
The Suffering for the World

Revelation 8:1-9:21

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Is God fair? In what we are about to read and see unfolding, this is a question many have. If people struggle with the fairness of present life-destroying disasters how will they handle the massive, world-wide devastation that will come at the end of the, at the end of the old creation?

Is it the right question? I think not. The Bible makes it evident that God is not fair in the human, world sense. But, God is just. He will do what is right. He will do what He says. He will judge, not on the surface illusion of things, but according to the deep reality He sees and knows. Since God is just and since God's people are often terrible treated, then we may and possibly ought, to be praying as we have seen and will see here. "How long, O Lord?" The prayers of the saints are incense to God. But the prayers of the saints may bring justice and judgment to the world.

So, fasten your seat belts. This could be a rough ride if you only think of God as loving, kind and merciful. God is all that to His people. And He is just, powerful and fearfully full of wrath against the world.

John has shown us the opening of six seals. We have seen the great multitude who were sealed, saved and safe before heaven's throne. Having come out of the great tribulation and joining those gathered down through the ages, they are praising and worshipping God. Their sufferings are over.

But the suffering for the world, for unbelievers, is about to crescendo toward the climatic gathering at the final judgment.

¹ Draw near, O nations, to hear,
and give attention, O peoples!

Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;
the world, and all that comes from it.

² For the LORD is enraged against all the nations,
and furious against all their host;

he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.

³ Their slain shall be cast out,
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;
the mountains shall flow with their blood.

⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their host shall fall,
as leaves fall from the vine,
like leaves falling from the fig tree.

[Isaiah 34:1-4]

Once again we have the structure of 6 things, an interlude and then the seventh. We have six seals, the heavenly scenes and the now the seventh seal. So, we have the six trumpets (8:1-9:21), an interlude of the witnesses in the world (11:1-13) and then the seventh trumpet (11:14-19).

And now, behold, the seven trumpets.

Portent Silence and Powerful Rumbings (v. 1-5)

¹ When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 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.

Our first difficulty is: where does this fit chronologically? Many say that the unsealing of the seventh unleashes the seven trumpeting angels, or the seven trumpets are the seventh seal. Except that is not what the text says. The seventh seal is silence. Then, the next vision includes two things: the summoning of the seven trumpeting angels and another angel with the prayer incense of the saints.

Again, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24-25 is our schema. Jesus answers the disciples question about when with a chronological order. I am convinced that while the Revelation has many visions that fill in details, you cannot alter Jesus' teaching. Remember, Jesus said:

²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. [Matthew 24:23-28]

Jesus gave His teaching so that we would not be deceived, even by a plethora of interpretations of Revelation.

The seventh seal then is silence. It is a heavy quiet like the terrible stillness just before the storm. Across all the heavens the praises stop, the songs still. A massive silence, a cosmic gasp is deafening in its muteness.

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.

⁸ And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons

and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

⁹ On that day I will punish
everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud.

[Zephaniah 1:7-9]

In this deep quiet, seven trumpets are placed in the hands of seven great angels. One more walks with majestic presence to what appears as an altar. In his hands he carries a great golden bowl full of incense, the prayers of the saints. This stately imagery conveys the prayers of the saints who are petitioning for the vindicating justice and judgments of God. The coals of the altar representing the judgment of God are placed into the bowl which flames up. The saints in their great suffering pour forth powerful aromas of prayers. The angel in turn strews the burning coals and ashes across the earth. Judgment has come. Justice will be done. God will be vindicated. His people will be glad.

The language of destruction is drawn from Psalm 18:6-15 and is evocative of Exodus 19:16,18.

⁶ In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.

From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.

⁷ Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.

⁸ Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.

⁹ He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.

¹⁰ He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.

¹¹ He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.

¹² Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.

¹³ The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.

¹⁴ And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

¹⁵ Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

This must be a part of our theology as well. God is going to ultimately save His people, all of them. And God will judge the lost. This is not theory. This will happen. God's people are portrayed here as praying to that end – that God will be vindicated as He stands up from His throne and scatters the burning coals of His wrath across the rebellious earth. And the aroma that arises is the incense of the prayers of His people.

Seven Trumpet Sounds

(8:6-9:19)

⁶ Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

Greg Beale wrote, "Christ's death and resurrection have triggered the execution of the seal woes. Therefore, the first five seals indicate both inaugurated prophetic fulfillment and revelatory clarification of OT prophecy. The sixth and seventh have not yet been set in motion, since they refer to the Last Assize. They indicate only a clarification of OT and NT prophecy, which has yet to be fulfilled. Nonetheless, the cross was the beginning of the Last Judgment, carried out against Christ as a sacrificial substitute, so that his people will be able to "stand" through the consummation of the final judgment. Similarly, the first six trumpets are woes anticipating the day of final judgment."

Just as the seals were a set of four, a set of two, an interlude and then the final seal, we have the trumpets the same. There is first a set of four (v. 7-12), a pause (v. 12) designed as a marker between the four and three woes that follow (9:1-19). These trumpet judgments are very similar to the plagues in Exodus and are meant to invoke the sense of the growing devastation under the escalating wrath of God. Consistent with His promise to Noah, none of these massive judgments involve a flood. Peter tells us that this present world which emerged from the world that then was and was overflowed with water, is now reserved for the judgment of fire. Well, now it begins.

These thirds are probably imagery rather than exact measures. They are meant to convey massive destruction. Yet the thirds are also filled with so many Old Testament allusions and images.

Each in his turn, John sees the angels step forward and blow their trumpet and judgments ripple across the universe.

The First: The Earth Stricken

(v. 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.

John sees God's judgment as destroying a third of the earth's surface and all the grass lands. Horrific judgment this: sheets of hail and fire pirouetting across one-third of the earth. This invokes the great plague of hail at the Exodus.

The Second: The Sea Stricken

(v. 8-9)

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.

John sees God's judgment as destroying one third of the oceans. The imagery here certainly invokes an asteroid strike in one of the great oceans and all the massive destruction that would come from it. The ocean is poisoned, the fish die and the sea going vessels are destroyed. In Biblical imagery this falling burning mountain is Babylon and the system she represents. This is parallel then to Revelation 18 where the system of world power is destroyed by God taking down one third of the earth's peoples and economies.

The Third: The Rivers Stricken

(v. 10-11)

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.

John sees God's judgment as throwing a star, fireball upon the earth that then poisons one third of the earth's fresh waters. Wormwood is the name of a plant that would make fresh water taste bitter. The Biblical allusion is to Jeremiah 23:15 and 9:15.

¹³ In the prophets of Samaria
I saw an unsavory thing:
they prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.

¹⁴ But in the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a horrible thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from his evil;
all of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah."

¹⁵ Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:
"Behold, I will feed them with bitter food
and give them poisoned water to drink,
for from the prophets of Jerusalem
ungodliness has gone out into all the land."

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' "

¹⁸ For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD
to see and to hear his word,
or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

¹⁹ Behold, the storm of the LORD!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

²⁰ The anger of the LORD will not turn back

until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his heart.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

So this imagery also points the poisonous effect of false prophesying and teaching. Jesus warned us about that for the last days and Jeremiah pointed to it as well. The second and third trumpets are an allusion to the poisoning of the waters of Egypt by blood.

The Fourth: The Sky Stricken

(v. 12)

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.

John sees God's judgment as destroying the luminaries in the heavens, the sun, moon and stars. We can easily locate ourselves by Matthew 24:29, *"29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken."* (Also, Mark 13:24-27)

This judgment plunges the earth into long periods of darkness and cold. It is hard to conceive how this could be literal, particularly in reference to the sun. But it is God striking the sky or the heavens. Whether it is the view of them from the earth or the actual darkening of them in the heavens, the message is clear. God can turn out the lights.

God is judging the whole of man's environment, earth, sea, fresh water and sky. God is ripping away all that natural man depends on for sustenance and worships instead of God. He has created all this. He is sovereign over all this. At the smallest lifting of His finger, He can bring it to a crashing end. And He is.

I can say this no better than Michael Wilcock when he writes:

What then is God doing here? We draw together our conclusions about the first part of Scene 3. Fearful damage is done to the land and its vegetation, the sea and its ships, the waters which men drink, and the light by which they see – their environment, commerce, resources, and vision. But the damage is partial ('one third'), not total; which seems to show that the Trumpets are sounding not doom, but warning. The majority of mankind is allowed to survive, being shown God's wrath against sin, and given the chance to repent. Paradoxically, therefore, the miseries of Scene 3 are really kindnesses. The Seals showed the suffering church pleading for justice to be done. But the Trumpets show the wicked world being offered mercy. The offer is not accepted, and the world will not in fact repent (9:20 f.); but let it never be said that God has not done all in his power, even to the devastation of his own once perfect earth, in order to bring men to their senses.¹¹

Pause: The Eagle's Announcement

(v. 13)

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!"

So, the great raptor, soars from the far horizons into the vision. Broad of wing, hooked beak, dark withering eyes, long sloping glide. He is hovering over the mass of doomed humanity. A great voice rings out announcing that three terrible woes are coming as his shadow passes overhead.

This functions in the visions to separate the four from the three following the pattern of the visions. But it also highlights the horrors that are about to rise. The first four trumpets have been the unleashing of nature against humanity. The last three trumpets, are the unleashing of Satan and demons against humanity. While there have been great calamities down through history nothing has ever struck humanity like what God is about to allow to be unleashed.

And so, the fifth seal.

The Fifth: The Release of the Tormentors (9:1-11)

The first woe and fifth trumpet actually is easy for us to see. We have similar in countless video games and horror movies. All those dark nightmares may one day well come slathering across the landscape.

¹ And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. ² He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸ their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹ they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

I am not going to offer all the alternative views as to what this is. The imagery here is meant to describe something that was understandable in John's day and in ours. It is not about tanks and helicopters. If only it were that. No this is a horror almost too great to imagine.

First, Satan is cast down to the earth and is seen here as this falling star who is given the keys to open the bottomless pit. Other texts locate this event at the cross.

¹² "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! [Isaiah 1:12]

¹⁷ The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" ¹⁸ And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." [Luke 10:17-20]

²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. [John 12:27-33]

He is given, presumably by God, the keys to unlock the bottomless pit where horrible creatures have been locked away. It is hard to know what the reality is behind the apocalyptic imagery. What are they? The aliens from the movie *Independence Day* appear and are described like these. Demonic creatures spreading like a plague across the world, powerful, armor plated, poisonous stinging tails their thunderous engines roaring following in the train of Abaddon-Apollyon, the Destroyer. Job 26:6 tells us, "*6 Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering.*" In the Old Testament, Sheol is the place where the dead go. It is thought of as the grave, a ravine, a pit. In the Bible there is a development that speaks of a deep prison house for fallen angels, a place of punishment for the wicked and a place of bliss for the believing until the resurrection. Then the souls of Old Testament believers in paradise are taken up to heaven to be joined by the souls of New Testament believers.

We may not know exactly *what or who* these are, but we do know *why* these are. They are unleashed on unbelieving humanity. God is sovereign even over the demons. They are limited in what they can do. That is why in the imagery they cannot touch the grass and trees. And they cannot afflict those who are sealed. This means that this may happen while believers are still upon the earth. What a great comfort this is. While these creatures roam the earth they cannot touch the sealed. They cannot afflict, harm, sting, or poison God's people. We may suffer many hardships from the seven seals and the beginnings of the seven trumpets, but we will never experience the death-seeking, death-denying pains of these creatures.

The Sixth: The Horrific War**(v. 12-19)**

¹² The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

¹³ Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. ¹⁷ And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

Once again we are faced with imagery that appears with enough detail to be horribly frightening and yet blurry enough that we can't quite make it out. I cannot say with complete honesty what these will be. I do know that when they appear, texts like these will suddenly be alive.

We have here more evidence of the parallelism we have highlighted before. We can see the parallel of the sixth angel blowing the trumpet to release four angels at the great river Euphrates and the sixth angel pouring out his bowl on the great river Euphrates in 16:12. The sixth trumpet brings the climax of afflictions just as the opening of the sixth seal is also the climax of (6:12-17).

From the golden altar of incense before God's throne, the order comes to release the four angels. What they release has been stored up for this day. It is a very precise That may be the wrath of God as poured through the armies they launch. The river Euphrates is loaded with Biblical imagery. It is one of the borders of the garden of God. It was the northern border of the Promised Land in Solomon's time. It was the northern border of the Roman Empire. It spoken of the line between God's Kingdom and the kingdoms of this world.

The angels release what appear to be armies but unlike any known. They are similar to what came up out of the pit in the sixth trumpet. Yet they are more and different. This is a huge army. They will bring three horrible plagues of fire, sulfur and smoke. Smashing their way across the landscape, one third of the remaining humanity is wiped out.

Continued Rebellion and Unrepentance**(v. 20-21)**

²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk,²¹ nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Do you hear this? Through all of these horrible disasters in nature and afflictions from demonic hordes and assaults by spiritually alien armies, those who are left will not repent. Bereft of God's grace, they turn further away from God and turn angrily against God. They do not give up their idols or their sins. They go right on.

These terrible ravages were not designed by God to produce repentance. They were designed to expose the unbending hatred of unbelieving depravity. They are designed to begin on earth the righteous judgment that will continue throughout eternity.

Reflect and Respond

Be sure your heart is loving God first. If we are loving people (family, friends, neighbors) more than God, this will be hard. But loving God supremely means we align our beliefs and wants with what He declares and requires and our emotions will stay tethered to the Word of God.

May this comfort our suffering souls. O, maybe not right now because we little know the suffering that is the common lot of believers through ages and in our world. One day, our own prayers may rise as incense from sacrificed souls, "How long, O Lord?"

There is horrific judgment to come. This is just the judgment in this life on earth. It is but a small hangnail in the massive guillotine of God's great wrath. Be warned. Repent, believe and be saved.

¹¹ Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986. P.95.