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REVELATION

SPIRITUALLY UNDERSTOOD

PART 9

REVELATION 8:1-13

The Mystery of the First Four Trumpets

BY: CHARLES D. ALEXANDER

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PART NINE

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Revelation 8:1-13

The opening of the SEVENTH SEAL introduces the full response of the Head of the Church to the cry of His troubled saints and martyrs. The reply takes the symbolic form of the SEVEN TRUMPET JUDGMENTS which cover the entire period of time to the end of the world. Chapters 8 and 9 of Revelation record the sounding of six trumpets. The seventh is reserved to signal the last judgment and the end of the world. It is the “voice of the archangel and the trump of God,” at the sound of which the dead shall be raised and we shall be changed, and death shall be swallowed up in victory. (1 Cor. 15:52-54; 1 Thess. 4:16) In this section of our study we concern ourselves with the first four trumpets of chapter 8.

There are three main streams of interpretation:

The FUTURIST, the HISTORICIST, and the SPIRITUAL.

The Futurist confines the trumpet judgments to a fragment of time lasting 1260 literal days (3 ½ years) during which one third of the earth’s natural resources are destroyed, sun, moon and stars are blotted out for one third of their shining, a plague of locusts of unheard of scorpion power is let loose upon the earth for five months (a long time in a period lasting only 42 months), and finally there is the mobilisation, equipment, and concentration in a corner of Palestine of an army of demon cavalry 200,000,000 strong, with all problems of supply and transport, to destroy one tiny nation of the Jews. It is impossible for one to maintain one’s mental balance and at the same time conceive of so vast a programme to be carried out in 1260 days.

The Historic theory tells us that the programme is spread over at least 1260 years and is in fact history written in advance, ascertainable by the historian as an exact conspectus of world history during that period of time. Historicists claim a complete series of dates exactly fitting into the events of European history, ascertainable in advance from the Book of Revelation and the associated prophecies of Daniel. These include the downfall of the Roman Empire, the emergence of the Papacy, the rise of Islamic power (Saracens and Turks), the

French revolution, and the subsequent fate of the Papacy.

As the Historicist scheme is associated with the names of so many godly men and competent historians, it must be treated seriously, and only rejected on grounds of highest consequence. We therefore make the following observations thereupon.

We are living in days of the decline of historicism. As time continues its inexorable course the confident predictions made during last century and preceding centuries are showing distinct signs of failure and irrelevance. Dr. Harry Grattan Guinness, the supreme expositor of this theory, writing in 1886, predicted so great crisis to fall in the year 1915. That was near enough to the outbreak of the great European War and the Balfour Declaration of a National Home for the Jews in Palestine, to create much fervour among the faithful around that time. With due modesty, Dr. Guinness having seen the marvelous fulfillment of earlier predictions in the battle of Sadowa and the fall of the temporal power of the papacy in 1866, felt himself emboldened (in 1886) to declare that according to his researches, the last prophetic time he could account for in Daniel and Revelation would run out in 1923, of which year he wrote, "We seem forbidden to expect that the mystery of God will extend beyond this date". That of course was as near as so careful and reverent a chronologist could get to declaring the date when Christ would return and the millennium be inaugurated.

Alas for his computations. There has been no millennium, we have seen, what Dr. Guinness would not have believed if he been told it, that the Roman papacy would, in the last half of the 20th century, recover from its 19th century eclipse, stage one the greatest come-backs in history, while Protestantism, which one time threatened to destroy the papacy, would itself be destroyed by another, more sinister foe of which Dr. Guinness never even dreamed - RATIONALISM, the last scourge of the church, the systematic denial of the Bible, contempt of all ideas of an inspired revelation of God, and the full acceptance of atheistic science to account for creation.

We can forgive the Historicists for much of their errors in their hopeful anticipation of a golden future just around the corner of the century, but cannot excuse them for propagating a theory which claims for Biblical prophecy nothing better than a cunning a cryptic almanack of events, calamities, and wars and rumours of wars (to which the Saviour bade us pay no heed anyway), with not one spiritual lesson to be learned out of the whole exciting exercise. At least the Futurist gets over his stark and barren prophetic episodes with merciful swiftness. They are no sooner here than they are gone. At breakneck speed he races through

3 ½ years of time – 3 ½ horrific years which are calculated not to disturb the peace of the church seeing she is already enraptured in heaven.

From both these barren fields we turn with relief to our spiritual Book and find afresh therein the consolation of the saints of the Lord in the assurance that “blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are writ therein, for the time is (always) at hand”. (Rev. 1:3)

THE SEVENTH SEAL - A HOLY SILENCE

“And when he had opened the seventh seal” (v.1)

This last seal throws open the entire book of God’s judgments and sets the scene for the unfolding of those judgments. As it is the Lamb who opens the seals, so we are to understand that it is the prerogative of Christ to defend His church and conduct her through all the trials and perils of the way, to His eternal glory and rest. At this stage it is fitting to remind ourselves that our Book of Revelation began with John’s exile in Patmos symbolising the outward state of the church as she became the target of the hate and cruelty of the world and its ‘god’ Satan. (2 Cor. 4:4) We learned in that first chapter that the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of patience - the church must wait for her bridal day, and meantime suffer the envy and hate of the world, and by so doing prove her love of her Lord and her true faith in Him.

“There was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” - Chap. 8. 1

The half-hour of silence signifies the solemnity of what is to follow. The divine answer to the church’s dilemma becomes the subject of a solemn and formal adjudication upon the conduct of her tormentors. We may regard the half-hour as being in fact an actual duration of time. The factual nature of the time element is interesting as shedding some light on the procedure of the visions. The contents of the entire Book passed before the vision of John in one day (chap. 1:10), just as the complete range of visions in the first six chapters of Zechariah came to the prophet in one night (compare Zech. 1:7 and 7:1).

A silent interlude of half an hour in John’s prophetic ecstasy would be of high significance in relation to the intensity of the drama then unfolded to his spiritual consciousness. It has bearing on the interpretation of Revelation for it marks the end of the preparatory visions before the Spirit carries John through the actual events about to be disclosed. Those who have confused the opening of the six seals with successive events of history should reconsider the position in the light of this

significant half-hour. Before this pause the stage was being set, the actors assembled, and the audience enlightened as to the purpose of the subsequent action. Now all is ready, and after the silence of half an hour the actual movement of the drama begins.

Hengstenberg sees this silence as denoting “the dumb astonishment of the raging enemies of Christ and His church.” Alford on the other hand quotes Victorinus, earliest of all apocalyptic expositors as saying, “HALF AN HOUR WHICH INDICATES THE QUIET REST OF ETERNITY”. Probably there is something of both to be found therein, but the latter is preferable as it denotes the undisturbed peace of the Deity in all His proceedings.

Very effective is Hengstenberg in his quotation of the fundamental OT passages:

Habakkuk 2:20: “But the Lord is in his holy temple: let the earth keep silence before him.”

Zephaniah 1:7: “Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God.”

Zechariah 2:13: “Be silent O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation.”

He might have added, from Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen; I will be exalted in the earth.”

The quotation from Zechariah is of special significance, for Zechariah stands very near to John in the nature and purpose of his visions. Zechariah prophesied after the return from the Captivity when the heathen power dominated the world and only the church (the returned exiles of Israel) appeared to be in trouble. (See Zech 1:11) The messages of comfort which came to Zechariah in his visions fulfilled the same purpose as the vision of John the apostle who, like Zechariah, stood for the oppressed church of God in the midst of a hostile world at peace with itself. Hence the warning to the nations in Zechariah – “Be silent O all flesh before the Lord for he is raised up out of his holy habitation” - that is, beware of judgment impending, for God is at last raised up to avenge His people.

There is a noteworthy correspondence in the plan of the judgments as described successively in the Seals, the Trumpets and the Vials of John’s vision. In each case the seven is divide into four and three, the last three being always of more intense severity, and conclusive in their outcome. Again, as the seventh seal introduces the

seven trumpets, so the seventh trumpet introduces the seven vials which appear to be a prolongation of the blast of the last trumpet in a rapid succession of cosmic calamities culminating in the end of the world.

Yet the whole movement of the seals, trumpets and vials is presented in such a way as to show the process is one which is in constant operation throughout history, repeated whenever the power of this world rises in all its pride to destroy the testimony of the church.

“And I saw the seven angels which stood before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.” (v. 2)

Too much must not be made here of the definite article, “THE seven angels.” Seven is a symbolic number throughout the Book and must be understood in terms of perfection and completeness. The angelic agencies in Revelation must be understood in terms of angels in general, and not in particular, unless there is special reason otherwise. The angels are engaged in their ceaseless ministry of carrying out the will of God. The processes of the divine providence in creation are entrusted to them as agents of the Almighty. The number in this case is limited to seven to enforce the specific nature of the judgments which are to ensue but there is no more reason to suppose that there are in fact seven special angels who ‘stand before God’ awaiting commissions, than there is to suppose that Gabriel alone has that office of standing before God when he said to Zacharias in the temple, “I am Gabriel that stand in the presence of God”. (Luke 1:9) As the trumpets they blow and the apocalyptic vials they outpour are neither trumpets nor vials, but only symbols of the judgments represented, so we must view the angelic agency here in general, denoting that God always has His ministers at hand to do His bidding in those realities of which we have here only the symbols or pictures.

PRAYER AND JUDGMENT

“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand.

And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.” (v. 3-5)

The action symbolises the cry of the martyred saints and their many prayers rising up acceptably before God, and the divine reply in the action of the angel casting down upon the oppressors of God’s people the coals of divine wrath. See in Psalm 18 where the church cries unto God in its distress and God “hears in His holy temple”. The earth shakes and trembles; the foundations of the hills are moved, smoke ascends from the divine nostrils, devouring fire proceeds from His mouth, coals are kindled by it; God bows the heaven and comes down, He rides upon the cherubim; the Lord thunders from heaven and the Highest gives forth His voice - hailstones and coals of fire. Thus God answers David and delivers His people in the remarkable terms of the great 18th psalm. John sees the same symbolic process at work in the fire of God, and the burning coals from the heavenly altar cast upon the earth.

All this imagery, in the Old Testament and in the New, illustrates the response of God to the prayers of His afflicted people and the certainty of the overthrow of the enemies who rise to slay and devour. It is the holy and just nature of the judgments of God which are the subject of the vision as we look beyond the apparatus to the vivid reality as first pictured in Psalm 18.

The imagery provides a valuable clue to the understanding what follows as the angels sound their trumpets. We are not to expect just one historic fulfillment. The judgments upon David foes in Psalm 18 become the type of the same judgments describe in John’s vision, and these in turn are repeated as often as the power of this world rises against the church.

EZEKIEL AND JOHN

There is a similar action in Ezekiel which bears a remarkable resemblance to that in Revelation and no doubt helps to form the pattern of the verses we are studying. In chapter 10 Ezekiel sees ‘the likeness of a throne’ and hears the Lord speaking therefrom:

“Go in between the wheels under the cherub and fill thine hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city”. (v. 2)

Ezekiel was prophesying of the divine judgment about to break out against

Jerusalem. The scattering of the coals of fire is a token of God's holy wrath against the aggravated sin of the nation. As the cherubim have no factual existence but are symbolic figures so the parallel action in Revelation 8 requires that the altar seen by John also is symbolic. These early visions of Ezekiel have much in common with those of John that it is obvious we have here the groundwork of John's symbolism and an important key to the understanding of the whole.

In Ezekiel's 9th chapter we have the vision of the six men, each with a destroying weapon in his hand, assembled by God for the destruction of Jerusalem. These are the counterpart of the six trumpet angels of Rev. 8 and 9 (we have already seen that the seventh angel is the Archangel of the 'Last Trump' 1 Thess. 4:16, Rev. 10:7 and 11:15-19). In Ezekiel's vision a man clothed in linen appear and is instructed to mark the foreheads of all who were to be spared in the overthrow of the city, as in the case of the sealing angel in Rev. 7:2-3. The reappearance of these agents in Revelation is designed to show the similarity and permanence of the judgment. In the latter case it is not just one disobedient city which bears the judgment, but the entire kingdom of this world in its opposition to the kingdom of Christ. In John's day that kingdom of the world was represented by Rome, newly risen up to persecute and destroy the people of God. The Historicist brethren therefore are quite right to see in the trumpet judgments the downfall of Rome. They are wrong only insofar as they confine the prophecy to that event and fail to see that Rome herself was only a type of the power of this world in a state of perpetual conflict with the kingdom of Christ. As often as world power rises to scatter and destroy the people of the Lord, so do the trumpets of the Lord's judgments sound anew until at the end of time the last great trumpet announces the coming of the Lord "to execute judgment upon all and to convince all that are ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him". (Jude 15)

We are prepared therefore to see in Revelation a very significant development of Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel was concerned with one event in history, the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon (the first of the four monarchies of Daniel's vision) whereas John's vision looks onward from the Roman persecution to the whole course of the church's history. The divine judgment on proud, imperial Rome becomes the type of all the successive judgments which God reserves to break the power which rises successively against His kingdom. As the first great deliverance of the Old Testament church – the Exodus from Egypt - became the symbol of all subsequent deliverances of the church, so we are not surprised to see in the judgments of Rev. 8 and 9 (and indeed in the subsequent vial judgments of chapter 16) a pattern similar to the plagues which fell upon that first oppressor of the

church, Pharaoh.

THE THEOLOGY of the SECOND PSALM

The theological basis for these judgments must always be found in the Second Psalm. Psalm 2 is David's first, and very appropriately records the resurrection of Christ (compare verse 7 and Acts 13:33) and His prerogative arising out of that event, to rule over the rebellious nations with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel. It is the psalm of the church's confidence in the face of all Satan can bring against her, and as such it forms the ground of that first prophetic prayer of the church in Acts 4:23-30, when the synagogue first rose up to silence the voice of Christ sounding in the midst of His people:

“Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven and earth and the sea and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing....”

By unerring inspiration the NT church arising from the bosom of the ancient church of the OT, in this her first encounter with the world, finds her security and defence on the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, in His rule over the nations of the world and all their kings, potentates, Caesars, and governments, all given into His hand by the Father in accord with that other great psalm of David which declares, “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand until I make thine enemies thy footstool”. (Psalm 110:1)

That same Second Psalm which mightily sets the style of Christ's sovereign rule over the nations, is already quoted in Revelation 6, verse 16:, where the kings of the earth and the great men, the rich, the mighty, and all subjects whether bond or free flee to the dens and rocks of the mountains to be hidden “from the face of him who sitteth on the throne and FROM THE WRATH OF THE LAMB”. David had written, “Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish from the way, WHEN HIS WRATH IS KINDLED BUT A LITTLE”. (Psalm 2:12)

It is a false theology which separates the mercy of God from His righteousness and justice. They who do not fearlessly reckon with the holiness of God will find it an embarrassment to understand the judgments of Revelation, nor will they be able to reckon with the mystery of creation and the problem of evil. A true theology perceives that the meekness and lowliness of the Nazarene are entirely consistent with His fiery indignation against the wicked. They have not begun to know the mystery of the cross who do not perceive how mercy and truth meet together there

(and nowhere else) and righteousness and peace kiss each other. Christ is always both the Lamb and the Lion, and the atonement for sin and the Avenger of justice. The One who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, is red in His apparel because He has sprinkled His garment with the blood of His foes (Isaiah 63:1-6). He whose 'dying crimson like a robe spreads o'er His body on the tree' assumes at His resurrection and exaltation the righteous government of the universe, and dyes His royal robes in the blood of His enemies. He who wept over Jerusalem and cried, "How often would I ... but ye would not" also pronounced upon her the dreadful doom, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate". The awful scenes in Jerusalem's last hours 40 years later were as surely the consequence of 40 years of unbelief in face of invincible evidence of the truth, as they were the righteous exercise of that iron sceptre of justice placed by the Father into hands which were pierced. "Weep not for me but for yourselves and your children," He warned the wailing women who followed the procession to the place of crucifixion.

At the great and final assize which all creation must attend it will be made perfectly clear that eternal love has triumphed over total evil and made it impossible for the problem to arise a second time to trouble creation. The victory of Christ will be total and final as the Book of Revelation assures us. The cross is the regulating factor of all being, and the answer to all questions. There is not nor ever can be, another answer.

"THE BREAKER IS COME UP"

The march of Christ through the wilderness at the head of His people in pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night during the OT deliverance from Egyptian bondage, is the symbol of His spiritual march down the ages at the head of His church.

"The breaker is come up before them: they have broken up and passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them and the Lord on the head of them." Micah 2:13

The fact that His church is poor and despised, weak and often helpless, as a shorn lamb beset by wolves, is no exception to Christ's sovereign care over His flock. The church is in a region of faith, not of sight, and the kingdom of God does not succeed by majorities, like some earthly government. Against enemies more subtle and deadly than Joshua ever encountered the church is carried to victory under the leadership of Him whom Micah describes as "The Breaker", even the Lord Christ

who goes on before His people and breaks open their way.

This is the victory which overcomes, even our faith, in patience and endurance, in suffering and hope. John is taught to inscribe it in his incomparable book in these words: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto the death”. (Rev. 12:11) Their sufferings are at one and the same time a tribute to their devotion to Christ, and an evident token of perdition to their oppressors. Only in a hostile world can faith and love be proved and the patience of hope brought to its highest and most glorious fruition. “They loved not their lives unto the death” is written over the most magnificent periods of the church’s history. However the problem of evil may be solved, it is already established that the character of the One in whose pierced hands the destiny of creation lies, is one who reigns over His kingdom by perfect love, and is the centre of the devotion, worship, and adoration of the redeemed.

“Much incense” (v. 3)

The adjective in this verse intensifies the thought. The incense denotes the acceptability of the prayers of the afflicted church. “Much” incense denotes the special regard the Lord has to the prayers of His afflicted people and His readiness to answer their prayer in all the fulness and majesty of His power. Bengel writes “A mighty power was to be formed, whence again was to arise mighty operation, and a movement extending far and wide.” The greatest power in exercise on the earth is the prayer of the afflicted church, to whom it is given, by her faithful intercession, to bind the kings of earth in chains and their nobles in fetters of iron. (Psalm 148:8-9)

In these days of irresponsible prophetic speculation, men set up for experts on contemporary events supposed to be foretold in scripture. We hear much of nuclear weaponry and innumerable hosts of armed men coming mainly (of course) from Russia and China but little or nothing about the power of faith and prayer. We ought to be told more frequently that the prayers of God’s meek and quiet people are mightier than all the pens of the prophetic speculator and mightier by far than all the hideous and frightful armament of all the world’s embattled hosts put together. We see in these chapters of Revelation how potent are the prayers of the saints against all the pride and all the power of this world.

“The prayers of all saints” (v. 3)

“All saints” must include all in heaven and on earth, for certainly the saints under

the altar (chap. 6:9-11) are being heard at the same time as their brethren on the earth await their turn to witness if need be with their blood; and Paul in Hebrews 12:22-24 reminds us that the church is one in all ages, in heaven and in earth, for “We are come to Mount Zion ... to the general assembly and church of the firstborn written in heaven ... and to the spirits of just men made perfect.”

“There were voices and thunderings and lightnings and an earthquake” (v. 5)

These manifestations of natural phenomena are symbols of the divine judgments about to be poured on the wicked. They are four in number, as four is the mystic number of creation. These judgments therefore are distinguished as universal judgments applying wherever and whenever on earth and in history, the earth power rises up crush the kingdom of Christ. Hengstenberg has a fine summary of this action from which we quote:

“The following may serve for defining the circle within which the Seven Trumpets move. The historical starting point comes first into consideration. The Revelation was occasioned by a severe oppression of the Christian church through the heathen world power. Accordingly we expect such a revelation as will bring destruction to this hostile power, but salvation to the church. Here (chapter 8) the introductory vision of the angel with frankincense is to be taken into account. The fundamental thought is that God will hear the fervent prayers of His struggling and afflicted church and cause His judgments to go forth against the world. Hence only such things can be suitable here as are salutary to the church and destructive to the world.”

“And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire of the Altar and cast it into the earth” (v. 5)

The same censer which held the prayers of the Lord’s people is now filled with judgments to be cast upon the earth. This is intended to show the strong connection between the prayers of God’s people and the Lord’s governmental operations in His judgments against the wicked. This again is another token that in the seven trumpet judgments we do not have a historical sequence long since worked out, but a continuing operation of the principles of God’s holy justice.

THE JERICHO TRUMPETS

We now come more particularly to the successive blasts from the celestial trumpets

which sound the doom of Satan's kingdom. They have much in common with the Jericho trumpets which, on the seventh round of the city on the seventh day of the series, brought down the walls of Jericho, or as the plagues which in their cumulative force brought down the pride of Pharaoh and humbled the might of the world's greatest contemporary military power - so that a nation of slaves marched out unharmed, with their wives and little ones, their cattle and herds, laden with the spoils of Egypt - and not even a dog bayed against them. These historic overthrows are designed by providence to picture the spiritual triumph of the church over all the power of Satan's kingdom in whatsoever form it arises against her.

The Jericho trumpets are singularly adapted to the pattern of the angelic trumpets of Revelation, for it was not until the sounding of the seventh blast that Jericho's walls fell down, and likewise the power of Satan's kingdom in Revelation is not finally destroyed until the seventh trumpet sounds (Rev. 11:15) and signals the end of the world and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God in Christ.

THE FIRST TRUMPET

In the Revelation trumpets we see an intermingling of outward and inward history-cosmic and natural calamities which themselves are symbolic of or associated with the deeper mystery of movements in the unseen realm of the spirit.

“The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.” (v. 7)

This corresponds with the seventh Egyptian plague. (Ex. 9:22-25) Hail is always a symbol of the divine wrath and justice. As it levels the fruitful field and destroys the trees of the forest so the divine judgment levels the pride of man and lays low the great ones of the earth. Trees and grass are OT symbols of the proud rulers of the world and the ungodly multitudes which they lead on to destruction. See Isaiah 2:10-22 - from which we select the following: “The day of the Lord of hosts shall be ... upon all the cedars of Lebanon that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan ... they shall go into the holes of the rocks and into the caves of the earth for fear of the Lord when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth ...” It will be remembered that the judgments of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:15) describe a similar scene of the wicked, with their rulers, fleeing to the rocks and the dens of the mountains. Again Isaiah 40:6-8: “All flesh is as grass ... the people is grass;” and, “All flesh is as grass and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away.” 1 Pet. 1:24

THE SECOND TRUMPET

“And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood:

And the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed.” (v. 8-9)

A burning mountain is, prophetically, a kingdom or an empire cast down to destruction by the judgment of God, as in Jeremiah 51:25: “Behold I am against thee, O destroying mountain (Babylon and Chaldea) saith the Lord: and I will stretch out my hand upon thee, and roll thee down from the rocks, and will make thee a burnt mountain.” This denotes the utter destruction of the power which God has marked for judgment. See also Psalm 46:2: “Therefore will not we fear though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.” The stone cut out without hands (the kingdom of Christ) smites the great image of Daniel 2 and, having utterly destroyed the heathen power becomes “a great mountain which fills the whole earth.” Matthew 21:21 must not be overlooked in this prophetic symbolism for there the Lord foretells the removing and the destruction of the Jewish ‘mountain’ which through the ministry of the apostles would be uprooted and cast into the sea: “If ye have faith and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done unto the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto THIS MOUNTAIN, Be thou removed and cast into the sea; it shall be done.” Earthly Zion was indeed uprooted and cast into the sea of this world’s seething nations, because of its unbelief, even as the blasted fig tree figured the perpetual barrenness henceforth of the Jewish covenant – “Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever.” (v. 19)

We are now in a position to understand the meaning of the first two trumpets. The hail is not natural hail. It is accompanied by fire mingled with blood. It is a symbol of the wrath of a holy God working throughout history to limit and destroy the pride and the power of all which rises against God. The trees and grass are the worldly multitudes and their rulers. The great mountain is any and every organised worldly power which rises against the kingdom of God. The sea is the troubled ocean of wicked men (Isaiah 57:20: “The wicked are like the troubled sea ...”) See also Rev. 17:15: “The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations and tongues;” and Jude 12-13: “These are spots in your feasts of charity, feeding themselves without fear; clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; TREES WHOSE FRUIT WITHERETH,

without fruit, plucked up by the roots; RAGING WAVES OF THE SEA, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.”

The fish of the sea are men, sometimes converted men, rescued by the gospel fishermen from the sea of death (see Ezekiel 47:8-10, where the divine symbolism mocks at all the efforts of superficial prophetism to make Ezekiel’s sanctuary river a natural watercourse flowing through Palestine, whereas John declares that that river is none other than the spiritual river of the Paradise of God (compare Ezek. 47:12 with Rev. 22:1-5).

The ships destroyed in John’s sea in Rev. 8:9, represent the worldly enterprise of mankind, in which man invests his collective hopes. They may be regarded as symbolic of apostate churches, institutions, governments, philosophies, false sciences, and other vanities which possess the minds and inspire the enterprises of unbelieving mankind, all of which are successively doomed to disappointment and destruction.

THE THIRD TRUMPET

“And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters;

And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.” (v. 10-11)

Rivers and fountains of water, embittered by the falling star of Wormwood (“Bitter”); a reference no doubt to the waters of Marah, similarly named (Exodus 15:23-26) sweetened by the tree-type of the Saviour, the trunk felled, but giving life to the world (“The Lord showed him a tree ...” Ex. 15:25). The reversion of the life-giving Gospel fountains to death-dealing bitter waters, takes place whenever the life-giving doctrines of divine grace are corrupted by apostate and carnal religion. The style never changes. In Jewish times the nation was divided between the doctrines of the Sadducees and the Pharisees respectively. We still have them in gentile times. We call them nowadays, rationalists and ritualists. The one boasts of the sovereignty of the human reason and the other of the efficacy of ritual sacramentalism - external observances - to save the soul. Both are enemies of faith and grace. They combine with worldly power (as at Pilate’s judgment seat) to put

truth out of the world. We have them today in the Catholicism which substitutes the outward and the sacramental for the inward and the spiritual, and the fallen Protestantism which by worldly philosophy places the human mind above the revelation of Holy Scripture.

That God permits the process to work itself out in age after age, is a species of the righteous judgment of God, just as much as the more obvious judgments of war, famine and pestilence. There is no need to identify the fallen star Wormwood. He is constantly reappearing throughout history and is very busy today. "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" declares the Saviour (Luke 10:18), a sentence which no doubt is uttered at every fresh phase of Satan's history when the very successes of the gospel open a new chapter of Satan's spite against the human race, permitted by the divine government (as in the case of Job), for the punishment of unbelief and also for the testing and purifying of the faith of God's elect.

Paul warns us to be vigilant and 'look diligently' lest any man fail of the grace of God, lest any ROOT OF BITTERNESS spring up to trouble the church and thereby many be defiled (Hebrews 12:15). "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters" complains the Lord in Jeremiah 2:13, "and hewed themselves out cisterns, broken cisterns, which can hold no water." The Lord describes true believers as those in whom is the well of living water and from whom proceed rivers of living water (John 4:14, and John 7:27-39). In Ezekiel 34:17-19 the Lord judges between cattle and cattle, and to the one, the wicked teachers of Israel, He declares, "Ye have drunk of the deep waters but fouled the residue with your feet." Again in Jeremiah 6:7, God complains of Jerusalem, that "As a fountain casteth out her waters, so she casteth out her wickedness." Wherever there is an apostate church, there the waters become wormwood. The historic succession may be splendid, but written over it is the divine signature, "Rejected".

THE FOURTH TRUMPET

"And the fourth angel sounded and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise." (v. 12)

The ninth, the penultimate, judgment upon Pharaoh and the land of Egypt, was the darkening of the light of heaven. "Stretch out thy hand toward heaven," said the Lord to Moses, "that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt." (Ex. 10:21-23). What was natural in the Egyptian darkness

must surely be spiritual in the Apocalypse. A hint of this is conveyed in the Lord's words to Moses – 'darkness that may be felt' - a phrase which has passed into general currency in the English language as denoting not only physical darkness but the special terrors attaching thereto.

Here then, we surely have the darkening of heavenly light under the parable of those heavenly bodies, sun, moon and stars, which give light and guidance to men, measuring his days and giving him means of direction in the watery waste of ocean or the trackless sand of the desert. To lose one's way in uncharted seas or the desolate howling wilderness is a fate near to despair and death. In the spiritual realm these heavenly bodies represent those means by which God has been graciously pleased to direct men to eternal safety through the light of His Word, and the revelation of Christ in the gospel. God alone is light, and Christ declares, "I am the light of the world." "If the light which is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness." "He hath translated us from the power of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son."

The heaviest judgment ever to fall upon the earth is to be given over to the power of darkness. It is of this darkness the fourth trumpet speaks. We will have noticed that all four trumpets have to do with "the third part of the earth" - a phrase we shall reckon with presently. The limitation of the extent of these judgments should put us on our guard against any easy or sensational conclusions such as are beloved so much today by thoughtless prophetism. These judgments have a deep moral and spiritual significance.

What we are seeing in the fourth trumpet is the diminution of gospel light wherever the Word of God is repudiated. The present state of Jewry with the veil of darkness still upon its soul after two thousand years is a solemn warning to all nations and generations to whom the Word of God has come, to beware of lightly casting aside such privileges. Paul tells us "their minds were blinded, for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament, which veil is done away in Christ." (2 Cor. 3:13-18). Again, "The god of this world (Satan) bath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ who is the image of God should shine unto them." (2 Cor. 4:4, etc.)

The messages to the seven churches at the beginning of Revelation are full of solemn warning to those to whom the Word of God has come telling them of the judgments which await those churches which, however apostolically founded, leave their first love, or tolerate fatal error, or soil their garments, or boast of their

(spiritual) riches. The last state of the world before judgment is one in which Satan has been purposely “loosed” from his confinement to torment a world which after the ages of gospel opportunity has finally (like the world before the Flood) turned away from the light and given itself over to violence and corruption.

This solemn fourth trumpet therefore shows how successively in history this principle comes into operation. Where now are the seven churches of Asia? Where now is the empire of Rome? Where is the one-time supremacy of Spain, foremost in opposing the work of Reformation? Whither Europe today, after two thousand years of gospel light and privilege. What fate awaits Britain? America? How long does the divine patience last before the terrible decree begins to run – “Darken their sun: Take away their guiding signs: Let deadly darkness and death descent upon those apostate churches!” “If God spared not the natural branches, take heed that he spare not thee” (Romans 11:21). The world’s greatest sin is unbelief.

How can it be considered (some may ask) that God should ever deliberately withdraw His Word from a nation or a generation? The answer is, He has already done so in the case of the chosen nation of Israel. Light is withdrawn from those who reject it, and they are given up to the darkness which they have chosen. The gospel is withdrawn from those nations and generations who fight against it. European history records a great period of time known generally as “The Dark Ages” because of the general blight of ignorance and superstition which fell upon the great continent where the greatest triumphs of the gospel had been recorded.

Was it for Israel alone that Amos records, “Behold the days Come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, - not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. And they shall wander from sea to sea and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord and shall not find it”? (Amos 8:11-12). Have we considered those solemn words of Paul, “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for, but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded, according as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this day”? (Romans 11:7-8).

Mercy is a divine prerogative, but hardness of heart is a judgment upon all who against light choose the darkness, as in the case of Pharaoh (Romans 9:16-18). An evil spirit was commissioned by the throne of a righteous God to persuade Ahab to go to battle at Ramoth Gilead, for despite all the deliverances God had given him and the peerless witness of the prophet Elijah, he remained impenitent, choosing death rather than life, and darkness in the place of light (1 Kings 22). Let no reader

of these lines stumble at these features of God's all-wise, all-righteous rule in creation. Paul with prophetic vision looks into the future and sees the rise of a great antichristian tyranny in the very bosom of the church, and declares, "For this cause **GOD SHALL SEND THEM A STRONG DELUSION THAT THEY SHOULD BELIEVE A LIE**, that they all might be damned who believe not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness". (2 Thess. 2:11-12)

In Revelation 20 we are shown that He who binds Satan is also He who sets him loose again. Job has shown us that Satan is not a second force in the universe, but the slave of providence, serving the interests of the throne of God though it is not in his thought so to serve. The greatest imprisonment is to be held in our own sins, victims of our own darkened minds.

CHRIST'S IRON SCEPTRE

Ungodliness in nations comes just as much under the iron sceptre of Christ's judgment as apostasy in churches. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and righteousness of men, who hold the truth of the sacredness of their own being, in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). Paul declares in the continuity of that same passage that there is no excuse for human ignorance of God, for that which may be known of Him is clearly seen from the creation of the world, even His eternal power and Godhead. Significantly he adds, in parallel with the judgment of darkness pronounced in Revelation 8, that because they extinguished the knowledge of God in themselves by their thanklessness, perversion and vanity, therefore "their foolish heart was darkened," God "gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves, who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator."

The God who gave His Son to die for sinful man, now gives up the incorrigible and the apostate to the vile affections which they have chosen (v. 26). They turn the 'natural use' of the relation between men and women into 'that which is against nature'. Men, burning in their ungovernable lust, turn to unnatural vice. Modern civilisation, once governed by Christian principles, now gives itself over to disgusting and depraving practices, and there are not wanting scientists, theologians, philosophers, psychologists and political theorists in the seats of government and power, who declare what is unnatural and against nature, to be 'just as we are made' and therefore no sin. Paul gave the answer to this hellish philosophy long ago:

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things which are not convenient.”
(See the entire passage in Romans 1:18-32)

If the darkness now falling upon our Western civilisation, as shown in the subversive legislation in favour of sodomy, abortion, atheistic education, and scientific materialism, is not a darkening of sun, moon and stars in the firmament of modern thought, religion and philosophy, we do not know what is. Its end product is likely to be worse in its consequences than all the cruel wars fought on the historic battlefields of the world.

“THE THIRD PART” of the Human Race

There has been much dispute among the commentators as to the meaning of this phrase, “the third part”, recurring constantly the account of the trumpet judgments. It occurs also, but with different purpose in Ezekiel 5:2, 12, and Zech. 13: 8, 9. Most writers consider it to mean the partial or preparatory nature of these judgments. Others, as Mede, see it as a description of the Roman Empire which occupied roughly the third part of the then known world. Elliott, writing later than Mede, thought it described the Western Empire after the unwieldy dominion was divided into three by Constantine the Great.

Both these writers came close, but fell short of the true significance of the passage because of their preoccupation with past history. They failed to see the much deeper meaning which did not expire with the demise of the Western Empire, but belongs just as much to the whole Church Era.

We trace the significance of the phrase, “the third part” to the great Noahic prophecy of the destiny appointed to the race after the Flood, when God apportioned the earth between the three sons of Noah, - Shem, Ham and Japheth. The importance of this division was emphasised by Moses (in Deut. 32:8) – “When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel”. That is, the earth was divided after the Flood, and allocated to the three main branches of the human race, according to God’s plan of redemption. It is important to recognise that all history revolves around the church (of OT and NT), and only so can history be understood and show any meaning. The division then made endures to this day.

To Shem was given the continent of Asia, to Ham that of Africa, and to Japheth,

Europe. Following the shame of Noah, the prophecy rose that the spiritual prerogative would be Shem's. From him would come the promised Seed of the Woman to deliver from sin and death. "Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan (son of Ham) shall be his servant."

"Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren."

"God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant" (See Genesis 9:25-27, Acts 17:26).

History records that the Word of God remained first with Shem, and through him, via Eber (from whom the Hebrew nation derives its name) and Abraham, to the nation of Israel and ultimately to Christ.

Yet the first political empire was achieved by Ham through his grandson Nimrod, the founder of the first world empire centred on Babel and its tower (a ruin still 300 feet high in Mesopotamia). That this empire was a usurpation is secured by the fact that to Ham Africa was designated, not Asia, hence Egypt is known in the psalms as 'the land of Ham' (Ps. 78:51). Ham was therefore the first persecutor of the church.

It was then that the right of Shem to be the channel by which the blessing of salvation was to be brought to mankind, began to be asserted. The Hamitic tribes fled to Africa following the appalling judgment of the Confusion of Tongues, and Japheth's people crossed the Hellespont into what we now know as Europe, where they remained in isolation for many ages until the time came when the Word of God would transform their condition.

Meanwhile the people of Shem never lost the original deposit of the Word of God, as the ancient Book of Job clearly shows, especially that glorious 19th chapter where in a moment of prophetic elevation Job anticipated the fulfillment of the promise concerning the Seed of the Woman: "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth". Armed with this promise, Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees and traveled by the river valleys to reach the Land of Promise from the north. We know the remainder of the story: the preservation of the Promise; its enlargement All continuous revelation in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David the king, and the prophets of Israel until the last of the prophetic line, John the Baptist, identified the Son of God as the Lamb to take away the sin of the world.

Christ refers to this threefold division of the human race in the parable of the leaven (Matt. 13:33): “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened”. The three measures can mean nothing else than the full extent of the human race in that threefold division fixed by the wisdom of God after the Flood. The special privileges of the divine favour were given first of all to Shem, but afterwards to Japheth who should thus ‘dwell in the tents of Shem’ - that is, inherit the privileges which Shem forfeited through unbelief when Messiah was rejected and crucified. The servitude of Ham – the African races - was to be perpetual. History has marvelously verified this prophecy down to the present day.

The divine initiative in redemption began to pass from Shem to Japheth when Paul, the apostle to the gentiles (Japheth) was summoned from Asia to Europe across the Hellespont, in his vision at Troas (Troy) (Acts 16:6-11). Ever since, the evangelisation of the world and the subjugation of its vast open spaces - chiefly the Americas, long isolated by two mighty oceans, and only late on in time brought into the general picture of world history - have rested in the dynamism and restless will to conquer, reposed by divine providence in the third son of Noah.

Above all, the Japhetic territory was destined to be the home of the church and the scene of the greatest triumphs of the Word of God. It is in this ‘third part of the earth’ that the history of the church has mainly been written, and the emphasis in Rev. 8-9 to this ‘third part of the earth’ seems clear when we consider that the first uprising of gentile (Japhetic) power against the kingdom of Christ was the occasion for the writing of this Book.

Here in Japhetic territory the church has fought her greatest battles for the truth. Here she has won her outstanding triumphs. Here she has proved her faith, her love, her loyalty, to her Redeemer. The story of the church has been written largely in Japhetic blood and tears. Brethren, we have a goodly heritage!