

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2012

The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John

VIII. Revelation 8 – “The Seventh Seal”

I. The Power of Prayer – Revelation 8:1-5

The eighth chapter begins with what sounds like an odd statement, that “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Revelation 8:1). Actually this opening section probably refers to the daily offerings in the temple in Jerusalem. Before the incense could be offered on the altar the priest had to light the fire to burn it. This whole process could take about a half hour during which time the priests prepared themselves to make the sacrifice by praying in silence.

The theme of silence before God recurs throughout the Scriptures (Habakkuk 2:20; Zechariah 2:13). The Lord says, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalms 46:10). We are certainly called to make a “joyful noise” (Psalms 100:1) but there are also those times when we need to be silent before the Lord, to meditate on who he is and on what he has called us to be.

The silence in heaven with the great multitude that has been described around the throne (Revelation 7:9-12) is related to the theme of prayer. Just as the priests in Jerusalem offer their incense before the altar in the temple so the angel with the golden censor offers the “prayers of all the saints” before the throne of God. This text demonstrates the tremendous power of prayer. The whole assembly in heaven stops to hear the prayers. The prayers then lead to fire on the earth. Their effect is described symbolically as causing “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (Revelation 8:5). Needless to say, we often underestimate the power of prayer. Yet we can see that power if we look for it. Even in our own time, examples from the coming down of the Berlin wall to the spiritual revival in Cuba, are signs of the tremendous impact of prayer.

II. The Trumpets sound – Revelation 8:6-12

We heard almost in passing at the beginning of the chapter of the seven angels who were given trumpets. Now the angels are ready to blow their trumpets. Trumpets recur throughout the Bible often sounding the theme of warning or judgment (I Corinthians 15:52). The second coming of Christ will be preceded by the sound of trumpets (I Thessalonians 4:16). The clearest antecedent to this passage would seem to be the account of Joshua’s conquest of Jericho (Joshua 6). The sound of the trumpets on the seventh day of circling the city leads to the collapse of the wall surrounding the city and the subsequent destruction of all its inhabitants (Joshua 6:21).

The key issue for most people dealing with the Joshua story and the account here in Revelation is the severity of the judgments. How could a loving God order the deaths of everyone, men, women and young and old? Following the first trumpet a third of the earth is burned up (Revelation 8:7). The second trumpet leads to a third of the sea becoming blood and a third of the living creatures in the sea killed, a third of the ships destroyed. The third trumpet results in the pollution of a third of the water in the world leading to many deaths (Revelation 8:11). Following the fourth trumpet a third of the world is darkened (Revelation 8:12). How are we to make sense of all of this?

The first thing we must keep in mind in interpreting passages like this in Revelation is that these are drawing heavily on other passages of Scripture. For example, hail and fire could hardly co-exist together under natural conditions. Yet they do so in the seventh plague on Egypt (Exodus 9:22-23). There are other references to the plagues. The sea turning to blood recalls the Nile being turned to blood and the darkness is also a plague. The context of the Exodus helps us understand these troubling passages both in Joshua and Revelation (according to the Westminster Confession scripture is its own best interpreter).

What was the context of Egypt in the time of the plagues? First, it was a land of injustice. The Hebrews were held as slaves. The male children had been brutally murdered to keep their numbers low. Second, it was a center for the worship of false gods, gods who themselves were often unjust. Finally, Pharaoh had defied the clear command of the word of God to let the Hebrews go. Apparently the rest of the nation of Egypt sided with him. God's plagues on the land were a call to repentance. Pharaoh himself understood this (Exodus 9:27-28). He repeatedly asks Moses to pray for him (Exodus 8:8, 28). Yet he invariably hardens his heart and defies the word of God (Exodus 9:34-35). Rejecting the opportunity to repent truly, Pharaoh leads Egypt on a downward path finally to the death of the first born (the fate that Egypt had decreed for the children of Israel) and the destruction of his army in the Red Sea, "not one of them remained" (Exodus 14:26-29). For John, Egypt is a symbol of the world in rebellion against God (Revelation 11:8).

God is a God of love (I John 4:8) but God is not indulgent or indifferent to injustice. In the case of Jericho which admittedly seems very brutal to us, the Canaanites had been guilty of abominable practices which included sexual perversion, human sacrifice and child sacrifice as well (Leviticus 18:1-28; I Kings 16:2-3). The world of the Roman Empire had its share of injustice and immorality also. God's judgment ultimately is a means to his calling nations and individuals to repentance. As devastating as the judgments of the first four trumpets are, it should be noted, that the destruction is not total. It is always a third that is affected, a third of the earth, sea or the sun. God's judgment is invariably a call to repentance (we will see this explicitly later in Revelation 14:6-7).

It is also important to remember that from the Biblical perspective the world has a moral and spiritual order which is even more important than the physical order. The spiritual breakdown leads then to the imagery of stars falling and darkness descending. All this suggests a return to the original chaos prior to creation (Genesis 1:2). The light that shines in the darkness is the spiritual light of Christ (John 1:5). The entire universe is dependent upon Christ (Colossians 1:15-17). Rebellion against God is finally rebellion against him.

The final question that emerges about the trumpets is whether this is a picture of the end of history. The second coming of Christ, as noted above, is announced with the blowing of a

trumpet. What is striking about this passage however is the fact that the actions are all described in the past tense. Rather than being a picture of the future this more likely is a description of God's continued judgments, in symbolic form, throughout history beginning with the exodus. One has to only think of the darkness that descends in the midst of battles and bloodshed to appreciate the imagery of stars falling and darkness descending. Karl Barth has also related such imagery to Christ's death on the cross in which darkness descends and even the graves are opened (Matthew 27:45-54).

III. The Warning of the Eagle – Revelation 8:13

The Bible is apparently the only ancient text where animals are reported as speaking, beginning with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The eagle is a symbol of judgment, swooping down on its prey (Deuteronomy 28:49; Job 9:26; Jeremiah 48:40). The cry of the eagle then prepares the inhabitants of the earth for the next trumpet blasts. If there is no repentance the judgments continue. There may also be an ironic note here since the eagle was often pictured as a symbol of Rome (for that matter it's also the symbol of the USA!). God will set the limits on earthly power. We can never ignore the reality of God's judgment (Galatians 6:7).

Questions for Discussion –

1. What does this passage teach us about the power of prayer? Given what prayer can accomplish, what can we do to make prayer more of a priority in our lives?
2. What can we say to those who argue that God's judgments are too severe and incompatible with his love and mercy?
3. Do you find anything hopeful in the blowing of the first four trumpets?

Next Study – Revelation 9 - "The Trumpets Continue"