

## Things are not what they seem

### Glimpses from Revelation

# The World, God's Kingdom (a)

## Revelation 8—9

### Overview

The vision of Christ writing *letters* has shown Christ tending his churches and bringing them to life. The vision of Christ opening the *seals* has shown Christ among the nations, sovereign over their fates and jealous for his saints as they suffer. In this third vision, *trumpets* herald a coming victory of Christ and the troubles visited on the earth's inhabitants who have refused to listen (study (a)). Before the seventh trumpet blows there is another interlude describing the nature of ministry during these events (study (b)). Our title comes from the conclusion to this section: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and his Christ (11:15).

### Interpretation

First, a word about the interpretive model I am using for this book. There are difficulties seeing it as a consecutive story from beginning to end. The progression through the book is best seen as a progression of revelation, not of history. In this way, we can see each vision traversing the period through which we are travelling—the age of the church under Christ as Lord in this present world. Each vision adds something to the previous one.

Given this understanding of the book's structure, the whole narrative can be useful to each successive generation of Christians. We need to be thinking as we read, 'How is this vision working out in the world now, for us, for people living in some other part of the world?' There is a danger in over interpreting, trying to find relevance locally when the message is to the church globally; on the other hand, there is a danger in so reducing the teaching to generalities that we don't hear what the Lord of the church has been given so as to help us live prophetically in eschatological times!

### The seventh seal

The section (8:1-6) begins with silence and ends with a lot of noise—a storm, an earthquake and trumpeters making ready to blow. The silence is notable because heaven has been busy and loud! But something happens in the silence: seven trumpeters appear, and prayers are offered—with incense. Then the noise begins again. Clearly, prayers are central to what comes next.

Is this God's response to the prayers of the martyrs (6:9-11), together with all those on earth who suffer because they belong to the Lamb (8:4)? Christians pray for the kingdom to come and this is where this section ends (11:15). So if this section has much to do with judgement, as it does, it is judgement arising from the prayers of the saints and with a view to the coming of the kingdom.

Praying martyrs in the previous vision were told to wait, and that others would die, but God does not ignore the cries of his people. These prayers are presented to God with incense, suggesting the priestly ministry of Christ himself, taking and sanctifying the prayers we offer.

Our prayers give rise to action on the earth, action that heralds God's victory. This recalls the days when seven priests *carried* trumpets as they marched around Jericho's walls for six days. On the seventh day, they blew them (Josh. 6:1-5—cf. the quietness in heaven

before the trumpets are blown). God's victory, as then, involves the judgement of those who oppose the purposes of God but it heralds God's coming victory.

There is an important difference between the opening of the seals and the blowing of the trumpets. In the first, Christians are martyred, and they pray. In the second, Christians pray and the world is troubled. Both views of our situation are true all the time and need to be taken together.

The first four judgements release turmoil in the creation, and the next two, demonic afflictions that touch the souls of those who reject Christ. One writer calls these trumpet judgements 'a controlled descent into chaos' (Joseph L. Mangina).

### **The first four trumpets**

The similarity between what happens when the trumpets sound and the time of the exodus is notable. In those days, the cry of God's people came up before God (Exod. 6:5-8), as here. At that time, plagues included hail, water turning to blood, darkness, locusts and human deaths, also, as here. God called on Pharaoh to repent and he would not, again, as here.

These judgements are penultimate, not final. They are limited to a third of the population and have in mind that men and women will see that the world is God's, and, that his Son, confessed by Christians, is the face of God.

The doctrine being contested today is not the deity of Christ or the effectiveness of the atonement. Most people don't care about that—not yet. What needs to be asserted is that God is God! These trumpets address that need.

Hail and fire—with blood, produce disasters on *land*—trees and grass. Then, something like a collapsing volcano produces disasters in the *sea*—marine life and shipping. Then, something like a massive asteroid destroys a third of potable *water*. Then a cosmic disturbance causes partial darkness. Here, we are well out of the range of climate change, and certainly out of the range of things we can remedy. The imagery could cover any one of the many 'acts of God' that send our insurance companies into a frenzy. Or, perhaps, leave populations devastated and spiritless. Jesus asked if some on whom tragedy fell were worse sinners than others. Answering his own question, he said: 'I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13:2-3).

We like to think we can make a world where nothing will go wrong—"This will never happen again!" And of course we should try our best to make it so. But what will it take before we see that it is God who provides for us and not ourselves (Isa. 26:9-12)?

Deeper troubles are to come and they are demonic in nature.

### **The fifth and sixth trumpets**

A fallen star suggests Satan fallen (Luke 10:18). The abyss is a place for foul fiends (Luke 8:31), the lair of the Beast soon to be revealed (11:7; 17:8). Satan is described later as bound here (20:1), and in the present case, he can only use his own domain if given the appropriate key. The creatures that arise can only touch humans, not the natural world, and only those who do not belong to the Lamb, and they can only torment, not kill. But they are unnatural in appearance, terrifying in their coming and agonizing in their effects (scorpions). Such is the reign of the god of this world. This is what he produces when permitted to do so, and the nature of his 'creation' is evident.

In one sense, this is all God's doing, but God often acts by giving us up to our own wills and pollutions and guilts. The pain of never being 'good enough' and the unnatural lengths this drives us to, to prove we are 'someone'; and then the death that hangs over us, unrelieved with hope, may well be excruciating. We are meant to know God as Father and to be at peace in him, but if we will not come to him through the Lamb, Satan not

only has a 'field day', he is given this task, if only to show the world that Satan is no father!

The sixth trumpet sounds, accompanied by a voice from the golden altar before God—where the prayers of the saints have been offered up (8:3). The voice says certain angels are to be unbound—presumably, they have been bound because they are fallen angels and have been kept in reserve for this task. Just as the death of the firstborn was the final plague in Egypt, so here, it is announced that a third of mankind will be killed. The fallen and unbound angels command an overwhelming number of soldiers and their horses are deadly instruments of death. Is this the war to end all wars? What effect does this produce in those who are spared this overwhelming destruction? Nothing. They are still in thrall to demons, and idols, and still committed to their disregard for human life, for truth (cf. sorcery), for purity and property.

The trumpets have given opportunity to repent, and know the grace of the Father, but sin has mastered those who have not turned to the Lamb.

Another interlude, explaining where we are in the visions, must come before the final trumpet is blown.

Is this what our prayers are about? We pray that our Father will be hallowed. We pray that God's kingdom will come. Does this just mean a few conversions, or an improvement in our discipleship? This may be part of it, but it means God's will being *done*, in earth as in heaven. It means the mystery of God being fulfilled (10:7). God knows the meaning of our prayers better than we do ourselves. He knows how deep human evil is. He knows how stubborn our hearts are. He knows nothing will serve other than the ministry of the Lamb, washing this filth away. And all the ministry of the Lamb, including this wrath, is directed to the world knowing him.

*Sovereign Judge, the world is aching  
Through its shame and wrongful ways.  
You are showing Your displeasure  
In the tumults of our age.  
Yet Your wrath is righteousness,  
Purging our pollution;  
Wishing not we be condemned,  
But that we be chastened.*

*Sovereign Father, all Your actions  
Lead us to Your own dear Son,  
By whose death all failures, terrors  
Are absolved, forever shunned.  
By Your unexpected love  
You have won us, Father.  
Let us do what pleases You,  
Be Your new creation.*