind you of how these verses fit into the rest of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation was written to the early church to give comfort and urge faithfulness in the light of persecution and other challenges that it was facing. Because it was inspired by God and included in the Bible, it is addressed to the church in every age as well. The reality on earth that it addresses is spiritual warfare which may be persecution, but includes all aspects of the church's struggle with the forces of evil in the world. The great comfort in the book is that God is on the throne in heaven and that Jesus Christ is next to that throne from where he is implementing the plan of God for the victory over sin and evil that he won by his life, death, and resurrection. One way to sum up the message of the book of Revelation is simply to say – Jesus wins.

The book of Revelation is highly symbolic. It is a type of literature called apocalyptic which describes things that go on on the earth in the light of heaven and the God who is bringing his kingdom. It is actually about the relationship between things that happen on earth and the God who dwells in heaven. A key picture that the book of Revelation gives us is that of Jesus Christ, as the Lamb who was slain but who is alive forevermore, with the scroll of God's plan for the coming of his kingdom in his hand. The things that happen on earth, happen as a result of the Lamb opening the seals of the scroll. We have covered the opening of the first 6 seals in earlier sermons. The opening of the seventh seal begins a new sequence of judgments which are unleashed as seven angels blow seven trumpets. So we have seven seals. Then we have seven trumpets. And later there will be seven bowls.

It is important to understand that these sequences are not chronological. The things that happen on earth as the seals are unsealed and as the trumpets are blown are things that happen throughout the period between the first and the second comings of Christ. The point of all of these symbolic pictures is that the terrible things that happen on earth, such as wars and natural disasters, happen because they are all part of the plan of God for the salvation of his people and the defeat of all opposition to his reign. That is the comfort for believers. The book of Revelation gives us biblical perspectives on all the calamities that happen on the earth and the heart of that perspective is that none of them happen apart from the plan of God.

Now let's look at the text that is before us this morning. Verses 6-7, "Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. 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 the green grass was burned up." Remember that this is highly symbolic. If you interpret it literally, you get it all wrong. What we see here is destruction on the earth on a massive scale.

One of the keys to interpreting all of these symbols is to remember that they were first addressed to the church living toward the end of the first century. Other than the passages that refer to the end of the world

and the new heavens and the new earth, the symbolism was meant refer to things that were experienced by the people living during the time the book was written. If we think of it in that way we are kept from being too literal in our interpretation and so what the symbolism related to the blowing of the first trumpet refers to is things like the devastation caused by large storms or by drought. Large scale disasters on the earth. These have happened throughout the ages and they continue to happen today. We can think of the devastation caused by hurricanes or droughts or forest fires.

We can apply the same principle to what happens when the second, third and fourth angel blew their trumpets. When the second angel blew his trumpet, “something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. The sea becomes blood. A third of the living creatures died. And a third of the ships were destroyed.” So the disasters unleashed in connection with the blowing of the second trumpet are associated with the sea. The disasters unleashed in connection with the blowing of the third trumpet are associated with inland waters. And the disasters unleashed in connection with the blowing of the fourth trumpet are associated with the sun, moon and the stars and light. The whole of the creation is effected – the earth, the sea, the inland waters, and the heavenly bodies. All of these symbols together refer to all the various natural disasters that happen on the earth. It is a misunderstanding of this kind of literature to try to be more specific than that.

This is how Richard Philips sums up how we are to interpret these first four trumpets – “We remember that Revelation is not a puzzle book but a picture book. The general impression is therefore most important. Here, the four trumpets bring plagues on the created order – the earth, the seas, the streams, and the stars and moon This is precisely what a sober view of history shows, with vast portions of the human race suffering and dying at any one time because of tragedies originating from every part of creation” (p. 281).

What the extreme symbolism does is reveal the meaning of what we think of as natural disasters. We are to take the graphic imagery of these verses and understand hurricanes and famines and all manner of disasters in the light of them. Instead of thinking in terms of literal fulfillment, we are to interpret the natural disasters in our world as the fulfillment of these graphic pictures and symbols. This is what is really going on. These verses give us the meaning of what we think of as natural disasters.

The term “natural disaster” is hard to avoid and there is no problem using it as long as we understand that there is no such thing as nature operating independently of God. But this passage tells us what is really going on in natural disasters.

It is really important that we do not set aside the apocalyptic imagery just because it is not to be taken literally. It is tempting, I think, to set aside these dramatic pictures like a great mountain being thrown into the sea when we realize that we are not to expect a literal mountain to come bursting out of heaven and falling into the sea. What we are to do rather is bring these dramatic pictures to mind when we think of the natural disasters that happen on a regular basis. These symbols are in the Bible for a reason. The impression that they

make when we reflect on them of larger than life realities is the impression that God is seeking to provoke in us. These terrifying images convey truth. When natural disasters happen, these verses convey to us the spiritual truth of what is really going on. God is using this symbolism to reveal to us a reality that we can not see with our physical eyes, but which is no less true because it is invisible.

My point is that the fact that we are not to take these symbols literally does not mean that the details are unimportant. We must allow the dramatic imagery of these verses to impact us. We must realize that they are speaking truth to us about the real meaning of the natural disasters that are experienced in the world on a regular basis. When we hear of a natural disaster we are to see it through the lens of these pictures.

So let's look now at what this passage is teaching us about the meaning of natural disasters. We will begin answering that question by looking at verse 13, "Then I looked, and I heard an angel crying with a loud voice as it flew 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.'" Woe, woe, woe – woe is a term of warning of God's punishment on unrepentant sinners. Isaiah 3:11 is an example: "Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him...." The "woe, woe, woe" in our text is the announcement of "further drastic judgments to fall upon an unbelieving world" according to one author. Woe, in the bible is the opposite of blessing. It is a word of warning of punishment upon sinners who do not repent.

The term "those who dwell on the earth" in Revelation refers to the unbelieving world. Verse 13 makes it clear that the things that happen when the angels blow their trumpets are God's judgments upon the unbelieving world. It looks ahead to the blowing of the last three trumpets, but in doing so it makes it clear that the first four trumpets unleash God's judgment upon unrepentant sinners.

What this means for us is that we are to understand natural disasters as God's judgments upon an unbelieving world. Natural disasters have a different meaning for the people of God. God promises to work all things together for the good of his people and natural disasters are part of that when it comes to how they impact the people of God. There is no question that God's people suffer in this life, but the meaning of that suffering is different. This passage makes it clear that as far as the **unbelieving world** is concerned, natural disasters are a form of punishment. They are anticipations of God's final judgment on the wicked. This passage is addressed to the people of God assuring them that natural disasters are God's judgment on those who dwell on the earth – on those who persecute them – on those who are opposed to God and his cause in the world.

Now to get the biblical balance, here, we must keep in mind that Jesus has sent his church into the world with the gospel of forgiveness for those who repent and believe the gospel. God has gone to great lengths for the salvation of sinners in sending his beloved Son to suffer and die to pay the penalty for sin. And yet the reality is that there are many who reject the message – there are many who refuse to repent and submit to the Lord – there are many who are settled in their opposition to God and his people. Revelation refers to them as "those who dwell on the earth" and there is a lot in the book of Revelation about God judgments upon those who

dwell on the earth. This passage is teaching us that natural disasters are part of the way that God punishes the wicked and punishments in time are anticipations of the ultimate punishment that is to come at the end of the age.

This passage gives us more insight into how these judgments are to be understood. There is the significance of the trumpets. Trumpets are used in various ways in the Scriptures, but the way that fits in this context is that trumpets are used in battle. And the most significant instance of this in the OT that gives insight into this text is the story in which God delivered Jericho into the hands of Israel at the beginning of the conquest.

God had sent Israel into the promised land to defeat the people who were living there. It was his way of punishing those people for their sins. The early in that story we are told about how God defeated Jericho. And it involved trumpets. Jericho had strong walls. God told the army of Israel to march around the city six days in a row. Seven priests were to go before the army blowing their trumpets. On the seventh day the seven priests were to lead the procession seven times around the city blowing their trumpets and then the people were to shout. Israel did as the Lord commanded and the walls of the city crumbled.

This story is part of the story of Israel's conquest of the promised land, and it foreshadows the church's conquest of the whole world. In the fulfillment of this theme in the NT much of that conquest happens through the preaching of the gospel as people are converted and brought into the kingdom. But as the book of Revelation teaches us the coming of God's kingdom involves both the salvation of sinners and God's judgment upon the impenitent and that is the significance of the trumpets in this passage in the light of the OT background. It is significant too that the people of God have a role in the judgment aspect of the coming of God's kingdom.

In the story of the walls falling down in Jericho, God brought down the walls, but the people of God were involved. In the passage that we are looking at this morning, the trumpets are in heaven and God is the one who sends the judgments, but as we have seen a number of times in the book of Revelation, he does so in answer to the prayers of God's people. The first five verses of this chapter make it clear that these trumpets are blowing in response to the prayers of God's people.

This is a very important part of the biblical message. The coming of the kingdom of God involves judgment on the impenitent as well as the salvation of those who repent and believe in Jesus. God's judgment upon the wicked is not an insignificant theme in scripture. It is not hidden away in a few obscure passages. It is very prominent. We are in a battle. There are enemies. God and his people seek the salvation of as many as possible. But many remain impenitent. They will be punished. And we, as God's people, pray for that to happen every time we pray, "Thy kingdom come." God's kingdom comes both through salvation and through judgment on the impenitent.

There is another insight from this passage that fills out our understanding of what is going on here. Much of the symbolism in this passage is drawn from the exodus story and in particular the story of the 10 plagues on Egypt. Israel was in slavery in Egypt. They cried out to God in their suffering. God appeared to Moses sending him to Pharaoh demanding that Pharaoh let God's people go free. Pharaoh refuses. God sends 10 plagues upon Israel and eventually Pharaoh lets the people go.

One of the plagues is a plague of hail and fire. In another of the plagues the river Nile is turned to blood. Here in Revelation a third of the sea becomes blood. One of the 10 plagues involves darkness over the earth. Here in Revelation when the fourth trumpet sounded, the heavenly bodies are struck so that a third of their light was darkened. The symbols of the first four trumpets are drawn from other OT passages as well, but it is clear that the story of the 10 plagues upon Egypt forms an important part of the background here and thinking of our text in the light of the exodus story helps us to understand its significance. That is how the Bible works.

In the exodus story, God's people are being persecuted. They cry out to God for deliverance and God sent these plagues upon Egypt. In the book of Revelation, God's people are being persecuted. They cry out to God for justice. God responds with the plagues that we read about in these verses. Much of the symbolism here is intended to recall the exodus plagues and so understanding God's purpose of the exodus plagues fills out our understanding of this passage in the book of Revelation which fills out our understanding of the significance of the plagues that God sends upon his enemies today.

In the exodus story God makes it very clear why he sent the 10 plagues upon Egypt. Listen to what God says in the following verses: Exodus 7:5, "⁵The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." Exodus 7:17, "¹⁷Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood." Exodus 10:1–2, "¹Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, ²and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.""

What we learn from God's own interpretation of the plagues that he sent upon Egypt is that their purpose was to demonstrate before Egypt and before Israel that he is the Lord. By the plagues God demonstrated his sovereignty. Through them God was demonstrating to all the world his greatness compared to the gods of Egypt. The purpose of these plagues was not the repentance of the Egyptians. God specifically says that he hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he could show his power in the plagues that Egypt and Israel and the whole world would know that he is the Lord. In Exodus 9:16 God says to Pharaoh, "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

The connection that the book of Revelation intentionally makes with the exodus story means that we are to understand modern day plagues and disasters in the light of the exodus story. There is reason to believe on

the basis of other passages that part of the reason for these calamities is to call the wicked to repentance. But in this passage because of the intentional connection to the exodus story, the purpose is not repentance. God hardens the hearts of the wicked who at the same time are hardening their own hearts so that he might send these plagues to demonstrate his sovereignty, his power, and his superiority to the gods of the wicked. This is a huge part of the reason for natural disasters. It is a huge part of the reason for the current pandemic. God is saying in his word – I have done this, that all the earth may know that I am the Lord.

Paul picks up on this in Romans 9:17 where he writes, “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’” A little later in this passage, Paul writes to the church in Rome, “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

Our text this morning is about the severity of God against the unrepentant wicked in natural disasters. And the connection that John, the human author, intentionally makes with the plagues of exodus teach us that current day natural disasters are judgments of God upon the unrepentant and that their great purpose is that all the world may know that he is Lord. God is demonstrating his power and his superiority to the gods of the wicked.

That is certainly part of the meaning of the current pandemic. It has come after a trumpet was sounded in heaven. The pandemic has shown and is showing the power of God and the weakness of the gods of this world before the power of God. The wicked trust in science and medicine and the like, but the pandemic shows that the things in which the wicked place their trust are as nothing before the power of God. That does not mean that by God grace science and medicine will not bring us relief. But in the pandemic God is showing us just a little of what he is able to do and how weak the gods of the wicked are before his overwhelming power and wrath. This is just a hint of what God can do. He has done this with his little finger, as it were, and the whole world is in turmoil.

The cosmic symbolism of what happens when the first four angels blow their trumpets, show us the kinds of things that happen when God comes in his judgments upon the wicked in symbolic form. Hail and fire mixed with blood thrown upon the earth burning up a third of the trees and all the green grass. A great mountain burning with fire thrown into the sea which turns it into blood and a third of the living creatures die. A great star falling from heaven blazing like a torch and a third of the waters become wormwood and many people dying. The sun, moon and stars darkened so that the light is diminished by a third. And an angel crying out with a loud voice – “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.” If you think that this is bad, you aint seen nothing yet. That is what that means.

And God is doing that that all the world may know that he is the Lord. He is demonstrating his power and his glory and his wrath against the wicked who refuse to repent.

And this belongs to our hope. All this is being implemented by Jesus as the Lamb who was slain and who rose from the dead. This belongs to the victory that he has won on the cross. The cross is about the defeat of sin and evil in the salvation of sinners and the destruction of the wicked. 1 John 3:8 says, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Revelation 8 shows us one of the ways that he does that.

Romans 11:22 "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off."

Hebrews 12:26, "²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.""

Hebrews 12:28–29, "²⁸Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire."