

Prayer, Plagues and Painful Perversity - Morning Service

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[0 : 00] Well now if you would turn to Revelation 8 and 9, page 1032, 103 in the Bible, that'd be great. I have a photograph that a surgeon gave me in the summertime of two pins, it's an x-ray photograph, two pins going across my hand and it looks great.

The pins are about this long and I look like a sort of a Wolverine cousin and I can see the pins but I don't have a clue what the bones are or what bones broken.

I have a great problem reading x-rays, they're a bit confusing to me and sometimes when we come to passages of the Bible they're very clear and accessible, in fact I'd say the majority are but sometimes they're not immediately clear.

And what makes today's reading especially unfamiliar is that we are looking at a spiritual x-ray of history. The seven trumpets tell the story of history again, not so much from the external political events but they go deep inside into the spiritual realities of history, particularly into the experience of those who don't have the seal of God on their heads and it explains something of their torment.

And if you've been a Christian for a while it's very helpful because it's easy to drift and to lose clarity and to fall back into a sort of an envy of those around you who don't have any commitment to Christ, who are pursuing the West Coast dream.

[1 : 44] Their lives just look so interesting and easy, don't they? The trumpets show that that's a lie, that to live without Christ is a kind of spiritual torment.

And the passage is here in the Bible to trade our envy for compassion and love. So I'm going to ask three questions. What does it say?

What does it mean? And how does that affect us? Is that all right? What does it say? What does it mean? How does it affect us? What does it say? Well, we just fly over it very quickly.

Chapter 8 and 9 give us six devastating trumpet blasts. It begins up in heaven, the first few verses. And then from verse 7 we have the first four trumpets. And the first trumpet is environmental devastation, verse 7.

Hail and fire mixed with blood fall on the earth and a third of the earth is burned up with the trees and grass. The second trumpet, verse 8, devastates a third of the marine life and shipping.

[2 : 46] Something like a great big mountain falls into the ocean, turning it to blood. The third trumpet devastates the fresh water supply for a third of the earth. And then the fourth trumpet, verse 12, brings darkness and gloom, cutting out a third of the sun and the moon and the stars.

Chapter 9, it gets worse. At the sound of the fifth trumpet, a star falls to earth and is given the key to the bottomless pit.

And when he unlocks it, out comes this belching smoke and a plague of terrifying locusts. It's shaped like horses, armed like scorpions with crowns like kings and faces like men and hair like women and lion's teeth, armour plated with wings to fly, moving with a deafening noise.

But they're told you can't attack nature and you cannot touch Christians. And they torment those who don't belong to the Lamb for five months so much that they would rather die than live.

And the sixth trumpet, in the last part of chapter 9, releases a very similar plague. And this time, it kills a third of mankind.

[3 : 59] That's what the passage says. Should we close in prayer? What does it mean? Well, you know probably that this section of Revelation, our passage today, has suffered greatly at the hands of those with good intentions who want to make the Bible relevant to today.

The most famous is an American evangelist by the name of Hal Lindsay, who in 1969 published a book called The Late Great Planet Earth. It was a massive success.

And it's an over-literalistic interpretation of Revelation trying to equate each of the details in Revelation with things that were in the news during his day.

So the locusts were, or everyone together, helicopters. That's right. Gunship helicopters. And Lindsay used Revelation as a sort of an elaborate puzzle to calculate exactly when Jesus would come back during his lifetime.

I believe he's still alive, right? Now, this approach to Revelation is very popular today. You'll find it almost everywhere. That what John saw in these visions were modern military machines.

[5 : 13] So in 1973, the British produced a tank called the Scorpion Tank. So everyone got very excited about this. This is the end of the world, you see.

It's a kind of a magical view of reality where we try and blame Satan for anything and everything that goes wrong with the world. So every time a comet comes close to planet Earth, people go to the verse on mountains falling into the sea and say, Jesus is about to come.

I've even read this week that some people are claiming that Chernobyl in Ukrainian is the word for wormwood. I don't think so.

And currently, the small weaponized drones are meant to be the literal fulfillment of these locusts. And the women's hair are the aerials that pick up electricity.

Now, I want to say this kind of reading of Revelation is well motivated, but it's a completely false trail.

[6 : 14] For starters, we don't make the Bible relevant. It is relevant. And many of us in the church are in small groups where we're looking through the book of Revelation.

So I want to just say three things that might help us as we move through this book. Three things begin with this. The first is that Revelation is a symbolic book, not a Sudoku.

This has been clear to us from the very first verse. If you keep your hand in 8 and 9 and go back to the first verse in Revelation, it's made very clear to us that the way God reveals these visions to John is through symbols.

Let me read the verse. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He, then there's one Greek word for the next three words, made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

The word made it known is the Greek word symbolized. John tells us that this is going to come to us. These visions are not going to come to us with literalistic detail, but symbolic.

[7 : 27] And all the symbols we've seen so far have been from the Old Testament. The vision of Jesus in chapter 1. All Old Testament features. We're even told what some of the symbols mean.

So the seven lampstands are the seven churches. But the further we go in Revelation, the more complex the symbols become. Now, we do this all the time. We use symbols, you know, light and dark and up and down.

We even use colors for our moods. And I was preparing on Thursday, and I picked up the Vancouver Sun, which happened to be lying close to hand. And this was on its front cover.

There were three sentences. Let me read them to you. Pirate Joe is in a battle with a U.S. giant. Is it a literal giant? No, it's a big store called Trader Joe's, right?

There's no literal pirate. Right? We read that metaphorically, symbolically. Here's another sentence.

[8 : 26] Purifoy puts fear in lion's opponents. It's about football, isn't it? Isn't it? Thank you. I read another sentence.

This is a guy reporting his experience. He said, I found a UFO. Anyone read that? Well, he's a diver, and he was diving off the north coast, and he found the remnants of an old bomb.

We use this kind of thing all the time. So when we come into Revelation, it's not so strange to think this way. And the reason I'm telling you this is because Sudoku is not a...

Sorry. Revelation is not a Sudoku. We'll go back and edit that. What I mean is, it's not some mathematical code which you get a deciphering book and just work it out one-to-one.

That's not the way symbols work. Symbols, and God uses symbols in these visions because they bring with them a whole world of meaning. Symbols reveal realities that are beyond our experience.

[9 : 29] They stir our hearts. And two weeks ago, we looked at when John describes Jesus as the lion and the lamb. Those two words bring a whole world of meaning, the two-sidedness of Jesus.

So I just want to say, we read it symbolically. There are no literal numbers in Revelation. They're all symbols. God doesn't have seven spirits. Babylon and beasts and lambs, these are all Old Testament symbols.

That's the first way to read it. The second is, it's a spiral. It's not a sequence. It's not a consecutive linear history of what's going to happen.

Revelation, we circle over the history of the world and over the same time period, going higher and higher each time. This is very important. See, chapters 8 and 9 are the third retelling of history from the time of the resurrection of Jesus until he comes again.

And the order of Revelation, not the historic order, it's the order in which John sees the visions. You with me?

[10 : 36] So look at chapter 8, verse 1. When the lamb opened the seventh seal, verse 2. Then I saw, verse 13. Then I looked, chapter 10, verse 1.

Then I saw. We're not meant to make a predictive chart out of this. What we're meant to do is we're meant to be caught up with John into these visions and to be led into worship. So firstly, it's symbolic.

Secondly, it's a spiral. And thirdly, we need to start with what's simple. One of the great principles of reading the Bible is that we read what is unclear through what is clear.

How many times have I heard people doing the opposite? This is a doctrine. It's called the clarity of scripture. God has revealed his word to us in such a way as that it can be understood by the ordinary person, which doesn't mean that every passage is easy.

And when we come to something that's not immediately clear, what we do is we look for what is clear. And you know, the great thing about the six trumpets is they come to us with an introduction and a conclusion that are wonderfully clear.

[11 : 49] In fact, the introduction and the conclusion serve like a kind of like two tracks along which to read the six trumpets so we can understand what it means, because that's what we're trying to do in this point.

We're trying to understand what it means. So let's look at these two clear things. Actually, let me just tell you that when I first preached on this 25 years ago, I thought I'd be very clever and I had a trumpet player in the congregation.

And I put him inside the pulpit. It wasn't at St. John's. It was another church. And every time I mentioned a trumpet, he blew a trumpet blast. Well, it had a reverse effect.

The whole first three rows nearly died when he first woke them up very quickly. But by the end, it was very passé. So let's have a look.

How does the introduction help us? Let's look at the first five verses. The introduction tells us and shows us the priority and power of prayer in heaven.

[12 : 53] So we have a silence in verse one, which means God is leaning forward about to listen. Then verse two, the seven angels are given seven trumpets. But before they make a sound, before anything is blown, we read this verse three.

Another angel came and stood at the altar. We've met the altar before 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 prayer of the saints rose before God from the hand of the angel. Now, just think about this. The first recipients of this letter were under great pressure.

Some of them were being persecuted. Some of them were in churches where there was false teaching. But God says to them, the great power behind history, what's causing things to happen, is your prayers.

I'm listening to your prayers. And verse five shows that the seven trumpets are then blown in answer to their prayers.

[14 : 00] The awesome power of chapters eight and nine is set in motion by God through the ordinary prayers of God's ordinary people. And in the seven seals, you remember in the last picture, it was Christ himself who was the great agent of God in history.

So now we learn it is also the prayers of his people that God uses as his agent in history. And I find that hard to take in. And the angel comes and he mixes the prayers of all the saints with this special incense that comes from the altar.

And it rises as a sweet sacrifice to God. And I think that's a wonderful thing to say because, you know, our prayers by themselves have no effect. Because none of our prayers are perfect on their own.

But when they are combined with the incense from the altar of Christ, they please God. None of us, none of our prayers are pure enough or faithful enough to do anything really.

But since Christ has died, all our prayers made sincerely to God are acceptable to him. So it's an astonishing introduction to these six trumpets.

[15 : 20] That God acts in our world in response to our prayers. That in heaven, our prayers have priority and backing. They rise from our lips. They go through the altar.

They are received by God. And then God, verse 5, throws them back into history with great power and effectiveness. Let me quote you from a commentator. What are the real master powers behind the world?

What are the deepest secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer. The prayers of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast on the earth.

So the obvious question is, what are you praying for? What do you pray for? What do you pray for?

Next, we know that the trumpets are moved forward on this first track of the prayers of God's people. So when we pray today, our Father in heaven, trumpets will blow.

[16 : 59] And when we pray, forgive us our sins, the trumpet will blow. And our prayers are not just said in a corner. They are heard by God, welcomed by God, and returned to earth in fire.

That's the point of the introduction. Well, let's go to the conclusion, the last two verses of chapter 9. And they tell us about the difference between true and false worship.

So chapter 9, verses 20 and 21. 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 thefts. In other words, here we are at the end of the six trumpets.

This is very clear. The purpose of the six trumpets is to bring people to the worship of the true God. If you don't worship the true God, you will worship something else. That's the way we are made.

[18 : 07] Whatever it is we give our lives to, if it's not the true and living God, if it's not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, it's false and it will consume you like a locust.

Through the great turmoil of the six trumpets and the devastation, what's God doing? He's working through the prayers of his people to bring people to repentance. They're not just random judgments.

They're not just, you know, random difficulties. They're sent by God for a spiritual purpose. And John calls them plagues, which of course is a reference back to the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, where God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.

You remember that the love of God and the power of God and the grace of God always meets resistance in us. And Pharaoh and his advisors resisted God's grace because they had other gods going.

And you can't just add the Lord into your heart and say, I'm going to give him a seat at the table with the other gods. He's either Lord or he's not. And when the Lord spoke to Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to acknowledge that the Lord alone was God.

[19 : 20] And yet God sent ten plagues, one after the other, each with increasing seriousness, not just to show his power, but to reveal that he alone was Lord so that all would come, all would come to worship him, not just Israel, but Egypt as well.

So the six trumpets, you see, are a kind of a spiritual x-ray of how idols and demons devour the life of those who do not worship God.

And you may find that very difficult to square with your happy, unbelieving friends who don't trust Christ.

This whole idea of worshipping demons and idols. But this is the x-ray of God's word. There is more to life than what we see. There's more to life than material things.

There's more to evil than psychology, bad psychology or bad sociology. We know this, don't we? Through the book of Revelation, that what lies behind cruelty and war and environmental collapse and racism is much more than bad parenting and lack of education.

[20 : 30] That there's a profoundly spiritual component. I've only ever met two people in my life who consciously worshipped demons before they became Christians.

And I think for the average modern person in Vancouver, this is just make-believe. This is the stuff of movies. But I remind you of what C.S. Lewis, the great C.S. Lewis said about this. Let me read you his sentence.

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

They themselves, that is, the devils, are equally pleased by both errors. and they hail the materialist or the magician with the same delight.

I think that's very clever. The devil is delighted with the materialist or the magician since both, you see, our ways of deluding ourselves about spiritual reality.

[21 : 33] Because what Satan loves to do is he loves to blind the mind of unbelievers from seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And even in us, every thought and act of selfishness brings us either deeper into darkness until we blindly worship something other than God.

That's the point of the list of sins at the end of verse 21. He mentions murder and sorcery and sexual immorality and stealing. These are strategies of the devil to turn us away from the true worship of the true God.

They're like bait. You know, like a plump and juicy morsel. But inside, there is a vicious hook, a spiritual hook, false love and false worship.

That's why the first four trumpets run the way that they do. They move from external realities, you know, the environment, into the inward spiritual realities. You have environment, environment, and environment for the first three.

And then number four is about, it's about darkness and the removal of light. And then you come to the fifth trumpet, it opens, and we find the same darkness, a smoky, sulfuric darkness.

[22 : 48] It's a picture of spiritual blindness and insensitivity. And at the start of the fifth trumpet, a star falls from heaven and is given a key to the bottomless pit. This is a phrase that's used two other times, maybe three, in the New Testament.

It describes the place where God holds down the hostile, demonic forces of the world. You remember when Jesus cast the legion of demons out of the man in Gennesaret and they say, don't throw us into the bottomless pit, throw us into the pigs, and he does.

In Romans 10, the word is used of the place Jesus went when he died. It's the place where God keeps the forces that are hostile to him until the judgment day.

And when the shaft is open here, symbolically, the darkness of delusion spreads. You see in chapter 9, verse 2, thick smoke darkens the air and the sun.

And out of the smoke come these locusts, which are perfect pictures really of demonic forces, strange and horrifying. They eat away everything that's essential. They eat away your very life.

[23 : 57] And in verse 4, they only attack those who do not have the seal of the living God. All those who have the seal of the living God live through this evil under protection.

These locusts direct their dark work toward the unsealed. So that whenever you hear the truth of God's word, you're not a neutral observer. You're either choosing light or dark.

But even their terrible work is limited by God for a set period of time and they're not to kill. And the terrible picture in verse 6 of spiritual torment goes under their leader in verse 11 who's called destruction.

Destruction. It's a word for being lost and then destroyed. It's the word for the rich fool who lived for money and then put everything in a barn. And that day God required his life.

And the sixth trumpet is deadlier still. It's an army very like the army of locusts but they're allowed to kill a third of human life. But look at it again. They're surrounded by smoke and sulfur and fire.

[25 : 09] The power to harm is in their mouths because they tell spiritual lies. And it's their lies that torment and finally kill because every spiritual lie contains a poison which unless it's dealt with in the light of God's truth will finally kill.

And if that's what the passage means then I want to ask thirdly and quickly how does it affect us today? I mean why do we have this in the Bible? Why is it here?

Why does God reveal this to us? Surely to goodness we ought to be looking at something more positive and uplifting. well I think it's here mainly to give us compassion for those who do not have the seal of the living God.

It's a spiritual x-ray of what it's like to wander through life blind to the glory of Christ and the true worship of the true God. And it's sandwiched between prayer and repentance because it's not there to make you feel better about yourself if you're a Christian but to help you enter into the pain of those around you who are not.

And those who first read this letter were under tremendous pressure to back off from worshipping the true God and just compromise a bit and to go back you know go with the flow.

[26 : 31] And it's interesting isn't it in this letter God's not content to call his people just to come back to the true worship of him full stop. He desires not just that we come to the true worship of him but that we also enter into the spiritual pain of those around us.

Specifically he desires that we pray for others for the precious gift of repentance for those we know and love who do not yet worship God. That's why the passage begins with prayer and ends in repentance because the will of God and the purpose of God in this world in our time in Vancouver are carried forward by prayer and they're carried forward by repentance and you won't see it on the front page of the newspaper but what matters in heaven are our prayers and every time someone comes to repentance there is a shout for joy.

and before the seven trumpet blows the seventh at the end of chapter 11 we have another interlude of two chapters because God has one more thing to give to those who are suffering at the hand of the locusts.

He gives to his world his church who will witness to his truth and that's what we'll look at next week. So let's kneel and pray together.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.