

## WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

### The Vast Throng from Among the Nations (7:9-17)

#### THE TRIBULATIONAL VIEWS

*At this point it may be helpful to address briefly the three major tribulation viewpoints that have arisen in the past couple of centuries. Early Christianity up until the early 1800s held a fairly consistent view that Christians would face the great tribulation and the anti-Christ at the close of the age. However, with the development of dispensationalism in the 1830s, which championed the idea that God's people would be evacuated from the earth prior to the great tribulation, three different options have developed.*

**Pretribulation Theory**, which is the dispensational viewpoint, is that Christ will “rapture” (this word comes from the Latin Vulgate) believers, which is to say, he will evacuate them from the earth prior to the great tribulation, thus exempting them from facing the anti-Christ. The primary biblical text is 1 Th. 4:13-18.

**Midtribulation Theory**, which developed later, is that Christ will “rapture” believers in the middle of the tribulation period, and this event is believed to be described in Rev. 10 and 11.

**Posttribulation Theory**, which is the oldest of the views going back to primitive Christianity, is that believers at the end of the age will face the powers of evil and the anti-Christ. Some, perhaps many, will face martyrdom. The language in the Revelation of “saints” and “those who have the testimony of Jesus” and “apostles and prophets” are references to Christians on the earth.

If the previous vision describes the people of God from one perspective, the succeeding vision describes them from another. Together, the two visions define the curious but wonderful paradox of the church. In the first sense, they are the true Israel, but in the second sense, they come from all the nations. In the first sense, they are particular in number, for God definitely knows his own. In the second sense they are innumerable, just as God's promise to Abraham was that his progeny would be innumerable. The first vision pictures the church on the brink of the great tribulation (7:1-4); the second vision pictures the church as victorious before heaven's throne at the end of the great tribulation. (7:9-17)

For the Christians of John's era, who were facing tremendous opposition from the Roman government and who might well have assumed that they were themselves entering the great tribulation, the knowledge that God had sealed them beforehand as well as the promise that he would guarantee their perseverance were two stabilizing forces!

The question may be entertained as to whether the great throng represents martyrs. There is nothing to indicate a clear answer one way or another. The point being made is that they are victorious. Neither the sealing of the 144,000 (the picture of the church entering the great tribulation) nor the victory of the great throng (the picture of the church emerging from the great tribulation) prohibits martyrdom. The people of God are shielded from the wrath of the Lamb, but they may very well endure the wrath

of God's enemies (cf. Re. 12:11, 17; 13:7; 17:6). On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that all of God's people to the last person will be annihilated by the powers of evil. Jesus seemed to indicate that there would be non-martyred survivors precisely because the time of the tribulation would be short (Mt. 24:21-22).

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Why do you think the idea of the pretribulation rapture has become so popular in America and elsewhere?*
- *From where does the idea come that the 144,000 are Jewish evangelists?*
- *Could the two visions of God's people—the 144,000 and the great multitude—simply be different metaphors for the same group, one depicting the community before the great tribulation and the other anticipating its triumph when the tribulation is over?*

### The Seventh Seal (8:1-5)

With the preparation of God's people for the tribulation and the assurance that they would be preserved by God, the 7<sup>th</sup> seal was opened. The silence in heaven was like the lull before the storm, for out of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal would proceed the second septet of judgments in the imagery of the seven angels with seven trumpets. (The imagery of seven angels comes from Tobit 12:15 and the apocalyptic book of 1 Enoch 20:7).

The vision of the incense being cast into the earth gathers together two pictures previously given. First, the incense consists of the prayers of the people of God which are offered in worship by the twenty-four elders (5:8). Second, the prayers of the saints are specifically said to be prayers for vindication (6:9-11). The call for God to vindicate the righteous and to avenge the wicked is a frequent petition in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 109:6-15; 137:8-9). Jesus himself promised speedy justice for his praying, oppressed people (Lk. 18:7-8). Thus, when the prayers and incense were collected in the censer and hurled onto the earth, the imagery forcefully indicates that God is now ready to answer the prayers of his people for vindication.

### THE JUDGMENTS OF THE SEVEN TRUMPETS: 8:6--11:19

When the seventh seal had been broken, seven angels with seven trumpets appeared, ready to sound. The symbolism of trumpets was deeply rooted in Israel's history as a call to war (Jg. 3:27; 7:17-22; Ne. 4:18; Eze. 33:1-4; Jl. 2:1; Zep. 1:15-16), as a call for the redemptive gathering of God's people (Zec. 9:14), and as the coronation of God as the King over the earth (Ps. 47:5-9; 98:4-9). With each trumpet, a plague representing divine retribution is poured out over the world. The plagues are not merely retributive but also evangelistic (9:20-21). God's people, though they might suffer at the hands of their enemies, would not suffer from the Lamb's wrath, but like the ancient Israelites in Egypt, would be protected. The trumpets serve both as a sound of judgment for God's enemies and equally as a sound of victory for God's people.



*Trumpets from Jerusalem's temple taken by the Romans as spoils of war, AD 70 (Arch of Titus)*

### The First Four Trumpets (8:7-12)

Like the first four seals, the first four trumpets are closely

related in that together they affect the natural elements of *land, sea, rivers* and *sky*. The exodus motif of the judgments comes through unmistakably.

#### Exodus Plaques

*Hail & Lightning*      *Ex. 9:22-26*  
*Water turned to Blood*      *Ex. 7:19-22*  
*Darkness*      *Ex. 10:21-23*

#### Trumpet Plaques

*Hail & Fire*      *Re. 8:7*  
*Sea turned to Blood*      *Re. 8:8*  
*Darkness*      *Re. 8:12*

As in Egypt, the saints are under fierce opposition from the anti-Christ, and the wrath of the Lamb upon the enemy's land heralds the release of God's elect.

The reader should probably understand the fractions of a third of the sun and moon being darkened as indications that the judgments are partial and preliminary not total and final. Fractions in apocalyptic literature are usually not intended in a mathematical way. The imagery of wormwood apparently comes from Jeremiah's prediction of doom on the disobedient and the false prophets of Israel (9:15; 23:15).

### **The Trumpet Woes (8:13--9:21)**

Whereas the first four trumpet judgments primarily affect the natural elements and only secondarily affect humans, the last three trumpet judgments are directed toward the rebellious human population. They are called "woes" (Jer. 8:13; 9:12), a familiar designation of judgments in the Old Testament prophets.

The plague of the fifth trumpet (the first woe) is precipitated by a figure symbolized first as a fallen star (9:1) and later described as the Angel of the Abyss or the Destroyer (9:11). While he is not identified further, many if not most interpreters see him as Satan himself, the fallen Lucifer (cf. Is. 14:12-15; Lk. 10:18; Jn. 10:10), and later, the imagery of falling stars is applied to the minions of the Great Red Dragon (12:4). In whatever way he is to be identified, whether as Satan himself or a high-level demon, he unlocks the Abyss in order to unleash demon-hordes upon the earth. The imagery of the demon-hordes is taken from Joel's locust prophecy (Jl. 1:4; 2:1-11, 25). The cumulative effect of the invasion is one of horror and relentless torment.

The plague of the sixth trumpet (the second woe) involves the release of four angels from the Euphrates River, who were to slay a third of the human race (and, again, the fraction is probably not to be taken mathematically). The significance of the Euphrates River is that it formed the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Though Rome, representing earthly political powers, was persecuting the church, Rome would herself be judged by God. Neither the angels nor the 200,000,000 mounted troops are directly identified. The combination of fire, smoke, and sulfur, however, certainly suggest a hellish origin (cf. 9:2; 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8). If so, then this incredible and grotesque cavalry, like the locusts in the previous trumpet judgment, would be demonic.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A word should here be said about the popular dispensational interpretation that this army is from Communist China. Completely apart from the fact that there is nothing in the imagery in and of itself to suggest China, it should be noted that the Euphrates River is a minimal barrier for modern China—far less a barrier than the mountain ranges which separate China from the Middle East (cf. 16:12). The assumption that anything east of the Euphrates River must automatically mean China is unfounded. Further, the assertion that the phrase "kings from the rising of the sun" (βασιλέων τῶν ἀπὸ ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου, 16:12) must be a clear designation for China completely misunderstands the

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- *If the plagues of the trumpet judgments parallel the plagues of Egypt, what might such a parallel suggest concerning a final redemptive event for the people of God?*
- *Often the question about literalism arises, some (usually dispensationalists) urging that to be faithful to the Revelation as the Word of God, one must take everything as literally as possible. What do you think of this demand?*
- *Do you think the demon-hordes could be emissaries from the anti-Christ in the sense of false teachers who spread deception along the lines of 1 Jn. 2:18-26 and 4:1-3?*

### The Angel and the Little Scroll (10:1-11)

Just as there was an interlude between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> seals, so there is an interlude between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> trumpets. In the first interlude there were two scenes, the vision of the 144,000 and the vision of the innumerable multitude standing before heaven's throne. Here are also two scenes, the vision of the angel with the little scroll and the vision regarding the two witnesses. The effect of these interludes is to set off as especially important the final action of God in the series of judgments.

The scene is set with the description of a mighty angel who descends from heaven holding an open scroll. At his loud shout, seven thunders respond, though John was forbidden to record their utterances, suggesting that the future is still to some degree hidden but with a premonition of judgment still to come. The rumble of thunder in the apocalypse is associated with the coming of judgment, just as in nature it heralds an approaching storm (cf. 4:5; 6:1; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; 19:6).

A solemn announcement is made by the mighty angel with upraised hand, the visible symbol of oath-taking (cf. Dt. 32:40)<sup>2</sup>. The announcement indicates that the cry of the martyrs is about to be answered. They had called for vengeance, asking, "How long?" (6:10). At that time, they were told to wait a little longer. Now the waiting is over; there will be no more delay.<sup>3</sup> When the seventh angel shall blow the trumpet, the redemptive plan of God will reach its climax with the salvation of God's people, the consummation of the kingdom of God, and the judgment of his enemies (cf. 11:15-18). This prophetic word about the world's redemption would be bitter-sweet, similar to the oracles of Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Eze. 3:1-4; Jer. 15:16-18).

Some have associated the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet and the phrase "mystery of God" with Paul's "last trump" and "mystery" of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. This association would be attractive were it not for the severe anachronism it produces. Having Paul allude to something in John's revelation before it was even written could hardly have made sense to the Corinthian readers of the letter. It is probably best to take the phrase "mystery of God" in the sense of God's secret redemptive purpose which was made known through Christ Jesus (cf. Ro. 16:25-26).

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Greek idiom, which only means somewhere to the east in a general way (cf. Mt. 2:1; 8:11; Rev. 7:2; 21:13). The most questionable aspect regarding this interpretation is the happy confidence with which it is propounded and defended as though it were a plain statement in the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew expression for swearing an oath is *נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת־יָדִי* (= I have lifted the hand), cf. Ex. 6:8; Eze. 20:5.

<sup>3</sup> The KJV words, "there should be time no longer," has given rise to the mistaken interpretation that this demarcates time from eternity. The point is not that time ceases, but that the delay in answering the martyrs' call is over.