

LIFE FALLS APART

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 8–9
14th Message
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Revelation 8–9

Being a judge is a huge responsibility. Many of you know that we adopted two children from foster care. As part of that process, we spent a fair amount of time in court at different stages of the process. I remember my amazement at the power and authority of the judges we interacted with.

They made decisions which affected children, their parents, families, and communities. They did their best to take all the facts into account. But someone was always disappointed. There are no easy decisions. I remember walking away one time thinking how glad I was that I didn't have to make decisions like that. What a huge burden to bear.

There are a lot of things wrong in this world—so many things broken that are desperately in need of fixing. Sometimes we talk like we could make things better. Or at the very least, we love to criticize those who are in charge.

But think about this: housing prices, the drug epidemic, education gap, homelessness, divisiveness, unrest around the world. What would you do if you were in charge? How would you judge the world? How would you set things right?

Psalm 98:9 claims that God does just this: "He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."

I can't even handle deciding who gets to have the first video game turn on a lazy Saturday at home. Judging the world with righteousness is completely out of reach.

What does it look like to judge the world with righteousness? We've seen what it looks like in our series on the book of Revelation. It's surprising and comforting and disturbing all at the same time. Our hope is that these passages would help us to wake up to the deeper spiritual reality which we aren't always aware of.

This morning's passage is certainly shocking. It's a difficult passage of painful judgment. So much of the

Scriptures speak of God's love for us. His giving us life. But this morning we will watch as God allows terrible pain. We will see that life falls apart.

We're going to encounter some very hard statements this morning. This is a difficult sermon to preach. We'll see God judging the world. We will wonder if it has to be this way. We might want things to be different.

But we have to understand that even these judgments demonstrate the great love of God. They reveal his passion that the world be fixed. This is all part of his plan to set things right. We only get here after he has tried everything else. And while we'll see some horrifying things this morning, this passage is not horror. It's a tragedy. We'll see the heart of a God who tries everything to reconcile with his creation.

We've talked before about how it's tricky to figure out when the things described in Revelation will happen. Interpreters sometimes talk about a prophetic pattern. That means that what we're seeing described is a pattern of how God works in the world. This pattern began long ago and continues today. It will reach its fulfillment in some cataclysmic way when Jesus returns. That's when the pattern will be completed.

Some of these have happened. Some of them are happening. Some of them will happen in the future.

I'm going to be reading all of chapters 8 and 9 this morning. It's a large section of text, but we need to hear all of these words. We need to see the full breadth of it.

Allow yourself to be disturbed. Be shocked at the pain and suffering described here. This will not be a comfortable morning. My prayer is that in these prophetic judgments, we will encounter the living God.

Introduction to Trumpets

After the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, we saw a majestic heavenly throne room scene in Revelation 4-5. The Lamb of God took possession of a scroll with seven seals that only he could open. Six of

those seals were opened in chapter 6. In chapter 7 we saw the sealing of God's people. Now we finally get to the seventh seal.

Revelation 8:1:

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Silence. I know that as a preacher, there are two ways I can really get your attention. One way is to get really loud in order to emphasize what I'm talking about. The other way is to just... stop talking.

If I go silent, you start to wonder what's going on. Is something wrong? Is he okay? What's about to happen? Silence makes us wait. It builds anticipation. We ask the question, what will happen next? Silence gets our attention.

What will God do in this world? Allow that question to get your attention.

Revelation 8:2-6:

Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

In the Old Testament, trumpets often served as an announcement of holy war. They let everyone know that God was going into battle. They served as a warning of what is to come.

In the same way, these judgments are meant as warnings. This is God's attempt to show those who don't know him that life on their own doesn't work. We've talked before about how these judgments are best understood as God allowing the natural consequences of sin in the world to be felt. A creation in rebellion against its creator cannot experience the fullness of life. The trumpets blow, and we see in grim reality how true that is.

But with the angels and the incense and the altar and the prayers, this also sounds a lot of like a worship event. If you've ever attended an Orthodox worship service, you'll see all of those things: a censer, incense, smoke, an altar, and prayers.

This looks like worship because it is. The purpose of God's judgment is to make him known. That's his goal throughout all of this—wake the world up to his presence. Reveal his glory to a world who's turned away from him. That's worship—making the glory of God known. We do that with our voices and our bodies and our postures and our lives.

So as we read these judgments, look for the glory of God. Look for the Glory of God in them.

Look for God's mercy. Even as he judges, he is merciful. Look for his character. Look for the heart of God, warning his creation of what a life without him leads to.

Imagine the anguish the Creator feels toward his fallen and rebellious creation. All the lengths he has gone through to make himself known to the people he loves. Can you see him rubbing his hand over his forehead lamenting, "What do I have to do before you'll see me? Do I have to send plagues on the earth? Do I have to darken the sun? What's it going to take?"

God doesn't enjoy seeing his creation suffer. Think about the pain an addict experiences as he goes through withdrawal from his drug. That pain leads somewhere. It leads to freedom and a new kind of life.

So too, this pain is meant for a purpose. And in that purpose is the glory of God. His desire for a creation to experience the life he meant for them. And so the trumpets begin to sound.

First Four Trumpets

Revelation 8:7-13:

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 green grass was burned up. 8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. 9 A third

of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. 10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. 12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night. 13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly 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!"

The judgments have begun.

As in so much of Revelation, there are multiple echoes of different Old Testament passages throughout these judgments. You might be reminded of the ten plagues of Egypt. You might be reminded of the six days of creation. You might think of the conquest of Jericho where God's people marched around the city for six days blowing trumpets.

A friend of mine in seminary was teaching the creation story to a group of people. To help them understand the narrative, he had them build a paper-mâché model of the garden. From what he described, it turned out beautifully. But then after all the work they put into that model, he smashed it to pieces. He wanted to drive home the point of how devastating the rebellion of creation was to God.

That's what we see here in Revelation 8:7-13. As the first four trumpets sound, what we witness is a kind of "de-creation." Creation itself is being undone. The earth, the trees, the mountains, the sea, the rivers, the sun, the moon, and the stars. All of the elements which God so lovingly placed in perfect arrangement to support life are being tainted and distorted and disrupted.

This is our doing. We've done this. God is simply allowing the consequences of our choices to be felt in creation.

My son recently did a report on deforestation in Madagascar. The fires of Northern California have left us with scorched earth and darkened skies. Did you

know that in the middle of the ocean halfway between California and Hawaii lies the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? A clump of floating garbage twice the size of Texas. (You can insert your own joke about a clump of floating garbage and Texas here if you'd like to).

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, left over 100,000 residents exposed to toxic levels of lead. And that's nothing compared to the clean water crisis across the developing world. One in every six people in Africa lacks access to safe drinking water.

Smog and pollution darken the sun in cities across the world. But more than that—the details of modern life have disrupted the natural rhythms of life which sustains our creation. For some, the day of work bleeds into night. For others, unemployment renders them unable to work during the day and sleep at night. How many of us struggle to find the simple balance of day and night, work and rest amidst the complexity of our lives?

These four trumpets are sounding even now. They will continue. And they will reach their peak when Jesus returns.

God allows these things to happen — he permits us to wreak devastation upon the earth he has created — so that we recognize our inability to live apart from Him. Like a parent who refuses to pick up the pile of Legos on the floor until his child notices them himself, God lets us poison what he created to give us life.

But these are only the first of the trumpets. After these four, we hear an eagle warning us of the severity of what's to come. Where the first four trumpets affected earth itself, the last three will directly affect its inhabitants.

The Fifth Trumpet

Revelation 9:1-12:

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. 2 He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any

green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. 7 In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; 9 they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

What I love about the Bible is how universal the imagery is. The images have more echoes of the plagues of Egypt. They bring back the prophesy in the first two chapters of Joel which describe a kind of locust apocalypse. Knowing all those connections help you to see this more clearly.

But on a general level, the big picture of what is going on is very clear. When you hear about thick smoke rising from something called the bottomless pit, what do you feel? Would you expect something nice and friendly to come from there? What about locusts who look like horses with human faces, lions' teeth and tails like scorpions? Does this sound like something you might like to snuggle up with on your couch as a family pet?

God hands over a key which unlocks the door to unleash demonic evil.

This is evil that makes life miserable. It's the kind of evil at work when someone lures a ten-year-old girl from her village with a flashy promise of life in the city only to force her into sexual behavior in front of a webcam to make money. It's the systemic oppression of an entire class of people labeled "untouchables" for generations in India. It's the mental health crisis in our own country where 20% of our children have a diagnosable disorder. It's the brokenness of a world where under-resourced families are trapped in poverty despite decades of trying to break free.

The first four trumpets made life more difficult because the creation was being undone. But this trumpet makes life miserable. Life becomes so full of torment and torture that people wish for death but don't receive it.

But there are two things to notice. First, we are told explicitly that this judgment is for those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. Last week we heard about God sealing his people. The people of God are protected in some way from his judgments on the world.

That doesn't mean we don't experience life falling apart. We do. I have, and I know many of you have as well. But there is something different about suffering with Christ. We have a spiritual awareness in our suffering which makes it meaningful. And we have the hope that God will redeem the pain we experience.

The second thing to notice is the power of God over evil. As terrible as all of this is, God is still in authority over it. He holds the key to this evil. He allows it for his purposes. Evil never overpowers God.

The response to all of this is not to fear evil. The response is to turn toward God. God's purpose is to make himself known so that we can see who he really is. We fear him in reverence. Fear God, not evil.

God limits the destruction of this evil. One-third of the trees burn up. One-third of the waters became bitter. The locusts torture for five months, but cannot kill.

We get the impression that God has been holding back these forces of evil. He has locked them away. God actively protects us from the consequences of our choices. But nowhere he allows it to have limited effect on the earth.

When my kids were toddlers, if they started running toward the street, I'd tell them to stop. If they didn't stop, I'd rush over and pick them up. I would protect them from making bad choices.

But as they grow up, I do that less and less. If they choose not to study for a test and receive a bad grade, I'll let that happen. My hope is that experiencing those consequences will lead them toward making changes. I'll gradually remove my protective hand so that they learn and grow. This is what God does here.

Can you see his glory? Can you recognize his mercy? He protects his creation from evil. But now he allows limited evil to work in the world. He hopes for people

to recognize their need and turn to him. And so the trumpets continue.

The Sixth Trumpet

The sixth angel blows his trumpet.

Revelation 9:13-21:

Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound. 20 The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

In the 14th century, the Black Plague tore through Europe. Over a single decade, some historians estimate that up to 60% of Europe died (Ole J. Benedictow 2005). All it takes is a single bite from a flea infected with the plague. Three to five days later, the person develops swelling where they were bitten. Three to five days after that, 80% of people die. Just like that, huge portions of a population are wiped out.

Did the sixth trumpet blow in the 14th century? I think so. Did it blow when the 35 million people died during the Mongol conquests of the 13th century; or when 25 million died during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire; or when 70 million died during World War 2 (Wikipedia)?

The first four trumpets released consequences which made the sustaining of life more difficult. The fifth trumpet released evil which made life more painful. But the sixth trumpet releases an army which takes life away. Twice ten thousand times ten thousand is 200 million. That's approximately the population of the world in the first century. One demonic soldier for every person alive.

The judgments of the trumpets seem to get worse and worse. So it goes with mankind. Our destruction and the brokenness of the world get worse and worse. We have a naïve view in modernity that we are managing to make the world better. But Revelation describes God gradually allowing more and more of our consequences to play out, hoping we would repent.

The most tragic part of all of this comes in the last few verses. "The rest of mankind did not repent of the works of their hands."

This is the tragedy. When we do see evil at its worst, most people don't turn around. They don't repent and recognize their absolute dependence on God. Instead, many of us are tempted to do the opposite. We blame God for those things! How could God allow such a terrible war? How could he allow the plague? How could he allow this or that to happen to me?

Can we allow the pain of this world to turn us to God? Can we help others to see that as well? Life falls apart. This is what happens because of the presence of sin in the world. But when life falls apart, turn to God. Wake up to God when life falls apart.

How God's heart must break! Most of the time he protects us from our choices. So we ignore him. Then he starts to remove his protective hand, allowing us to go through suffering and pain so that we could see our dependence on him. But instead, we blame him for all the suffering and hate him all the more.

What more can God do to get our attention?

Will we allow life falling apart to wake us up? Can we walk alongside others to help them see God in the midst of their pain?

A friend of mine says, "Relationships fail, lives fall apart, and people die." He points out that our calling is to have already been there as a friend before those things happen so that we can be a support to them when they do.

Maybe if we've woken up, we can help others to wake up when they hear the dreadful sound of these trumpets in their own lives.

Conclusion

It's not easy being a judge. Most parents know this. If you've ever had to sort through a conflict between your friends you know this. How do you step into a messy situation and make it better? There's usually no easy way.

In the blowing of the trumpets, we have seen God remove his hand from restraining evil. We've seen the full consequences of mankind's rebellious choices play out. It's been horrific and terrifying.

But mostly, it's been tragic. This is God's final attempt to make himself known to his creation. These judgments aren't so much a punishment as they are a revelation of the brokenness of man and the goodness of God.

If you don't know Jesus, can you see all that he has created for us? Can you see how our sinfulness and refusal to acknowledge him has brought devastation to the earth? Maybe you can see it in your own life? Maybe in the lives of those around you. We have strayed from God, and this world is broken as a result.

Can you wake up to the love of God in the death of his son Jesus?

This scene is tragic, but it is not the end of the story. We will see how everything concludes as we near the end of Revelation. We will see the new creation. We will see where all of this pain is leading to.

As S.M. Lockridge wrote 70 years ago, "It's Friday // Hope is lost // Death has won // Sin has conquered // and Satan's just a laughin' /// But it's Friday // It is only Friday // Sunday is a-comin'!" (Taylor 2014)

EndNotes

- ¹ Ole J. Benedictow. 2005. "The Black Death: The Greatest Catastrophe Ever" *History Today*. Accessed January 2019. <https://www.historytoday.com/ole-j-benedictow/black-death-greatest-catastrophe-ever>.
- ² List of wars by death toll, *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_by_death_toll
- ³ S.M. Lockridge, "It's Friday—But Sunday's Comin'" (*The Gospel Coalition*, April 18, 2014). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/its-fridaybut-sundays-comin/>