

Getting started:

The trumpet judgements actually stretch from 8:2 to 11:19. For the sake of time and focus we will concentrate on Ch. 8 & 9 in this study.

The seal judgements (Ch. 6 & 7) taught the 7 churches that their suffering and the progression of history are interlinked in God’s plan. God wasn’t wasting their suffering. As such, their endurance during tribulation was essential. Their endurance would pay off because God would not only see them through this, but he would also raise them above the ones who tormented them because of their faith (they’re destined to rule with Christ, Ch. 5:10).

The sequence of judgements:

Ch. 7 ends on a high note for God’s people. They are sealed and the chapter ends on a victorious note of worship. This would be the perfect place to end the story. But Ch. 8 & 9 seem to take readers back through God’s hand of judgement again taking action against creation. What’s the relationship between the seal/trumpet/bowl judgements? Do these judgements occur consecutively (one after the other) or are they concurrent (parallel) views of the same time period? Many scholars believe that all three judgements are concurrent with each other. That is, all three are progressively parallel views of the same time period. Jon Mark Olesky, for example, suggests that the 7 seals highlight the triumph of the gathered church (Jew and Gentile), and out of the seals the 7 trumpets highlight the punishment of the world for its rejection of God, and out of the trumpets 7 the bowls represent final judgement. The Bible Project takes a very similar approach.



The configuration of the seal/trumpet/bowl judgements outlined above is provided by Jesusplusnothing.com to illustrate the difference between the traditional consecutive approach (upper) and the concurrent (lower) approach of the judgements when aligned with Daniel’s 70th week. Scholars prefer the lower arrangement because if one follows each judgement there seems to be a similar pattern to all three. And they all end the same.

The net effect is that these concurrent judgements intensify the exceedingly fine and thorough

nature of God's judgement of the earth. Every element of creation undergoes God's cleansing fire. I'm reminded of what Peter said to the church concerning God's cleansing,

But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly people. But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 2 Pet. 3:7-13

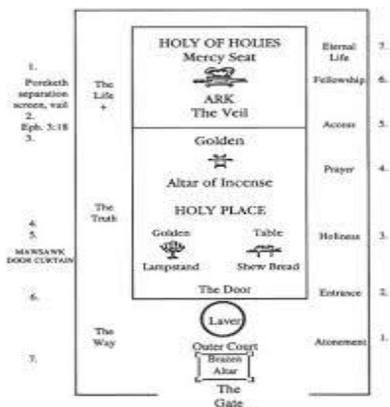
Sobering words indeed. And if you read this passage carefully you can see clearly the similarity between Peter's words concerning God's cleansing plan for the earth and what God expects of his people in light of this, and what John says to the churches in Revelation and what he sees in the seal/trumpet/bowl judgements. Both writers call God's people to holy living in light of God's plan.

The Core:

Ch.8

8:1-6 setting the scene

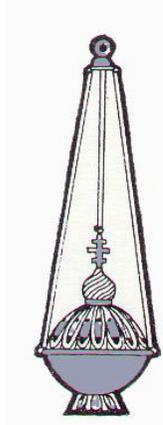
Ch. 8 begins in the context of the Tabernacle/Temple. We 21st Cent readers must remember that the 7 churches had a much clearer understanding of Tabernacle and Temple worship than we do. The diagram next gives you an idea of the visual/mental image undergirding the place where the trumpet judgements originate.



The angel seems to be standing in front of the veil in the Tabernacle/Temple at the Golden Altar of Incense inside the Holy Place, just outside the Holy of Holies. The place of the action is as important as the action itself. For God's suffering people in Asia Minor, knowing that the vision and ensuing action emanate from such an intimate holy place is comforting and encouraging. Remember, the Tabernacle/Temple is God's palace, and the Ark of the Covenant is his throne and footstool inside his throne room. The action is happening within the king's oversight. He is fully in control. Just like the worship in Rev. 4 & 5.

With the opening of the 7th seal an unusual silence envelopes the scene. The purpose for the silence has been debated by scholars, but what makes the most sense comes from what follows it

in Ch. 8 & 9. In 8:3 John sees an angel holding a golden censer perhaps like the one pictured here.



The angel holds this censer while standing at the altar which is before the throne. On the altar are the prayers of all the saints. Much incense was given to the angel to be added to the saint's prayers. The incense, prayers, and fire from the altar are then put into the censer, and hurled to the earth. As the censer is hurled peals of thunder, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake occur. God is speaking. But who listens?

What ought to grab our attention immediately is that these events happen in the context of worship which stem from Ch. 4 & 5. Also, the prayers of the saints as mentioned in 8:3 connect with the prayers of the saints mentioned in 5:8.

So what is happening? Remember, in 6:9-11 the martyred saints under the altar asked God how long he would take before he avenged their blood. **What was the answer?** Ch. 8 at least partly answers their question as God responds by gathering all the prayers of his people, using them as a judgement on a wicked earth that sought to harm God's people. Keener observes that the best way to understand the silence is to see it as God taking time to hear what his people are saying to him. There is a conversation going on here, and God hears his people's cries. The people's cries go up in desperation, and in tears, and they come down in peals of thunder, flashes of lightning, and earthquakes.

I like Dr. Ed Neufeld's observation concerning the prayers of the saints and what happens here, "This is God answering the prayers of the saints for justice against their tormentors. In short, this is payback time." These verses graphically portray incredible torment, and they are designed to encourage believers who are **facing** torment, believers who have **endured** torment. There will be justice. Paul says, 'Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God.' **Rom 12:19**

8:7-12 Trumpets 1-4

Trumpets in the Bible have a variety of applications but serve one general purpose. They are used to call people to attention. They are used for sacred assemblies (Lev. 23:24; Numb. 29:1), they preceded the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chron. 15:24), also in times of celebration (1 Chron. 13:8), brought down the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6:4), preceded Israel into battle (Num. 10:9), the return of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:52), the resurrection of the dead (1 Thess. 4:16), etc.

In Revelation each trumpet blast announces something to which we must pay attention. And as the angels blow their trumpets in succession we again witness creation's reversal. A number of scholars have noted some significant similarities between these first four trumpets and the plagues of Egypt in Exodus (Ex Ch. 7-11). Hail mixed with fire, water turning to blood, darkness on the land, etc. all remind us that as God acted on behalf of his people then, so now he again acts decisively. God's purpose for this, as Peterson points out isn't punitive, it's purgative (God is purging something). The exodus plagues weren't sent to make Pharaoh miserable, but to get him to change his mind, to repent. And as the end of Ch. 9 makes clear, the ones who experience the trumpet judgements have the same hard Pharaoh heart. But it's not Pharaoh's heart in view here,

it's Rome, and on an even wider scale anyone who, like Pharaoh or the Roman Emperors, think they're superior to God.

A word about 1/3:

It's worth noting that in Ch. 8 the reader constantly encounters the fraction 1/3. What does this represent? 3/3 is the total of something. 2/3 is most of something. 1/3 is the smallest part of the total. 1/3 likely represents God's mercy at work in the midst of judgement. God could have destroyed everything, or most of it, but in his infinite mercy he only took 1/3 so as to bring people to repentance.

8:13 The soaring eagle

Between the 4th and 5th trumpet John observes an eagle flying mid-heaven. The eagle's precise identity is debated but its presence signals a new development in the trumpet judgements. Caird points out that the word "eagle" is the Greek word "aetos" which, "is regularly used in the LXX or Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) to translate the word "vulture" (Lk 17:37). He notes, "It's possible that we ought so to translate it here for a vulture hovering over a dying beast is an obvious symbol of doom." Oddly, this eagle speaks, and what it speaks concerns woes that are about to fall on people. So, much like seals 1-4 that involve creation, and seals 5-6 that involve people, here a similar pattern continues. Trumpets 1-4 involve creation, and trumpets 5-6 involve people. The difference between seals 5-6 and trumpets 5-6 is that the judgements they represent increase in intensity and graphic nature.

Ch. 9

Craig Keener's observation is important. "The intended impact of Revelation's images on those who deliberately reject its truth is harsh: John is not like some refined modern preachers unwilling to 'scare' someone into repentance. But few who reject Revelation's message will read this far; its main audience is Christians, and its main message at this point may be twofold. (1) Christians flirting with compromise with the world should think twice, because the entire social order will be destroyed in the awful catastrophes of war; Christ alone is an adequate security. (2) Christians suffering at the hand of the world should never envy the positions of their persecutors. Their persecutors will suffer too; invasions by other ungodly persons or spirits function as God's judgements on a wicked society, hence active vindication of his persecuted people."

Does a perspective like this mean that Jn does not have an ultimate end in sight? No. Applying Rev 9 in this fashion doesn't limit it to AD 95. One day all will appear before God's throne to experience his justice and judgement. Ultimately the whole world will appear before him, and they will have to come to terms with the truth of what really lies in their hearts. The primary issue here is that because of how we have been classically taught to look at Revelation, we focus on two things, the nation of Israel, and the very end of time. Looking at Rev 9 from the vantage point of the seven churches and AD 95 opens us up to see a message for the church that is needful now, and until the end of time.

9:1-12 trumpet 5

The precise identification of these images is hard to understand. The overall point John's making is that evil rises from the depths of the earth in new and terrifying ways. And at the center of the evil is a hoard of locusts with an insatiable appetite. Here there is again a powerful connection with the locust plague of Ex 10. The odd thing about these locusts is that they act as a hoard of tormentors of people who aren't sealed by God. They operate within very strict parameters but their devastating impact drives men to the brink of death, but not over it.

The locusts are fierce, unrelenting, and unstoppable in their terror campaign. Most notable is that the king over them is named "Abaddon" (Hebrew) or "Apollyon" (Greek). These two words relate to similar concepts. Abaddon has to do with Hades, and Apollyon is the destroyer. These names have been linked to various Roman Emperors, most notably Domitian who saw himself as a reincarnation of the Greek God Apollo. Thus Apollyon is seen as a word play on Apollo mocking Domitian as a destroyer.

9:13-19 trumpet 6

As if trumpet 5 wasn't already horrific enough, trumpet 6 takes destruction to a whole new level. Some scholars suggest that because of the mention of the Euphrates River (V14) and what seems like a massive invasion, John sees the impending invasion of the Parthian armies against the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Others see some futuristic invasion of another demonic kind. Whatever the vision suggests, the one thing that is true is that it's incredibly bad.

9:20, 21 The point of the trumpet judgements

As the seal judgements were meant to bring men to their knees asking the question, "who is able to stand?", so here the trumpet judgements were meant to bring men to repentance. The sad thing about God's judgements is that instead of repentance they respond with hard flinty hearts.

Making it real:

What can we take away from Ch. 8 & 9?

1. God listens. Revelation gives us an intriguing glimpse into how God listens to us. This communicates something of the value God places on our relationship with him and our prayers to him. He takes time to listen to our prayers and not only ours but those of every child of God. As Jesus (Matt 19) was ministering, some children came to him. The impatient disciples wanted to shoo the children away but Jesus used that opportunity to teach them how much he valued the ones who came to him, to seek him. He listened to these children carefully and attentively.

2. God responds. Craig Keener says that prayer can shape history. Perhaps, out of this portion of Revelation you may consider the power of prayer anew. To be sure, God hears and responds, but the mature believer understands that God responds in his time according to his will. Nonetheless, when we pray things happen, whether we see them in our time or not. Many of the believers in AD 95 died without seeing the reversal of creation take place as Jn's vision outlines it. Yet, these same believers could rest assured that as God dealt with the Egyptians, so he will deal with all those who oppose him. Therefore, leave room for God's vengeance. The imprecatory Psalms (Psalm 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, etc.) remind us that God openly hears our complaints about those who persecute us. We do ourselves no favours when we hide the laments we hold deeply,

especially our thoughts and feelings of injustice. God hears our laments and his time administers justice.

3. God doesn't waste our prayers. Have you ever felt like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling and never getting to God's ear? Sometimes our prayers do bounce off the ceiling because we approach the purpose of prayer wrongly (Jas. 4:3). But when push comes to shove and our back is against the wall and we cry out to God in earnestness, be assured that our prayers go somewhere. And Ch. 8 reminds us of where they go. God collects the prayers of his people and they become the very stuff of our vindication in Christ.

4. God is the Sovereign Lord of all. This is a truth that has been emphasized repeatedly so far in the Revelation. And in this portion as well, we are reaffirmed in the notion that the gods of this world are nothing. When I read of the trumpet judgements and how creation reverses in the wake of God's sovereign control, I am reminded of Psalm 96:4-6,

“For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For the gods of the people are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him, strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.”

The gods of the people, says the Psalmist, are empty and vain. The gods of the people are nothing. So why trust and worship them?

For the churches compromising and caving in, here is solid advice to clearly see the gods of the people they are attempting to find middle ground with, or giving in to. There is only one God and his Son Jesus Christ is the living one, once dead but now alive, who holds the keys of death and Hades. Jn shows us the truth of what he has presented to the churches concerning their risen Savior from the beginning of this letter (1:12-16, 17, 18).

Before we allow ourselves to become tempted to worship that which is not God, we ought to read Rev 8:7-12.

5. God is not to be trifled with. The image of God we gain from the trumpet judgements so far is that the God we worship is infinitely powerful and awesome. In Heb. 10:31 we find this statement,

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

I find the trumpet judgements to be useful in helping us correct our attitude when it comes to God's character. The world trifles with God thinking him to be a myth, or man-made image.

Much of the world's approach to God's character seems to diminish and weaken his great and awesome power. Even in the church we have a great tendency to think of God simply as our buddy or our pal. The trumpet judgements offer us a chance to reconfigure God's relationship with us.

Think about what this might mean for how you worship God, how you talk about him in public, or how you treat him with regard to your behavior toward him. Prov. 9:10 says

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding

There are approx. 295 passages in the Bible (235 OT/43 NT) that refer to the fear of the Lord. The fear we are to have toward God as believers is a reverential and responsive one that understands his great and awesome power. Ours is a grateful respectful fear demonstrated in worship, adoration, love and obedience because of what we have been saved from through Jesus, and what we are saved to in terms of an eternity spent with him.

The fear the world should have, but clearly doesn't, is demonstrated in the trumpet judgements.

When I think about God's awesome and terrible response toward a world that is completely and stubbornly unrepentant, I am immediately struck by the equal awesomeness of his love toward sinners not wishing any to perish but all to come to repentance. The incredible gift of salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ is magnified all the more in light of Rev. 8 & 9. John puts it this way,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

What a great salvation we have in Christ! What hope!