



The Last Word

A Bible Study on Revelation by Stan Key

HOLY SMOKE REVELATION 8–9

I. The 7th seal makes it possible for the 7 trumpets to sound (8:1–5).

A. The 7 Seals (chapters 6–7).

We have seen that as the Lamb opened the six seals (6:1–17), the destiny of the world unfolded, one horrific revelation at a time: war, famine, disease, death, persecution, etc. We saw that these events may represent human history **in general** or they may hint at things to come (cosmic calamities in the 6th seal, for example). But once the 7th seal is opened (8:1), we are clearly dealing with realities still in the **future**, both for John 2,000 years ago and for us today. You may think life on planet earth has been difficult under the reality portrayed by the 7 seals but wait till you see what happens when the 7 trumpets start blow!

B. Read 8:1–5. At least three elements of this passage deserve comment:

1. “About half an hour” of **silence** (8:1).

Revelation is a **noisy** book (loud voices, huge choirs, thunder, earthquakes, horses in full gallop, etc.). But for 30 dramatic minutes there was silence! You may say, “That’s not very long.” But when you are dealing with a great congregation of people, even two or three minutes of silence can feel like an eternity! George Frederick Handel understood the dramatic power of silence in music and used it very effectively in the *Hallelujah Chorus*. During the half hour of silence two things were happening (see #2 and #3).

2. Seven angels¹ are given **seven trumpets** (8:2).

At first a curved ram’s horn (*shophar*) and then long, straight metal “trumpets”, these instruments were not yet developed to the point of making “music” as we think of trumpets today. Rather they were used primarily to get people’s attention:

- To **assemble** the people (break camp, an announcement, etc.) (Numbers 10:1–10).
- To warn of **danger** (invasion, enemy attack, etc.) (Amos 3:6).
- To prepare for **battle**. To arms! (Joshua 6:4–21; Judges 7:16–20; Job 39:24–25).
- To announce the **arrival** of some great person; the king, perhaps (Matt. 24:31; I Cor. 15:52; I Thess. 4:15–16).
- To **celebrate** in worship, feasting, offerings, coronations, dedications, etc. (Lev. 25:9; Num. 10:10; II Kings 9:13; II Chron. 5:12; 29:27–28; Ezra 3:10).

The seven trumpets of Revelation seem to signal all of the above!

3. Another angel with a **censer** (8:3–5).

¹ When you think of “angels” don’t think of cute, cuddly, chubby cherubs with stubby wings that are often portrayed in pop culture. No! Think mighty warriors, armed and dangerous.

The angel took incense and mixed it with “the prayers of all the saints.” First, he allowed the smoke to rise to the throne, then he took the coals from the censer and cast the fire down on the earth. The silence was suddenly broken by “peals of thunder, rumblings (literally, voices), flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” (8:5). During the silence, God was listening to the prayers of his people on earth, suffering as the first six seals were opened. The smoke of prayer **goes up** and the fire of judgment **comes down!**

C. The 7th trumpet (11:15–19).

Six trumpets are blown in rapid succession in chapters 8 and 9. Then there is an interlude, another pregnant pause (10:1–11:14). When the 7th trumpet is blown all **heaven** breaks loose! The culmination of human history is gloriously proclaimed.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (11:15).²

When we pray the words Jesus taught us (...*thy kingdom come*...), we are pleading with God to let the 7th angel blow his trumpet. But remember: before the 7th trumpet can sound, the first six must be played.

II. Six Trumpets (8:6–9:21).

- A. The 1st trumpet (8:7). These judgments fall on the **earth**. Hail and fire mixed with blood. A third of the earth is burned up.
- B. The 2nd trumpet (8:8–9). These judgments fall on the **salt waters**. Something like a mountain of fire is thrown into the ocean. A third of the sea becomes blood, a third of the sea creatures die, and a third of the ships are destroyed.
- C. The 3rd trumpet (8:10–11). These judgments fall on the **fresh waters**. A blazing star named Wormwood falls to earth. A third of the waters become bitter (toxic) and many people die.
- D. The 4th trumpet (8:12). These judgments fall on the **heavens**. A third of the sun, moon and stars are struck and a third of all light is lost.

A brief interlude occurs when an eagle flies through the heavens screeching “Woe, woe, woe!”. The next three trumpets will bring three horrible woes.

E. The 5th trumpet/the first woe (9:1–12).

John saw a “star fallen from heaven to earth.” This was probably a vision of Satan (Lucifer) and his expulsion from heaven (Isaiah 14:12; Luke 10:18). Having the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit, he releases swarms of **locusts**. These creatures will torment everyone who does not have God’s seal on their forehead. In the Bible, locusts are often used for divine judgment (Exodus 10:1–20; Joel 1:4; 2:5) but this locust invasion is undoubtedly the worst!

What these locusts look like (vv. 7–11):

- Like horses prepared for battle.
- Crowns of gold on their **human-like** heads.
- Hair like a woman’s, **teeth** like a lion, breastplates of iron.
- When they fly it sounds like a **stampede** of horses and chariots.

² Handle knew his Bible well and included this verse in the climactic portion of the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

- **Tails** that sting.

What these locusts do (vv 4–6, 10):

- **Spare** those who are marked with God’s seal and spare the grass and trees (but grass and trees are precisely what locusts normally eat).
- Inflict **pain** on people (but don’t kill them) with the sting in their tails... like a scorpion.
- This will last 5 months (about the life-span of a locust).
- People prefer death to the pain and torment of the sting.

But the real explanation for the diabolical terror caused by these locusts is that their king is the angel of the bottomless pit: **Apollyon** (Greek) or Abaddon (Hebrew)... the Destroyer.

F. The 6th trumpet / the second woe (9:13–21).

A demonic army is released from the east numbering **200 million** mounted troops!³ The riders wore breastplates “the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur” (v. 17). But the most terrifying aspect of this army was the **horses**:

- Heads like a lions’ heads
- Out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. This created three plagues that killed **a third** of the earth’s population.
- Their tails were like **serpents**... they bite!

And yet the survivors still refused to **repent** of their evil deeds (murders, sorceries⁴, sexual immorality) and they continued “worshiping demons and idols” (vv. 20–21). Thus we see that God’s purpose in sending the 6 judgments on the earth was not punitive but **redemptive**.

*⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but **everyone** to come to repentance. (II Peter 3:9 NIV). (see Ezekiel 18:23).*

God will do whatever it takes to bring us to repentance. If he can’t succeed in this endeavor by **preaching** (Acts 2:38) or by showing us **goodness** (Romans 2:4), then sometimes the only method left is to allow suffering and pain to come in like a flood.

*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His **megaphone** to rouse a deaf world.... No doubt pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul. (C. S. Lewis. The Problem of Pain. pp. 74, 76).*

III. Holy Smoke.

The 7 trumpets are blown because the people of God pray. It is only as the prayers of God’s people go up that the fire of God’s judgment comes down (8:1–5). Chapters 8–9 are not really about the end of the world but rather about the **power of prayer!** Prayer is and

³ “Twice ten thousand times ten thousand” (v. 16). Do the math.

⁴ In Greek, *pharmakon* denotes the use of drugs or enchantments and on occasion referred to poisoning. These things were often associated with the occult (thus, sorceries).

always has been the saints' **nuclear option**. Pastor John knew that his congregation was living in an evil empire (Babylon). He wanted to encourage them to pray.

- A. Never underestimate the **sound of silence**. Rising smoke makes no sound. But don't be fooled. It has the capacity to create thunder in the earth! In the late 1970s a delegation from the World Council of Churches went to Russia to report on the state of the church under an atheistic regime. The delegates were not impressed. Their report coldly stated: "It's just a bunch of **old ladies praying**." Revelation helps us to understand that wicked thugs and tyrants everywhere should tremble when old ladies pray!
- B. No prayer is **wasted**. The censer had to be filled before the fire was cast down (8:3-5). Like a suspended water bucket at a water park, it tips over only when it is full. So God's judgments are released in the earth only when the "prayer bucket" is full of the petitions and intercessions of his saints. No prayer is ever lost. They are all stored in his "bucket." David prayed: *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?* (Psalm 56:8).
- C. Prayer is **pleasing** to God. Prayer is mixed with incense. It is a pleasing fragrance, an aroma that brings pleasure to God. Paul tells us to "find out what pleases the Lord" (Ephesians 5:10). Now we know.
- D. Prayer is more **powerful** than you imagine. It may often seem that prayer is just a quiet, contemplative spiritual discipline that affects no one but the one praying. But more is happening that you can ever imagine!

*Little boy kneels at the foot of the bed,
Droops on the little hands little gold head.
Hush, hush, whisper who dares?
Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.⁵*

- E. Prayer encourages God to do whatever it takes to bring people to **repentance**. Be sobered by what your prayers may unleash! God will do whatever it takes to bring this world to repentance. Before all heaven breaks loose, he may permit all hell to break loose! So go ahead, pray... but be prepared for what your prayers may produce.

*Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work.
(Oswald Chambers. My Utmost for His Highest)*

*God instituted prayer in order to lend to his creatures the dignity of causality.
(Blaise Pascal. Pensees).*

TABLE TALK

1. What has God said to you during this lesson?
2. How do you respond when you read of God's wrath and judgment falling on sinners?
3. What did it take to bring you to a place of repentance?
4. Has this lesson changed the way you think about prayer? How?
5. Will your prayer life be different?

⁵ *Vespers*. A. A. Milne.