

"THE FIRST SIX TRUMPETS"

I. Introduction

- A. This passage marks the beginning of a new visionary cycle in Revelation.
 - 1. As we have been noting throughout this series, each cycles provides us with a different portrait of the temporal judgments that God sends upon the world in the period between the first and second comings of Christ, culminating in the climactic judgment that will take place at the end of the age.
 - 2. The cycle of the seven seals focused on how God restrains his judgments in order to ensure the preservation of the elect.
 - 3. The cycle of the seven trumpets focuses on how God's judgments demonstrate his victory over those who persist in their opposition to him.
- B. This is made clear by the Old Testament background to the trumpet symbolism.
 - 1. One of the most notable texts that comes to mind along these lines is the role of the trumpets in the fall of Jericho.
 - 2. As Israel's men of war marched around the city on seven consecutive days, seven priests blew seven trumpets that culminated in the walls of Jericho falling down.
 - 3. The theme of God's victory over the ungodly world is also emphasized by the parallels between the trumpet judgments and the plagues that the Lord sent upon Egypt at the time of the exodus.
 - 4. The hail, blood, darkness, and locusts all have direct corollaries in the exodus plagues.

5. Those plagues were judgments, not only upon the people of Egypt, but also upon the false gods in which they trusted.
6. In a similar way, the judgments that are described in the first six trumpets affect the various aspects of life in which the people of this world place their trust.

II. Trumpets One Through Four (8:6-12)

- A. We will begin our study of this text by looking at the first four trumpets as a group.
 1. The eagle's introduction of the last three trumpets clearly sets them apart from the first four.
 2. This grouping of the first four trumpet-judgments continues the pattern that was established with the seven seals, where the opening of the first four seals resulted in the coming of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.
 3. We should also note that there is an increased intensity in these judgments.
 4. Back in chapter 6, at the appearance of the fourth rider, one-fourth of the earth was affected.
 5. Here it is one-third of the earth.
 6. And by the time we get to the seven bowls, it will be the entire earth.
 7. This is a key literary feature in the book of Revelation.
 8. Though each cycle of visions ends with a picture of the final judgment, the emphasis on the severity of judgment increases from cycle to cycle.

- B. The judgments unleashed by the sounding of the first four trumpets are leveled at the environment in which the ungodly place their trust.
1. The first trumpet brings hail and fire that devastates land, trees, and grass, the sources of food for man and beast.
 2. The second trumpet afflicts the sea, the source of the trade that was so essential to the economy in the first century.
 3. We should note that the burning mountain that is cast into the sea is not literal but is a symbol of a great earthly kingdom meeting its end.
 4. The image is drawn from Jeremiah 51:25-26, where the Lord says this of Babylon: "Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the LORD, which destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain. No stone shall be taken from you for a corner and no stone for a foundation, but you shall be a perpetual waste, declares the LORD."
 5. In our text, the point of this image of the burning mountain thrown into the sea is that whenever a great world power falls, there are devastating economic consequences for many.
- C. The third trumpet afflicts the fresh water, causing it to become poisoned.
1. This is not to be taken in a strictly literal way, but as a symbol of a blow struck at the things that are the fountains of life in this world.
 2. As one commentator explains, "The rivers and fountains include all the living waters of the earth, on which depends its fertility and habitableness; and these must symbolize, of course, all the springs of earthly happiness, family influences, and public institutions, together with the social affections, the kindly impulses, the moral feelings and principles, and the mutual confidence, that refresh the heart, and give life to the energies of men, and success to their pursuits." [Ramsay, 372]

- D. Lastly, the fourth trumpet afflicts the sun, moon, and stars, the bearers of natural light in this world.
 - 1. The blotting out of one-third of their light is symbolic of the decreased influence of the light of truth and goodness in the world.
 - 2. As the light grows dim in a culture, error, immorality, and instability increase.
 - 3. We can see how this has happened in the nations and kingdoms that at one time benefitted greatly from the light of the Christian faith.
 - 4. Think of the Roman empire, the nations of Europe, and our own United States of America.

- E. The basic theme in the first four trumpet judgments is that of unraveling security.
 - 1. Throughout this present age, the Lord sends these judgments upon the earth to demonstrate the folly of putting your trust in the things of this world.
 - 2. Temporal judgments upon the environment, the economy, the things that make society pleasant, and the nations themselves are precursors of the day when this world will meet its end in the great conflagration.

III. The Fifth Trumpet (8:13-9:12)

- A. The next three trumpets are introduced by a threefold pronouncement of woe by an eagle flying high up in the sky.
 - 1. The Greek term for “eagle” can also mean “vulture.”
 - 2. This is worth pointing out because we tend to have positive associations with eagles.

3. For us, they are symbols of majesty.
 4. What we have to remember is that eagles are birds of prey.
 5. The point of this image is to emphasize the world's impending doom.
 6. Imagine yourself stranded in a hot desert, trying to find your way back to civilization, and when you look up overhead you see a vulture circling.
 7. That is not a good sign.
 8. In the same way, this eagle is a symbol of the fact that the last three trumpets will be much worse than the first four.
 9. Trumpets one through four depicted physical judgments, but trumpets five through seven will depict spiritual judgments.
- B. When the fifth trumpet is sounded, John sees a star fallen from heaven to earth.
1. He tells us that this star is given the key to open the bottomless pit and unleash terrors upon the unbelieving world.
 2. We gain insight into the meaning of this symbolism by looking at parallel texts in Revelation and in other passages of Scripture.
 3. The fallen star is clearly Satan, since he is described in a similar way in Revelation 12 and in Luke 10, where Jesus says, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18 ESV)
 4. The image of a bottomless pit is used in Revelation and other New Testament passages to refer to the realm where demonic forces are subjected to punishment as they await the final judgment. (see 11:7; 17:8; 20:1-3)
 5. The thick smoke that is belched out of this hellish pit is symbolic of the deception and moral degradation that the forces of darkness

bring upon the people of this world.

- C. It is important to note that Satan's ability to unleash demonic torment on the world is not absolute.
 - 1. The key to the pit is given to him by God.
 - 2. Moreover, this plague of locusts, which is symbolic of demonic influences in the world, can only harm unbelievers.
 - 3. Those who have the seal of God on their foreheads cannot be harmed by them.
 - 4. This reminds us of how God protected the Israelites from the plagues in Egypt.
 - 5. This tells us that this is not a picture of temptation, which is experienced by believers, but of souls being tormented.

- D. John says that this plague lasts for five months.
 - 1. As with the other numbers in Revelation, this is not to be taken literally but symbolically.
 - 2. Five months is the time period when a harvest is especially susceptible to locusts.
 - 3. Locust plagues were dreaded in the ancient world.
 - 4. When locusts came upon a region, they would strip everything bare.
 - 5. But literal locust plagues did not last for the entire harvest season.
 - 6. Once the locusts ate what was available, they would move on.
 - 7. This demonic locust plague is much more severe than that, lasting for the entire harvest period.

8. This is a picture of the spiritual torment that the forces of darkness are unleashing upon this world in this present age.
- E. We should also note the significance of verse 5, where John writes that the locusts “were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them.”
1. The reason why this is important is because some preterist interpreters, most notably David Chilton, say that this is referring to a report from the Jewish historian Josephus about the conflict between the Jews and the Romans in the years just before the destruction of the temple.
 2. Preterists say that verse 5 was fulfilled in the killing of about 3,600 Jews in AD 66 at the command of the Roman procurator.
 3. The problem with this is that verse 5 explicitly says that the people who were afflicted by these demonic locusts were not killed.
 4. This reminds us that the key to interpreting the symbols of Revelation is not to look at contemporary newspapers, which is what dispensationalists do, nor to look at first-century news reports like those of Josephus, which is what preterists do.
 5. Instead, we need to look at the Old Testament background of the symbols and consider how they inform our understanding of what is taking place throughout the entire course of history.
- F. The spiritual torment brought about by these forces is emphasized in a number of ways in John’s vision.
1. First, he says that though people will long to die, death will flee from them.
 2. This describes a people who have lost all sense of meaning.
 3. Life is misery to them.

4. This describes many people in the world today.
 5. Though we live in an astoundingly affluent culture, many people are in one way or another withdrawing from life in the real world.
 6. Many seek to escape from reality and responsibility by immersing themselves in the amusements and distractions that are so pervasive in our age.
 7. Many fall prey to opioids, alcohol abuse, or other drugs.
 8. And who knows how many souls are enslaved by the secret use of pornography.
- G. John's description of these demonic locusts underscores their power to afflict people.
1. They wear crowns, symbolizing victory and conquest.
 2. They have human faces, symbolizing their intelligence and cunning.
 3. They have hair like that of women, symbolizing their seductive influences.
 4. They have teeth like a lion, symbolizing their savagery.
 5. They have breastplates, symbolizing their invulnerability and man's inability to repel their assaults.
 6. The beating of their wings is deafening, symbolizing their overwhelming power.
 7. Their scorpion stings symbolize their ability to inflict great pain.
 8. And they are led into battle against our fallen race by a king whose name is Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek, names that mean "Destroyer."

9. These are the forces that are arrayed against the unbelieving world, the forces that are even now afflicting it.
10. Is it any wonder that the world is as spiritually dark as it is?

IV. The Sixth Trumpet (9:13-21)

- A. We turn now to a brief consideration of the sixth trumpet.
 1. John says that the sounding of this trumpet results in the release of the four angels who are bound at the Euphrates river.
 2. In John's day, the Euphrates marked the eastern border of the Roman empire.
 3. The Romans dreaded the prospect of an attack by the Parthians, who lived beyond the Euphrates.
 4. The basic idea being conveyed by this image is that demonic forces will incite nations to war against each other.
 5. This is a picture of the horrific devastations that are brought about through warfare during the time in between Christ's first and second coming.
- B. The sixth trumpet concludes with a summary of the response of those who survive the onslaughts that are brought about under the direction of the four demonic angels who are released to wreak havoc on the earth.
 1. In spite of the terrors that come upon the world, people persist in their unbelief and idolatry.
 2. Though God sends judgment after judgment, most people do not listen.
 3. Think of what happens when a great tragedy occurs, like the 9/11 attacks or the terrible tsunami in Indonesia.

4. Some people turn to God for a time.
5. But for many of them, it is short lived.
6. Others blame God for letting such evils take place in the world.
7. This is ironic, because the Scriptures tell us that these evils befall the world because of sin.
8. The fact that people persist in their rebellion against God shows us the terrible bondage of man's fallen condition.
9. Left to ourselves, there is absolutely nothing that will cause us to see our blindness, our folly, and our wickedness.
10. Even when horrors unfold before people's eyes, things that give them a preview of the horrors of hell, they will not repent.
11. Only the grace of God has the power to take our hearts of stone and make them alive.

V. Conclusion

- A. John's vision of the seven trumpets underlines the danger and folly of living for the world and putting your hope in it.
- B. As one writer puts it, "To live in the world, and for the world, to have your whole heart and your treasure in it, and your objects of pursuit, is to be living always exposed to woes that are irresistible and irreversible. 'Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.' It is only he 'who sows to the Spirit,' who, in the midst of abounding judgments and sweeping desolations, 'will from the Spirit reap eternal life.'" [Ramsay, 380]