

# Prayer, Plagues and Painful Perversity - Evening Service

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Good evening. If you haven't met me before, I'm Aaron. I look after the service. If you're visiting with us or new this evening, it's wonderful to have you here. Some Sundays, the passage we're preaching on works really well with the stuff happening in the community.

Like, for example, someone's going on a missions trip, and that night I'm preaching on being a witness for Christ, for example. And then there are other weeks like this, where three beautiful children are baptized, and I'm preaching on demonic locusts from hell, torturing people.

Well, all that to say, if you're visiting with us today, welcome. It's great to have you. This will be interesting for you. So I'll try and catch you up.

We are in a series in Revelation. And chapter 4, it's kind of like the closest thing we've had to what we're preaching on tonight. Chapter 6, sorry.

And we preached on that a couple of weeks ago, and that was about the judgment of God on earth. And the judgment looked like, one way you could say it is this. You could say the judgment looked like God letting people live with the consequences of their choices.

[ 1 : 15 ] And the symbol used in that chapter were seals on a scroll. So you remember, right at the start of Revelation, there's this scroll. You know, you roll up a scroll, and the scroll represented God's plan for the world.

And there were these, like, seven wax seals on it. This is all chapter 6. And every time a seal was cracked open, John had a vision. You remember one of the visions was these four horsemen of the apocalypse.

But in chapter 6, there were only six seals cracked open. Well, chapter 8 today, today's passage, the seventh seal is opened.

And what happens? We get another vision, this time of seven trumpets. Later on, the seventh trumpet is going to look like seven bowls. Okay, but we'll get there when we get there.

And when each trumpet in our chapter is blown, as you heard, John has another vision. And again, it's mostly about the judgments of God on the earth. And you might ask, how does this relate to chapter 6?

[ 2 : 16 ] Because we've had the horsemen and the other stuff. What's all this about? Is this a different time? Is this also what's going to happen? Is it different?

What's going on? Like, is this the same thing or a different thing? Well, it's not talking about the same time frame. It's not talking about a different time frame to last week or a couple of weeks ago, the four horsemen.

It's the same time frame. And it's the same subject. It's just talking about the history of the world from Christ's ascension and his return. And it's talking about judgment. It's just talking about all of those things from a different angle, from a different perspective using different symbols, because it's trying to communicate something quite different to us this evening.

So that's the context. Now, a very just quick overview of the chapter. I know some of you folks like that. Just a reminder of what we've heard read, because it was quite sort of engrossing there, wasn't it?

So the seventh seal is opened, and there's silence. There's awe. Then there's seven angels. They each get a trumpet. Six of the angels blow the trumpets. Bam, bam, bam, bam.

[ 3 : 23 ] The first four trumpet blows result in devastation on the earth. And then the fifth trumpet, we hear about this pit opening, and these demonic locust kind of creatures jump up, and they start torturing people.

Then the sixth trumpet, there's this huge army that you can't count, and they kill the third of the people on the earth. So that's the overview. Now, what do we make of all of this?

These are disturbing images, some of the most disturbing revelation, I think, especially the locust stuff. That's just awful. That's an awful, frightening picture. I think the passage is trying to communicate a number of things to us.

And one of the things it's trying to get across through symbols and through picture is this. It's about the devastating effects of sin and idolatry.

We know that because right at the end of the passage, it talks about people who did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshipping demons and idols of silver and bronze and gold and stone and wood.

[ 4 : 35 ] So the people of the world in this passage are being judged for sin and idolatry. And what does it look like? Well, we see one of the things it looks like is the first four trumpets.

It's the earth, the sea, the rivers, and the sky are all poisoned. In each of these visions, though, in each of the six visions we see tonight, they all operate on a number of different levels.

So I think on one level, there's an Old Testament reference, which we won't get to tonight. But if you want to look it up yourself, it's or think about it yourself, it's mostly to do with the plagues on Egypt back in the Old Testament.

So there's this Old Testament reference. There's also like a metaphorical, kind of just a spiritual reference or implication. And then there's this kind of very real practical sort of meaning to it as well.

And I'll give you some examples of that. So let's look at the very sort of practical truth betrayed perhaps just in these first four trumpets here. And I think one of the things it could be saying here is, I think it's very likely saying, is that humanity has not done a great job of looking after the earth that God has given us.

[ 5 : 44 ] I don't think many people would disagree with that. Decreased water supply, greenhouse gases, depletion of natural resources, pollution, all of that stuff. The earth is in sort of roughest shape. And the main thing driving that is human greed and idolatry.

It's because people love things and money more than they love God and desire to look after the good earth that he has given us. And God is letting us live with the consequences of treating his earth badly as a judgment.

But I said these things operate on lots of different levels. I think that's one level it's talking about. Another level, another on the ground implication, another more symbolic meaning or spiritual meaning, which I think is more important, is this.

I think this is a picture. If you read it over again, just the first four ones again, there's this sense of the earth just being swallowed up in spiritual darkness.

And what it is, is it's a picture of what it looks like spiritually for people who don't know Jesus. It's trying to give us a picture of what that looks like.

[ 6 : 50 ] We'll come back to that. Okay, so the first four trumpets. Let's look at the fifth now. This brings the judgment more directly on people. So we hear about these hellish, bizarre, locust creatures with different faces and tails and wings, and they're attacking people, and people are suffering so badly.

It says they just want to die. They just want to die. It's so bad. And I think this on a spiritual level, if we look at that interpretation of it, I think it's talking about a state of hopelessness that people can find themselves in spiritually when they don't know Jesus, when they don't have meaning or hope or purpose.

A state of hopelessness and despair, which is a reality for a lot of people. And we have the sixth trumpet, an army of hundreds of millions. A third of the world is called.

What's that? I think this is a picture of being, it's trying to convey the sense of being completely overrun, completely overwhelmed. Again, these are awful pictures and images, but ones that are here in the Bible to teach us something.

The first point, these dire pictures, what are they meant to do? They're meant to shock us. That's why they're so visceral. It's why they're so vivid. They're meant to shock us out of this overly optimistic or sentimental view of the world that we live in, so that we acknowledge the devastating and very real impact of human idolatry on the world.

[ 8 : 20 ] That impact is real physically in what is happening to the earth, and it is real spiritually. Humanity has a soul problem, and it comes out in despair and hopelessness.

To say that all very simplistically, it's a picture of life without God. And when we worship anything but God, when we have in the heart of our hearts the thing that's most important to us, if that's not God, things are going to go sideways.

And when you have billions of people and that's their situation, the whole earth goes sideways. And God is letting it happen. He's letting it happen as a judgment on us, on the world.

Now, the second thing I want to mention, and I won't be preaching for very long tonight. Did you notice the fractions? Isn't that interesting? Fractions. In chapter 6, you remember, it was like a quarter.

It was like a quarter of the world. A quarter, a quarter, a quarter. This time, a third. It's like the pressure's starting to build in Revelation. A third of the people will die or suffer.

[ 9 : 30 ] A third of the rivers are poisoned. What's that about? This is very important. It's trying to communicate that the judgment that is upon us is limited.

Because it's not the final judgment. Here's what it is. This is really key. It's a warning. So God's judgment is not like, that's it. I've had it with you people.

Everyone's going. It's all, I'm starting again. That's not what this is talking about. This is a warning. And one of the ways that we know it's a warning is that you notice the trumpets.

Of course you notice the trumpets. It's just so bizarre. Like of all the things, drums that seem a bit cooler to me, or I don't know, like why, or a spear, I don't know, or a magic mirror.

I don't know. Trumpets, right? Trumpets. Why trumpets? Well, in the Bible, trumpets are used for a number of things. Like we see them a little bit in sort of worshipy stuff when it talks about worshipy stuff. We see them a little bit mentioned in kind of celebration sort of stuff.

[ 10 : 33 ] But mostly, trumpets are used when it's talking about a warning. So all the bad stuff happening that's in this chapter, it's all symbolically an alarm.

It's an alarm. It's a warning to us. It's saying, something is wrong. Something's wrong, people. You need to do something different.

This is what life looks like on the earth for a lot of people. Despair and hopelessness and feeling completely overwhelmed and the earth is going sideways ecologically. There's something wrong, folks, and you need to sort it out.

God is speaking to us through all of this stuff. C.S. Lewis, you've probably heard this quote before. It's wonderful. He says this. He says, So these ecological problems, spiritual despair and darkness that people feel, it's a warning.

It's a warning. Something's wrong. Now, I know these ideas are difficult ones. This is not nice stuff to hear.

[ 11 : 51 ] Particularly the idea that we sort of unpacked a week ago or a couple of weeks ago when we talked about God being sovereign over all of this and seemingly initiating some, you know, this stuff.

I would warn against trying to trace God's hand through terrible events.

I think that's tricky business. And even trying to make sense of it, that's very difficult. Trying to wrap your head around all these horrible, that's tough stuff.

But either way, whether you can wrap your head around these ideas or not, whether you can make sense of it or not, the response God wants from people is always the same.

The response God wants from his warnings is the same. And that response is repentance. There's a great story in Luke 13. So some folks come to Jesus and they're looking for answers.

[ 12 : 55 ] And they heard that he's like an important guy, he's a rabbi, and he knows what he's talking about. So they talk to him about these people who were killed by Pilate and their, you know the story, the blood was mingled with, you know, it was idle stuff, it was terrible business.

And a tower fell on some other people, 18 people died, it said. And they're looking for answers. They're going, come on Jesus, you know, why did this happen? And they've been thinking it through and they go, were these people that died, were they terrible sinners?

Jesus is very forthright in his response to them. He doesn't say, oh, I hear you're confused, I hear you're sad.

No. He doesn't say that. It's very interesting. It's kind of a, it's kind of shocking how abrupt he is with them. Jesus says very directly, he says, he says, no, they weren't worse sinners than other people.

He says, but I tell you, unless you repent, you will otherwise perish. What's he saying? The response God wants from people, whether we can make sense of our pain or not, whether people can make sense of this stuff or not, is repentance.

[ 14 : 04 ] We need to ask God for forgiveness for our part in the world's pain. Now when I say repent, what am I actually talking about here? If you're here and you're not a Christian, you're kind of new to this stuff, what am I actually saying here when I say repent?

Well, repentance is not feeling bad. That's easy, right? You guys can pull that off pretty easy probably. Regret? Oh, I could nail that. Regret's easy. Repentance is much tougher.

The Greek word is metaneo. And it literally means like a change of direction turning 180 degrees. It's a change in our thoughts.

It's a change in our purposes. So it's not just, God forgive me because I want us to be cool. It's not just a religious right, like we did a bit of a religious right early on. That can be a helpful part of repentance.

But it's not just, it's not just that, like doing some stuff, say some things, kneel and stuff. It's all of life. It's God, forgive me, change me deep within me. All the stuff in my heart that dishonors you, replace it.

[ 15 : 13 ] Change my heart, change my dispositions, change my purposes so that my life is one that treasures God. Repentance is a whole of life thing. That's what repentance is.

And it is reflected in our liturgy because we don't just say, God forgive me so we're cool. We ask for forgiveness. We do do that. But we acknowledge that the big problem is our heart. We acknowledge that that needs to change and we acknowledge that God needs to restore us.

And so those are the things that we pray for. One of the problems with an unrepentant life if you don't feel like you need it perhaps is let me tell you what's going to happen to you.

It was an unrepentant life. Unrepentance steals your humanity from you. And here's what I mean by that. In verse 20, do you note this?

It's very interesting of chapter 9. It says, the idols we worship cannot see or hear or walk. Why that detail? Because it's reflecting another part of the Bible which says that we become like the things we worship.

[ 16 : 14 ] So if you live an unrepentant life and you stay worshipping the thing that isn't God, whatever it is, money, sex, power, whatever, you become less human is what it tells you.

Right, let me tie this all together. Revelation 8 and 9. Judgment. The judgment it is talking about, it's a warning, it is a trumpet call, but as you know, judgment is not God's favorite thing.

Isaiah 28 makes this very clear to us. Let me read verse 21 of that. The Lord will rise up. It's a passage all over. It's an oracle of judgment against Israel. God is very unhappy with Israel when he says this.

The Lord will rise up as he did. He will rise himself up as in the valley of Gibeon to do his work, his strange work. It's talking about judgment. His strange work to perform his task, his alien task.

That's how it describes God's judgment. So this is saying that the work of judgment is foreign to God's deepest desires. And I love that phrase, this alien task, right? God's proper work, what he does that best expresses his nature is to give grace, love, and to show mercy.

[ 17 : 32 ] So revelation is not just judgment's happening. It's happening. And that's all. It's not just saying that. No, it's a warning because he wants people to come to him.

He wants people to repent. He wants us to be in a relationship with him. That's a wonderful thing. Now how do people in Revelation 8 and 9 respond to this warning?

How do they do? They get all this warning. They get ecological disaster. They get despair. They get overwhelmed. It's this terrible, terrible business. How do they respond? Verse 20.

The rest of mankind who were not killed did not repent. What's this trying to say as I finish? So we have these people experiencing the pain of the world living in spiritual blindness and it's not enough to bring them to God.

It's not enough to lead them into the life that God wants for them. something else is needed, isn't it?

[ 18 : 41 ] And we'll find out what that is next week in verses, chapters 10 and 11. And what we're going to see is this, that God goes further than just judgment.

What he does is he gives an idol-worshipping world, he gives them the church. He gives the world the church. and not an in-club. He gives the world a witnessing church whose job it is to show the love of Christ to the rest of the world.

That's what chapters 10 and 11 is about. And so we'll hear about that next week. Amen. Amen.