

Warnings ignored

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapters 8 and 9 starting at chapter 8 verse 1. When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 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.

And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rose before God from the hand of the angel. 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. 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 green grass was burned up.

[1 : 24] 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.

A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. 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.

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. 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.

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 blast of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to burn.

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 : 52] 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.

Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 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.

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. And in those days people will seek death and will not find it.

They will long to die, but death will flee from them. 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, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's teeth.

[4 : 03] 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. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails.

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. The first woe has passed.

Behold, two woes are still to come. Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

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.

The number of mounted troops was twice 10,000 times 10,000. I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision, and those who rode them.

[5 : 18] 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.

By these three plagues, a third of mankind was killed by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 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.

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their theft.

Well, good morning. Very warm welcome once again. Let me add that to Jake's welcome. I'm Ben, as you said. I'm a member of the church family here at Grace Church and one of the wardens. It's lovely to have everybody together. We've had the passage read, a long one. Let's pray to God to help us understand it. And let me read a verse from 2 Timothy 3 and verse 16.

[6 : 42] All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

And so, Heavenly Father, we praise you that you haven't left us in the dark, that you do speak to us and that you've helped us and help us to see the world from your perspective. And we pray, Lord, in your grace, that you help us to do that today.

Amen. Well, in 2008, the Tokyo Power Company were warned that a 10 metre high tsunami could threaten its nuclear power plant.

They were warned to prepare. Between 1984 and 2011, over 6,000 significant earthquakes were experienced in the area. All clear warnings of the potential for a greater earthquake and tsunami to come.

Now, do we see the world as God sees it? That's the question we've been asking while reading Revelation over the last four or five weeks, hasn't it? Revelation was written in the first century by John, who received visions of reality from God's perspective.

[7 : 56] It was written to Christians, many of whom were oppressed and marginalised, encouraging them to persevere because, in the end, God wins. Today's passage is not to be taken literally, as many have tried to do in the past.

Locusts representing helicopters, the great star that we've just read about being Hitler. But rather, drawing on powerful imagery from the Old Testament, it shows God's perspective on the world.

And as we see the world as God sees it, I hope this morning that we wake up, that we return wholeheartedly to Jesus and that we'll be prepared for and expect suffering and persecution as a result.

Last week in chapter 7, we saw the reality that Christians are sealed for salvation. What wonderful news that was. And that answered the question from the week before, who of all can stand before a holy God?

We saw in chapter 6 that there is purpose to suffering today. In chapter 5, that there's a plan that that suffering won't continue. And right at the beginning of our series in Revelation, in chapter 4, we saw Jesus in authority, on the throne, in charge.

[9 : 11] And the message to the persecuted church has been this, God wins. And it is to this God that the prayers of the saints in verse 4 of today's passage rise.

How long they have prayed. They did so in chapter 6. How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth. And God from his throne responds to these prayers. Look down at verse 5. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire from the altar and threw it on the earth. And there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

God is angry at a world that has rejected him and a world that has persecuted his people. And he responds to the prayers of Christians and does so by, decisively, by sounding seven trumpets. Trumpets not playing notes of celebration, but notes of warning. Six trumpets today. A final trumpet that we'll see next week. They each herald a plague like the earthquakes in Japan and they act as a warning sign to a world that has rejected God and is persecuting his people.

[10:27] The imagery, as no doubt we've seen as we read it, is powerful and disturbing. But as we'll see, it describes a world that is familiar to us. And the question we'll ask towards the end of the passage is this.

Is the world listening? Has the world responded? So our first point today, and if you are, if you have got Vicky's sheets, the first, the points are printed out on the back of that sheet.

You might find it helpful to follow along. Our first point is God responds to the prayers of the persecuted church. The second, by providing warning signs of a greater judgment to come.

The first four trumpets, which come as a group, herald environmental disasters. I don't know if you spotted that. The first trumpet is blown and verse seven, the land is struck with hail and fire and a third of the vegetation is destroyed.

The second trumpet is blown, verse eight, this one resulting in the sea turning to blood with a third of the living creatures and a third of shipping destroyed. The third trumpet, verse 10, leads to a third of fresh water becoming bitter.

[11:34] people dying. The fourth trumpet, verse 12, affects the sun, the moon and the stars and leads to the blotting out of a third of the light. One bit at a time, the world's natural resources are ruined.

Now, people originally reading Revelation might think of the earthquake that destroyed Colossae in AD 60 or perhaps they'd think of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.

We might think of pollution. Earthquakes, drought, famine, deforestation, climate change, overfished seas, tsunamis. From the moment of the fall, humans have burned, polluted, poisoned and destroyed the world that God has commanded us to look after.

As one commentator said, we've written our judgments for ourselves and God has responded by meeting them out to us. creation itself is under judgment because of our rejection of God and the persecution of his people.

Now, this isn't primarily a call to look after the world, although clearly we should. The main point is that God, on his throne, in sovereign control of all that happens on earth, intends these environmental disasters to be warning signs to sinful humans of a much worse judgment to come.

[12:56] But notice that for now, only a third of the earth is affected. It's not complete loss. On the whole, the world can carry on. There's still chance to respond.

When we see natural disasters, forest fires, rising sea levels, global pandemics, these partial judgments are warnings.

They're trumpet sounds of a greater judgment to come. They're God's voice crying out, repent, turn back to me while there's still chance. The first four trumpets are sounding.

Is the world listening? Has the world responded? Now, if all this looks bad enough, there is something much worse ahead. Look down at verse 13. Then I looked and I heard an eagle crying out with a loud voice as it flew overhead.

Whoa, whoa, whoa to those who dwell on earth at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow. Of course, it's not the creation, but the creatures who have rebelled against God.

[14:01] And so with trumpet five and six, it is people who face judgment too. We've seen creation is cursed. Now we see rebels are cursed.

When the fifth angel blows his trumpet, a star which has fallen from heaven to earth in verse one to three of chapter nine is given the key to the shaft of the abyss. In Isaiah 14, 12, a star falls from heaven and it describes the king of Babylon, a representation of evil.

In Luke 10, Jesus says, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. So this fallen star is the prince of evil. It's Satan. He unlocks the shaft of the pit in verse two and what is released as you have seen is a swarm of terrifying demonic locusts and they're horrific.

Verse seven, like horses prepared for battle, their faces like human faces, hair like women's hair, teeth like lion's teeth with tails and stings like scorpions and they have over them a baden which is Hebrew, a polyun which is Greek, both words which mean the destroyer and what a suitable name.

As we saw, you may remember in Africa in May, locusts destroying everything in their path. But verse four, these locusts aren't here for the vegetation. They're here to make the lives of humans miserable.

[15 : 26] Remember that this passage is painting spiritual realities not physical ones. We're not expecting a great pit to open and hordes of creatures to appear. Part of God's present judgment is that he hands unbelievers, those wedded to life without God, over to the influence of spiritual forces and like the imagery used here, they are horrific.

fears, anxieties, despair, futility, slavery to hollow immorality, materialism, people held captive to false religion, life, miserable for millions and all signs of a society under God's judgment.

And the tragedy is that, as we see from Romans 1, by nature, we actually choose these things. Do you remember? For although they knew God, Romans 1 said, they didn't honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Notice, though, that for all the horror that follows, God is on his throne and it is he who gives Satan the key. Satan is given free reign, but at all times it is God who is in charge.

And notice verse 4, the limit to his curse, but only harm those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

[16 : 53] God's people, while not protected from every evil, are immune from the sting of these locusts. They're protected from Satan's direct assault and at the end of it all they're still able to praise him.

This isn't the case for the unbelieving world to them. Their suffering is aimless and pointless and endless. And yet, in God's merciful purposes, this suffering acts as one more warning.

The suffering of human beings in all its forms is a warning to end their rebellion against God and his throne and turn their hearts to him. Suffering is God's voice crying out, repent, turn back to me while there is still chance.

the fifth trumpet is sounding. Is the world listening? Has the world responded? Now there's a seventh and final trumpet to sound that we'll read about next week, which, when blown, will mean it is all too late.

the sixth trumpet in verse 13 today, therefore, acts as the last warning for people on earth. This trumpet is blown and the imagery becomes even darker as four fallen angels lead a terrifying demonic cavalry of 200 million mounted troops breathing fire and sulfur.

[18 : 15] And yet, like the locusts, they are still fully subject to God's control. Notice in verse 14 that it is God's voice from the altar that commands their release.

The main difference between these mounted horses and the locusts before them is that these don't just cause pain and suffering, they cause death, the death of a third of mankind, verse 18.

As we saw at the beginning, God, in responding to the prayers of believers, angry by the way humans have rejected him, angry at the suffering the world inflicts on his people, brings judgment. And in this case, it's death. But notice again that even at this moment there is still chance to respond to turn to him. We see the death of other people all around us.

Over 45,000 people in the UK have died as a result of COVID-19. Friends, neighbours, family, sadly dying as a result of disease, accident, murder, old age, and it brings sadness, regret, loss, heartbreak, loneliness, and we face our own death.

[19 : 33] We know that death will come at some point and when we face up to the fact if we're brave enough to do so, we might fear the apparent uncertainty, the leaving behind of loved ones, we might fear the process of death, death.

But yet, in God's merciful purposes from his throne, in charge of all that happens on earth, when these things happen, as we face the death of others, as we consider our own deaths, we're being given one more warning of the greater judgment to come.

Death is an appeal to the world to end their rebellion and to turn their hearts to him. A final warning while there is still chance to repent. Death is God crying out, repent, turn back to me while there is still chance.

The sixth trumpet is sounding. Is the world listening? Has the world responded? In 2008, the Tokyo Power Company had a chance to respond to the warning of the threat of tsunami.

They had a further chance to respond after numerous subsequent earthquakes. They even had the chance to respond to what became their last warning when on March the 9th, 2011, a 7.2 magnitude of earthquake was felt.

[20 : 48] But two days later, it was too late because on March the 11th, an earthquake triggered a 15 metre tsunami that hit the atomic complex at Fukushima, causing devastation.

If only the operators of the Fukushima power plant had listened to and responded to the warnings before it was too late, the trumpets have sounded, the world is damaged, humanity suffers, people die, clear warnings in this second point this morning of a greater judgment to come.

Is the world listening? Has the world responded? Well, in these final few verses of this morning's passage, we see an answer. And the third point is this, the world ignores them.

It's impossible to read Revelation 8 and 9 without being reminded of the plagues inflicted on Pharaoh while the Israelites were in slavery. You'll recognise perhaps the vegetation destroyed, water turning to blood, darkness coming over the land, the plague of locusts, and finally death. What were these plagues for? They were warnings to Pharaoh to turn, to let God's people go. A warning to obey God who sits on his throne in authority. Plague after plague was sent to Pharaoh, providing chance for him to repent and each time he failed to listen.

[22 : 12] Well, look at verse 20 to see how the world responds to God's warnings. The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons of idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood which cannot see or hear or walk.

Nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts. It's remarkable, isn't it? How could people with such clear warnings not respond with anything other than repentance?

In a world in which evil is so plainly unleashed, we'd expect all to wake up, to seek mercy, to repent. But amazingly, like Pharaoh, people don't repent.

People don't give up on their false religions, their useless idols, their sin, their murders, their immorality, their materialism. Even death being all around us doesn't need repentance.

Indeed, in chapter 9, verse 6, people would rather die than repent. And this shows the ingrained nature of our sin. It shows the extent of our stubborn hearts, the depth of our hostility to God.

[23 : 24] It's not that we can't repent, it's that we choose not to. And so while we might be appalled by the extreme nature of these verses in Revelation, we must recognise that this horrific imagery in these verses is in proportion to the seriousness of our position before God.

Natural disasters are appalling. The torment of human beings is appalling. Death is appalling. But worse even than that is mankind's unwillingness to bow the knee to King Jesus in repentance. Perhaps you're someone who knows that you've not turned to Jesus in repentance and not asked for forgiveness. It is a hard thing for us to do. Some of us would rather do anything than admit that we've rejected God and to repent.

But can you see the warnings around us? Don't say, one day I'll do something about it. Don't underestimate just how hard the human heart is. Next week we'll read about the seventh and last trumpet.

At which point it'll be too late to respond. But it hasn't blown yet. There is still chance to respond. Respond in repentance today before it's too late.

[24 : 41] Run to Jesus in whom, as we saw last week, there is safety and refuge. We've seen that Revelation was written to oppressed and marginalised Christians, encouraging them to persevere, reminding them that in the end God wins.

These churches were individually compromised, lukewarm, persecuted, and it is to Christians therefore that this passage is primarily applied.

So for the compromised, while verse 20 and 21 describe the lack of repentance from the rest of mankind, it is so tempting for Christians to cling to the old clothes of idolatry and immorality, we too, as we see the state of the world, do we hear the warning trumpets?

Do we recognise the great chasm between God's rule and our rebellion? We must continue to repent and to recognise once again that the holy God on his throne, let's turn back to Jesus day by day and stand in awe of him.

And of course we're reminded of what Jesus achieved on the cross. Remember the seal in verse 4? That seal that secures our forgiveness and is the only way that guarantees that we'll come through the other side to stand with him and the final trumpets sound, that wonderful seal.

[26 : 05] Well let's live wholeheartedly in thanksgiving for Jesus and what he achieved on the cross, our King, our Saviour, and for the lukewarm.

This is a passage that should really galvanise us into action. If we knew that a tsunami was on its way we'd make sure our house was in order, we'd wholeheartedly encourage others to do the same.

Christians encouraging Christians. When we watch the news and cry out there's something wrong with the world, it would be quite possible to despair, to give up.

But no, Christians should remind each other that these are trumpet sounds and they're from God who is in charge. Wake up, live wholeheartedly for him.

And if we knew a tsunami was on its way we'd surely also run around warning people who hadn't heard the warning sounds. And of course Christians must surely point out these warning trumpets to people around us.

[27 : 03] Let's proclaim the good news of salvation of Jesus to people we live with, who we work with, who we go to school with, and we must do so with all our energy while there is still chance.

And finally for the persecuted. Well firstly we mustn't be surprised when people around us don't repent and don't turn to Jesus. The human heart is so hard that many will never respond to these warnings and will correspondingly persecute God's people.

people. So let's not be surprised when this happens on our road or in our workplace or at our schools or within our own families. But let's also remember what an incredible encouragement it is that our prayers don't disappear into the ether.

Think back to the beginning of chapter 8 that they rise to the heavenly altar to God on his throne and that he listens and that he responds.

So when things are hard when there is persecution in whatever form it takes let's keep praying.

Let's keep crying out to God and take great comfort that God is on his throne in charge that he is listening that he responds to our prayers and that he is one.

[28 : 25] Let's pray. Heavenly Father thank you so much for this vision of John.

Thank you for helping us to see the world from your perspective as people around us we know fail to repent and bow the knee to you. Please help us to be prepared for rejection knowing at the same time that you listen to our prayer and that you respond.

Help us to heed the sounds of these warning trumpets to respond to world events in repentance ourselves and do so without despair knowing that you are on your throne and that you've won.

Amen. Amen.