

“Seven Trumpets” (Revelation 8)

May 16, 2021

Brian Watson

Like most people, I like watching movies. When I was in my 20s, I decided that I should watch a number of classic films, often movies from the 1970s, but also from the 1950s and 1960s. I realized a number of these movies, whether it was first two *Godfather* movies, or *Easy Rider*, or *On the Waterfront*, were the kinds of movies that are often referred to as cultural reference points. These are the kinds of movies that have famous lines or famous images. They’re the kind of movies that culturally literate people should see. So, I would occasionally watch those movies.

There are some foreign films that fall into this category. I don’t really like foreign films because I don’t like reading subtitles. I read a lot, so I’m not against reading, but there’s something about the aesthetic experience of reading a movie’s dialogue that just seems wrong. At any rate, one movie that I have long been aware of, a movie that is often called one of the best movies of all time, is Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, which came out in 1957. I finally watched it this week. The movie is set in the late medieval era, during the time of the Black Death in Europe, in the middle of the fourteenth century. Somewhere between 75 and 200 million people died from that plague across the world.¹ The plague would kill almost a third of Europe’s population within a few years. It wiped out 40 percent of England’s population. *The Seventh Seal* begins with a quotation of Revelation 8, which is where the title comes from. The movie is famous for the image of Death, personified as a pale person in a black cloak, playing chess with a knight. In the story, Death comes for the knight, but the knight asks Death if he plays chess. (The knight just happens to have a chess board and its pieces with him.) Death says he’s been known to play chess every now and again. The knight proposes a deal: as long as they play, the knight lives, and if he wins, he can go free. Death agrees. I’ll be honest: I found the movie a bit odd, and not in an entertaining way. Most of it isn’t about that chess game, and it’s forgettable. But the point is that death is inevitable. In the end, Death wins the chess match, and he comes for the knight and some others, to lead them to their dark fate. But not before more of Revelation 8 is read.

¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2017), 7.

I was thinking of the inevitability of death this week because I walked by and through Pine Hill Cemetery a couple of times this week. As I looked at all the headstones, I thought, “I’ll be here someday.” I looked at the last names on the markers and before long, I saw one that said “WATSON” on it. There’s nothing like seeing your own name on a grave that makes think about the reality of death. We should think about death and its inevitability. Thinking about death helps us to think about the meaning of life, why we’re here.

According to Christianity, death comes because of sin. We were made to know God, to love him, to worship him. We were made to serve him, to reflect his glory by looking to him, resembling him, and obeying him. That’s why we’re here. But we don’t do that most of the time. We ignore God. We reject him. We do what we want to do, not what he wants us to do. And God has given humanity over to death, which is a punishment for sin.

Today, as we continue to look at the book of Revelation, we’re going to see more images of judgment, including the opening of that seventh seal. We’ll hear about trumpets that are blown, which announce judgments visited upon the world. These are serious and sobering images. I think that’s what God wants. The intent of this book of the Bible is to wake us up, to get us to think about what life is all about. Revelation is meant to cause us to think about who or what we’re worshiping, where life is going, and what will happen when we meet our Maker.

Before we start reading today’s passage, which is chapter 8, I want to briefly remind us of what we’ve seen in some of this book. I won’t give a full recap; if you’ve missed previous sermons, you can find them on our website.² But I will say this: This book is a recollection of images given to a man named John at the end of the first century. These images came from God the Father and Jesus, through an angel, to John, who wrote down what he saw. In chapters 4 and 5, John got a glimpse of God in heaven, seated on his throne, about to issue judgments. We read about a scroll that contained God’s plan for history, and how only Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, was worthy of opening the scroll. The scroll was sealed by seven seals, and in chapter 6, those seals are opened one by one. The first five seals seem to represent events that occur throughout the time between Jesus’ death and resurrection and his second coming in glory to judge the living and the dead. When the sixth seal is opened, it appears as though that great Day of the Lord has arrived, and those who did not have a right relationship with God try to hide from

² Go to <https://wbcommunity.org/revelationsermons>.

him, as if they could. They ask, “who can stand?” on that great day of judgment, when God’s righteous wrath against sin is unleashed.

Then, in chapter 7, we saw an answer to that question: God’s people are described both as the twelve tribes of Israel and also a multitude that no one could number, from every nation, people, and language. These are the ones who can stand in the day of judgment. And the reason they can stand is not because they never sinned. All of us have failed to love, trust, and obey God as we should. But these people who can stand in the day of judgment put their trust in Jesus, recognizing that he was slain on their behalf. He took the punishment for sin that we deserve, and if we trust in him, if we find refuge in him, then that punishment is removed from us. The wrath of God that we deserve was absorbed by Jesus, who willingly took it. But this applies only to those who believe in Jesus. Those who reject him will suffer that wrath, for they have rejected the one means by which God grants salvation.

Now, we haven’t actually seen that wrath of God executed in the book of Revelation. Chapter 6 led us right to the precipice. Chapter 7 was a bit of side journey, an answering to that question of “who can stand?” We’re still waiting to hear an image of that destruction. And that brings us right to chapter 8. Let’s start by reading the first verse of this chapter:

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.³

The seventh and final seal is opened, and it seems as if now God’s plans can be fully executed. We’re expecting there to be judgment and also a new creation made. In other words, we’re expecting evil to be crushed and removed from the world. But instead, we get silence for about 30 minutes. What is happening here? Was God busy watching a sitcom?

The half hour of silence is a bit odd, and it feels anticlimactic. On a dramatic level, the silence heightens the tension. It keeps us waiting for what happens next. But there’s more meaning to the silence than that. Elsewhere in Revelation, judgment is described as occurring in a single hour (Rev. 18:10, 17, 19). And half may just mean that this silence takes up part of that hour. But “silence” comes from several Old Testament passages.

Habakkuk 2:20 says:

²⁰ But the LORD is in his holy temple;

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Zechariah 2:13 says:

Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

Zephaniah 1:7 says:

Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the Lord is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.

Isaiah 41:1 says:

Listen to me in silence, O coastlands;
let the peoples renew their strength;
let them approach, then let them speak;
let us together draw near for judgment.

And Psalm 76:6–9 says:

- ⁶ At your rebuke, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lay stunned.
- ⁷ But you, you are to be feared!
Who can stand before you
when once your anger is roused?
- ⁸ From the heavens you uttered judgment;
the earth feared and was still,
- ⁹ when God arose to establish judgment,
to save all the humble of the earth. Selah

Each one of those passages refers to judgment. And each of them says, “be silent.” God shuts the mouths of the nations that rage against them when he judges them. When God comes to judge, there is nothing left to be said. Even that phrase that most of us know, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10), is about judgment.

As we’ll see, a great deal of what we read in the book of Revelation comes from the Old Testament. And quite often, the book of Exodus is in the background. In the exodus, God judged the idolatrous Egyptians and saved his people, Israel. One of those times of judgment was the parting and closing of the Red Sea. Right before that event, Moses tells Israel: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians

whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Exod. 14:13–14).

So, the silence is heightened drama, but it’s also a sign that judgment has come. What can sinners say in the face of God when he comes in wrath? Nothing. What do believers have to say on that day? Nothing. They can be still and know that God will fight this battle. And God will win.

Now, let’s move on to verse 2:

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

We still haven’t seen God’s wrath unleashed, but now we’re presented with an image of seven angels with seven trumpets. The seven trumpets are basically parallel to the seven seals, and they are parallel to the seven bowls (Rev. 16). They don’t come after the seven seals chronologically speaking, but only in literary terms. They are presented here because the seals and the trumpets interlock. This passage links the images of the seals with the images of the trumpets. We’re already being prepared for the next set of images.

But before we get to the trumpets, we get one image of God’s wrath being unleashed. Here are verses 3–5:

³ 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, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵ 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.

You might remember something from chapter 6: when the fifth seal is opened, John sees souls under the altar, people “who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Rev. 6:9). These people cry out to God, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). They are told to wait until the full number of martyrs is complete. Now, God answers their prayers.

In the Old Testament, incense was offered at the temple, the place where God dwelled among his people. The incense represented prayers. Psalm 141:1–2 is an example of that:

¹ O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me!
Give ear to my voice when I call to you!

² Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

Incense was part of the worship offered to God in the Old Testament. And this language intentionally echoes the language of worship in the Old Testament (cf. Lev. 16:12–13). But this language connects those prayers and that worship with judgment. An angel takes fire from the altar and casts it upon the earth. Something similar happens in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 10 of Ezekiel, an angel is told to take coals from the altar and scatter them over the city of Jerusalem (Ezek. 10:1–2). This was an act of judgment against an idolatrous people. Here, this judgment comes upon the whole world.

Think about this for a moment: The saints ask God how long it will be before he executes judgment. They want justice. They look forward to a day when all wrongs will be set right. And God responds to their prayers with judgment. When we pray for justice, when we pray, “May your kingdom come,” God will answer. His answer doesn’t come when we want it, but he will answer it. And sometimes we see acts of judgment in this world during this age. Whenever there is a natural disaster, there is a sense that this is judgment against sin. I don’t mean to say that if people suffer due to an earthquake, a tsunami, or a hurricane, they are more sinful than anyone else. If that were the case, earthquakes would have leveled Las Vegas and Washington, D.C., and many other cities besides. Still, natural disasters come because of sin. So, when we pray for justice, we shouldn’t be surprised if God acts in powerful ways, perhaps through natural disasters, or perhaps in ways that we couldn’t imagine. In the end, God’s kingdom will come in its fullest, so that heaven and earth are one. We should pray for that day to come.

And here in Revelation 8:5, this certainly is *the* day of judgment. We read of thunder, lightning, and an earthquake. When these events happen, it is a description of the final judgment (Rev. 11:19; 16:18). As I’ve said before, Revelation doesn’t present us with a linear story, where the early chapters tell the beginning, the middle chapters the middle, and the closing chapters the end. Revelation presents us with several cycles that basically cover the same time period. We read of things that happen throughout this age and then the final day of judgment several times. Each cycle gives us a slightly different perspective. Each cycle is filled with images that are hard to forget. The entirety of these images give us a multi-perspectival view of these realities, so that the images complement each other, sinking into our minds and awakening our hearts.

And now we finally get back to the seven trumpets. Let’s read verse 6:

Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

There are two major Old Testament references behind the trumpets. The first one is more obvious. In the book of Joshua, we read of how God gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites by defeating the ungodly people there. In chapter 6, Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down. But the way the Israelites fight is odd. They're told to march around the city seven days in a row. On the seventh day, they're supposed to march around the city seven times, and seven priests are supposed to blow seven trumpets. When the seven trumpets are sounded, the wall falls, perhaps because there was an earthquake. In chapters 8 and 9 of Revelation, there are six trumpets blown. The seventh trumpet is finally blown in chapter 11. And what happens then? The Lord Jesus, the true and better Joshua, whose name, like the name of Jesus, means "God saves," returns and there's an earthquake. It's game over. God returns to earth, and the ungodly are judged.

But before that seventh trumpet, there are six trumpets that are blown, and with each trumpet blast comes a form of judgment. These judgments resemble the plagues that are visited upon Egypt in the book of Exodus, and that is the other Old Testament background to this passage. I don't think these six trumpets blow right before Jesus returns in the so-called "end times." I think these first four trumpets (at least), like the first five seals, represent things that happen during this age.

Before we read about these first four trumpets, I want us to think back to the exodus. God's people were enslaved to a terrible master, Pharaoh, who made their lives difficult, to put it mildly. God said he would send plagues on Egypt, to harden Pharaoh's heart, to demonstrate that he is the true God, to display his glory in the most powerful nation in the world, and to execute judgments on the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12). The plagues were not designed to bring everyone to repentance, to turn them back to God. But there were some Egyptians who joined Israel, so it seems that the plagues did bring some people to God (Exod. 12:38). That might be the case with these trumpets, too. God displays his glory, he hardens hearts, and brings some to faith through these judgments.

Let's read about each trumpet, one by one. First, there is verse 7:

⁷ 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.

What happens when this first trumpet is blown is very similar to the seventh plague that occurs in Egypt. There, God rains hail and fire upon the land, and this destroys vegetation and trees (Exod. 9:22–25). The same happens here. In Exodus, God spared Goshen, the land where the Israelites lived. Here, God spares two-thirds of the earth. We may wonder why it is that a third of the earth and trees are affected. One reason might be that there is an intensification of these judgments in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 6:8, when the fourth seal is opened, a fourth of the earth is given over to Death and Hades. Here, a third is affected. In chapter 16, the whole earth is affected. But there's also another Old Testament background. In Ezekiel 5:2, 12, the city of Jerusalem is divided into thirds when it is judged. God is making a division between those who are his people and those who are not.

Let's move on to verses 8 and 9:

⁸ 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.

⁹ A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

When this trumpet is blown, “something like a mountain,” set on fire, is cast into the sea. Think about that image for a while. Imagine a large mountain, like Mount Washington or Mount Rainier, set ablaze, and then lifted and thrown in the ocean. That would be literally awesome. Also, think of what happens next: the sea turns to blood and a third of the sea creatures die, and a third of the ships are destroyed. This resembles the first plague in Exodus, when the Nile turned to blood. But I doubt this is meant to be taken literally. A mountain can represent a kingdom. It often does in the Bible. And God sets up and knocks down kingdoms.

Consider Jeremiah 51:25:

“Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain,
declares the LORD,
which destroys the whole earth;
I will stretch out my hand against you,
and roll you down from the crags,
and make you a burnt mountain.

That warning is issued to Babylon, which was literally a kingdom at that time, several centuries before the time of Jesus. Babylon was the world's superpower, a “destroying mountain,” and God was going to bring it to its knees. And God did that. Babylon came to an end. But Babylon also refers more symbolically to the kingdom of sinful humans, the powers on this earth set

against God. In the first century, the Roman Empire was Babylon. It was the ungodly empire. And part of the book of Revelation's message is that Rome would fall. But so will all kingdoms of man. This happens throughout this age.

Let's move on to the third trumpet. Here are verses 10 and 11:

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

When the third trumpet is blown, a star falls. Perhaps this is a reference to a fallen angel, cast out of heaven. It's possible that this is yet another reference to the Old Testament, this time Isaiah 24:21–22:

²¹ On that day the LORD will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.
²² They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.

The "host of heaven" is a reference to angels. So, perhaps an angel is cast out of heaven, and a third of all water is turned bitter. I think that this is another bit of evidence that these images are not meant to be taken in a literal way, for how could one star selectively affect only a third of all the water on the earth? More to the point is that the water is turned to wormwood, and many people die. Wormwood is a bitter herb associated with judgment in the Bible.

There are two times in Jeremiah when God says that he will feed false prophets and those who listen to them "with bitter food" and "poisonous water to drink" (Jer. 9:15; 23:15). I wonder if the fallen angel and these passages mean that one of the judgments God gives to people throughout history is that he gives people over to false teaching. Throughout the Bible, when people don't want God, God gives them over to their desires. In some cases, God sends false prophets to idolatrous people. The idea is that they don't want to hear the truth, so God gives them over to lies, which is what they want. If people don't want to go to God to get living water, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, then they will get the poisonous water of false prophets and lies, which only bring death.

The last trumpet we'll consider today is the fourth trumpet, which we read about in verse 12:

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.

This judgment is like the ninth plague that God put upon the Egyptians in Exodus. In that case, there was darkness over the land for three days (Exod. 10:21–23). Now, we saw in chapter 6 that the sun became black, the moon became like blood, and the stars fell from the sky. The fact that only a third of the sun and moon and stars are affected here means this doesn't come after that event in chapter 6. Again, that's not how Revelation works. But I wonder if darkness here represents spiritual darkness. Again, if people don't want the light of the world, Jesus (John 8:12), God lets them stay in the dark. This is similar to what we read right after one of the most famous passages in the Bible, John 3:16. John 3:18 and 19 say:

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

These people hate light because it exposes their sins (John 3:20). They would rather stay in the dark than come into the light to receive correction and light. But those who stay in the darkness have God's wrath remain on them (John 3:36).

Before concluding this sermon, I want to read the final verse of chapter 8. This verse sets up what comes in chapter 9. Here is verse 13:

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 blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

The final three trumpets are more serious, and I think those three trumpet blasts usher in the final day of judgment. We'll see the next two trumpets next week.

Earlier, I said that death is inevitable. It will come. And we won't be able to keep it at bay by playing chess. And the fact is that death always wins the game. But there is a way out. I said earlier that I had walked through Pine Hill Cemetery recently. There are hundreds if not thousands of graves there. I noticed one gravestone that was different. I approached it from the

left of the stone, and I noticed there was writing on the side of the stone. It said, “Book of Life.” The front of the gravestone looks normal, but if you look closely, the top and the right side of the stone look like pages. The gravestone is very subtly shaped like a book. And the idea is that those two people have their names written in the Book of Life (cf. Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). They will live forever. They will be resurrected one day and live in a new world, one where God dwells, one where there is no death. If you trust in Jesus, you won’t suffer God’s wrath. Your name is written in the Book of Life. You are safe.

But if you don’t trust in Jesus, you will suffer plagues and you will suffer God’s wrath. Consider two verses from the end of this book. Here is Revelation 22:18 and 19:

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Those who twist God’s word will suffer these plagues. Those who reject God’s word will receive the same. They will not eat of the tree of life, which grants eternal life. They will not dwell with God in the holy city.

I urge you all to follow Jesus, to trust him and obey him. And cry out to God in his name, that his kingdom would come. God will answer that prayer.