

ANGELS OF DOOM

by Ray C. Stedman

In our studies in the book of Revelation we have been following the unrolling of the seven-sealed scroll which the Lamb of God won the right to open by his death upon the cross. The title of that scroll is "The Mystery of God," and when we come to Chapter 10 we will read that that mystery -- exactly how God is going to bring about universal peace and joy to a sinful, angry, and murderous world -- is completed.

God is doing that very thing with individuals even today. Many of you here have experienced the peace and joy which God gave you in the midst of the struggles and trials of your life. He does that by grace, by the offer of total forgiveness of sin. But to a world that rejects grace, God can only bring peace through judgment. That is what we are seeing in this book. Six of the seven seals have already been opened when we come to Chapter 8, and we have watched the waves of successive judgments roll across the earth. We learn from the prophet Daniel that these cover a seven-year period in the last days of this age. Under the seals, it is covered from one point of view, i.e., what happens when man is allowed to have his own way. All God does is to take away the restraints and let human evil find wider expression. It is limited slightly (to a fourth of the earth), but it finds far greater expression than it does today.

That brings us then to the seventh seal which is now opened to us, in Chapter 8:

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

And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. {Rev 8:1-2 NIV}

It must indeed have been an embittered and chauvinistic commentator who first suggested that this half an hour silence proves there will be no women in heaven!

That, of course, is not the reason for it. This word about silence reminds us of the prophet Habakkuk's cry, "The Lord is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!" {Hab 2:20 KJV}. This silence comes as a dramatic contrast to the shouting of praise and the playing of harps that has been going on in heaven up to this point. Millions of angels, hosts of redeemed humans, and other heavenly creatures have been crying out before the throne of God, and singing praises to him. But now suddenly everything ceases. When the seventh seal is opened there is total silence. It is a most dramatic pause. It reminds one of that moment of silence just before the last great "Hallelujah!" in the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah. This is the silence of mystery, a silence of intense anticipation of what is about to happen.

Our good friend, Earl Palmer, in his commentary on Revelation says, "It communicates in a dramatic way the full and awesome authority of God. Everything must wait for his kingly move."

That move begins, as this account tells us, with seven angels being given seven trumpets to sound. It is all part of the opening of the seventh seal. These are impressive angels indeed. We are told they are the angels "who stand before God." That calls to mind the story in Luke 1:19 of an angel sent to Joseph to tell him that Mary will be the mother of a child. The angel identifies himself as "Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God," {cf, Luke 1:19 NIV}. These seven angels are probably archangels, and they are given an extremely important task in the sounding of these trumpets. They doubtless include Michael the archangel, who appears also in the book of Daniel. In fact, the apocryphal book of Enoch, an ancient book which is not part of our Bible, gives the names of all seven angels. They are Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sarakiel, Gabriel, and Phanuel. Notice, their names all end in "el," which is short for the name of God. These are "angels of God," powerful angels, who are given these trumpets to sound. Before they blow the trumpets another dramatic scene is recorded.

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. {Rev 8:3-5 NIV}

Many of the expositors of Revelation identify this angel as Jesus himself. The reason is that in the Old Testament, while Israel is marching through the wilderness, they are led by a great angel called "the Angel of Yahweh," or, "the Angel of Jehovah." Most Bible scholars feel that it was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ, i.e., the Son of God himself, leading his people through the wilderness. Since Israel is in the forefront again in this book of Revelation, then it would make sense that the Angel of the Lord appears again in connection with that nation.

The New Testament also teaches us that Jesus is a great High Priest for his people. The book of Hebrews, and a reference of Paul in Romans 8:34, tell us that Jesus is now a High Priest who "makes intercession for the saints," {Heb 3:1, et al, Rom 8:34 KJV}. This is clearly what this angel-priest is doing here. He takes fire from the brazen altar, adds to it incense, along with the prayers of the saints, and offers them on the golden altar of incense before God. It is a wonderful portrayal that tells us much about the function of prayer.

Do you ever feel that your prayers are not even heard, let alone answered? According to this, the prayers of saints, especially intercessory prayers (those we pray for others), are like fragrance in the nostrils of God. They delight him. He smells in them a remembrance of the character of Jesus, the One who gave himself for others. As these prayers are mingled with the incense provided by the great angel himself, (who may indeed be Christ), they delight God. But, more than that, they move God to action. If burning incense is symbolic of the prayers of saints who are imploring God to act -- then returning that fire to earth is a symbol of answered prayer. In other words, we have now come to the time when God will answer the prayers of his people.

What is the result? We read, "there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake." You may remember that in 4:5 these were the first sounds that John heard coming from the throne of God in the opening scene in heaven. He heard "flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder," {Rev 4:5b NIV}. Here an earthquake is added to that as well. These sights and sounds mark the close of man's age, and the opening of God's kingdom upon earth.

In Chapter 11, at the last of the blowing of trumpets, we learn that when the seventh angel blows his trumpet the same sounds are heard and an angel proclaims that, "the kingdoms of men have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ," {cf, Rev 11:15b}. The scroll is then fully unrolled. These sounds come at the end of each of the series of seven: The seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of the wrath of God. Thus we learn here at the opening of this seventh seal, when the great Angel casts the fire of God back upon the earth, that the day has come when God answers fully the prayers of his people.

There is one prayer that the people of God in all ages have been praying that has never yet been answered. It is clear from the Scriptures that this prayer was prayed by the saints of God from the dawn of the race. Adam probably prayed it when he left the Garden of Eden. Noah undoubtedly prayed it when he came out of the ark into a new world after the flood. Abraham surely prayed it as he looked for a City yet to come. King David prayed it, and, when we come to the New Testament, all the apostles, including Paul, prayed this prayer. It is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2 KJV}. That prayer has never yet been answered. We have not seen God's kingdom visibly on earth. Invisibly it is present in the church and is seen in the rule of God over the affairs of men, but visibly the prayer has never been answered. But when we come to the end of these three series of judgments we will find that the prayers of men are at last to be fulfilled.

Let us come back to the seventh trumpet which probably begins what Jesus called in his Olivet Discourse, "the great tribulation." In Matthew 24 he says, "For then there shall be great distress [tribulation], unequalled from the beginning of the world until now -- and never to be equaled again," {cf, Matt 24:21 NIV}. It is the very acme of judgment.

At Revelation 8:6 we come to one of the most difficult sections of the book to interpret. There is much debate as to whether these judgments are literal, reflecting some physical judgment upon the earth, or symbolic, a picture of something else much worse. My own view is that they are both! This is how God frequently works. He pictures something invisible by means of a literal event. For instance, the sun is, of course, literal. It is a great shining star that warms our earth and keeps the whole solar system working. But it is at the same time symbolic, and is so used throughout Scripture. We refer to it in everyday life as a symbol of light, knowledge and truth. Fire, too, is literal. You can burn yourself badly with fire -- but it is also symbolic of torment, torture and judgment.

The prophecy of Joel in the Old Testament opens with a vivid description of a plague of locusts that came upon the earth and ate up every green thing. Joel describes them in dramatic and accurate terms but his description soon becomes a description of the invasion of a great army from Babylon that will soon come into the land.

Israel, throughout its history, used literal trumpets to indicate public warning of imminent action. So, through this series of seven trumpets we are hearing God's public announcement of severe judgment that is about to take place. These judgments are not something new in history. God has often acted in judgment upon men. Even today he is speaking to us of terrible moral failures by using actual literal events.

Take, for instance, the drug scourge which is such an enormous problem in our day, especially among our youth. Drugs destroy the mind, burn out the brain, and turn people into worse than beasts and animals. What is this scourge saying? Not only is it literal, but it is symbolizing the terrible danger of self-indulgence -- the philosophy of self-fulfillment that is widely advocated in the media today. Self-indulgence, like cocaine or crack, lures us on by giving a sense of fulfillment and immediate pleasure. But the user is drawn on into a continuing orgy of self-indulgence until he finally finds himself living in the suffocating atmosphere of total self-centeredness. The drug scourge is the visual aid that God has given our generation to make us see what is happening to us at the root of our being. How blind we are to it! Jesus once rebuked the Pharisees of his day because they could interpret the signs of bad weather ahead, but they did not know how to understand the times.

The AIDS epidemic is a very literal, frightening plague that has come upon us. It is consuming life after life in many countries today. I talked the other day with a doctor friend who has been recently in Africa. He told me that 50% of the women and 30% of the men in Uganda have AIDS. That country is facing almost total annihilation because of this fearful plague. We know how widespread it is here. It is literal, but what does it also symbolize? Just as AIDS robs people of their immunity against other infections, so, the Bible says, indulgence in sexual promiscuity robs us of any defense against the widespread theological and moral errors of our day. That is why people go for strange cults and strange teachings on every side today. They are easy prey because their moral defenses have been torn down by sexual promiscuity. They have no moral immunity left. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he lists certain wrongful sexual activities, and says, "Because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient," {cf, Eph 5:16 NIV}.

The terrible scourge of abortion today, this awful murdering of unborn children, is obviously literal. The whole country is being torn apart over this issue at this present hour. But what is it saying, what is it picturing to us? I think it pictures the moral sacrifice of our children, the loss of a whole generation of young people who are not being taught the truth about God. Watch them on the streets and in the ghettos of our great cities. Look into their listless, dull eyes. We are losing them. Like the ancient people of Israel, we are throwing our children into the vast burning yaw of the god Molech, deliberately sacrificing them to our self-centeredness. Abortion makes it horribly visible to those who wish to see.

Now let us look at these trumpets and see what they portend.

The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. {Rev 8:7 NIV}

This is very similar to the seventh plague that fell on Egypt during Moses' confrontation of Pharaoh, when hail

and lightning came upon the whole land. Here, it is mingled with blood. This is not a new phenomenon. Scientists have recorded other times when red rain fell from the sky. They never could explain it fully, but it actually left great puddles of water that were as red as blood. Here is the same plague hitting the earth. It brings terrible destruction of the natural world. Notice that the plagues of the first four trumpets all fall on creation. This is, in a sense, God's judgment upon a race that destroys its environment. He is saying, in effect, "You want a destroyed world -- then you shall have it." This is fully in line with his methods of judgment.

But the destruction is not only literal, it is also symbolic. It is teaching something invisible to the eyes of men at that time. As we have already noted, the earth is used in Scripture as a picture of Israel, the intended model nation under God. Here is depicted a judgment upon Israel, both on its leaders (the trees), and upon its people (the grass). The prophet Jeremiah and other prophets of the Old Testament call attention to a time when God will judge his people Israel. Let me read such a prediction from the prophecy of Zephaniah. God says:

"At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.' Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine." {Zeph 1:12-13 NIV}

Jeremiah calls this, "the time of Jacob's trouble," {Jer 30:7 KJV}. That is the effect of the first trumpet.

The second one follows:

The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. {Rev 8:8-9 NIV}

The first trumpet judgment attacked the earth but this attacks the sea. A great blazing mountain is seen falling into the sea. Perhaps it is a volcanic eruption. It may be Mount Etna on the island of Sicily which volcanologists say is ready to blow its top, like Mt. St. Helens. Many scholars feel that the sea on which this judgment falls is the Mediterranean. Or perhaps it is a meteor falling out of space into the ocean. At any rate, the sea literally becomes blood red. Once again, this is not unknown. Every now and then the papers report what is called a "red tide" which appears in the sea and turns large areas of the ocean blood red. A tiny marine organism, red in color, multiplies at such an enormous rate that it makes the water look like blood. This plague destroys many of the living creatures in the sea; the ships are destroyed and the commerce of the ocean reduced by a third.

But if it is literal, it is also symbolic. The symbol of a great mountain blazing with fire is that of a kingdom aflame with revolution. Jeremiah, for instance, describes Babylon as just such a mountain. He calls it a "blazing mountain" which is the destroyer of the earth {cf, Jer 51:24-26}. It probably pictures, as we gather from other Scriptures, the rise of what is popularly called "the revived Roman Empire," the ten-kingdomed coalition of Western Europe and the Western allied nations under the antichrist, which conquers the other nations of the earth. The sea is used frequently as a picture of the Gentile nations of earth.

Again, it is limited to one-third. Notice the repetition of this word "the third" all through the series of trumpet judgments. Under the seals the limitation was one-fourth of the earth. That is very meaningful. Four is the number of human government, and under the seal judgments God is saying that he uses human government to limit the onslaught of the four terrible horsemen of Chapter 6. Human government still retains some vestige of restraining power during those days. But here, even that is gone, and under the trumpet judgments only God himself restrains. Three is the divine number and this is declaring that only God's mercy and God's grace limits these awful judgments to one-third of the earth.

Now we come to the third trumpet,

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water -- the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters

that had become bitter. {Rev 8:10-11 NIV}

This great star which falls into the rivers and the fountains of earth, is very likely a comet which breaks up when it enters the atmosphere and scatters itself throughout the earth, falling into the rivers and springs and poisoning them with what is probably a form of radiation. We have had, perhaps, a kind of a foregleam of this and a note of warning from God, in the terrible atomic accident that happened in Russia some years ago. It occurred at a city named Chernobyl -- and Chernobyl is the Russian word for Wormwood!

I read in the paper yesterday that a new comet has been spotted in the skies. It has been given the name "Austin," and will become in April the brightest object in the night sky. These comets flash into our solar system unexpectedly at times. No one knows where they come from or when they will arrive, and a new one has now been spotted. I am not saying it is the great star predicted here, but it indicates the suddenness by which such comets can appear.

At the same time that this physical event takes place, it will also symbolize something to happen in the invisible realm of man's internal life. Rivers, of course, symbolize masses of people moving in the same direction -- whole peoples who are caught up with one idea and moving like a river does in a predictable direction. The fountains denote the sources of moral or philosophical leadership, and a star is in Scripture the symbol of a prominent leader. It appears that some great personage, widely recognized as a leader, suddenly reverses his policy -- he "falls" in that sense. Many people are embittered by this and set against one another, resulting in widespread moral death. That is exactly what will be described later in Revelation under the rule of the Beast that comes from the earth, as we will see. We will find a similar "star" in Chapter 9 when we hear the fifth and sixth trumpets of judgment. I will leave it at that for the moment.

The fourth angel sounds as recorded in Verse 12:

The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. {Rev 8:12 NIV}

Without preliminary comment I would like to read to you our Lord's word, recorded in the 21st chapter of Luke, where Luke gives his account of the Sermon on the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus says:

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken." {Luke 21:25-26 NIV}

That clearly is a reference to this same event under the fourth trumpet. But not only is it literal -- the sun and the moon and the stars are, for one reason or another, darkened and fail to give their light for much of the time -- but it also symbolizes something. Sun, moon and stars are used in various places in Scripture to typify earthly authorities. The highest, of course, is the king or president. He would be portrayed as the sun, and those under him would be as the moon and the stars. They symbolize a hierarchy of authority. But what does this darkening mean, metaphorically? It pictures light withdrawn from the authorities of earth. They are morally darkened and no longer display moral judgment. They are not governed by any sense of ethical restraint but become characterized by increasing deceit, treachery, merciless cruelty and a total lack of justice. Yet by the grace of God this darkening is still limited to one-third. Some restraint of evil is yet possible, but only by the sovereign grace of a sovereign God!

Verse 13 now warns us of an eagle who comes to declare that there is much worse yet to come. If you have a King James text, it reads "angel," but the better manuscripts use "eagle" here.

As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!" {Rev 8:13 NIV}

Three great disasters are yet ahead, and these "woe" judgments are to fall upon the "inhabitants of the earth."

That is not a very accurate translation. It is, literally, "those who make their home on earth." It does not mean people who live on the earth, because there are many of those, as we have already seen, who will be redeemed. But these judgments fall upon a moral class, those people who live only for earth and its advantages, who are merely concerned for this life and care nothing about the life to come. Someone has well described them in this bit of doggerel,

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish!

Do you know people like that? All they seem to think about is eating, sleeping and meeting their needs. They have no thought for the purpose of life or of any meaning to their own existence.

What we are told here is that these last three trumpets, two of which we will take up in Chapter 9, give us insight into the full extent of the moral disaster that the first four have brought upon the earth.

We have seen in each of the series this division into four and three. In the seals, you will remember, there were four horsemen who rode through the earth, and then we were given, under the next three seals, insight into what was going on behind the scenes, as it were. Here there are four trumpets that sound, and then we get a deeper insight in the last three of the terrible impact of these awful judgments. In the bowls of wrath that will come, we have again the same division of four and three.

These series seem to reflect the three common degrees of comparison. Everyone knows that there are three ways to indicate increasing value, meaning, or even material size. First, it is "big." That is the positive, the comparative is "bigger," and the superlative is "biggest." With reference to evil, there is "bad," "worse," and "worst." This is what we have in these series: a climaxing of judgment, a crescendo that ends at last with the pouring out of the bowls of the wrath of God, the worst of all.

If I took a poll of this congregation this morning, and asked you how you felt after hearing this, most of you would say, I'm sure, that you feel uncomfortable.

Why is that? Why do we feel uncomfortable when we read of judgments like these? Let me share these words on that theme from Eugene Peterson. He says:

We do everything we can to make light of judgment. We use every stratagem we can find to avoid dealing with the consequences of sin. But God will not let us off. He will not indulge our inattention. He will be taken seriously. In a pause between trumpet blasts an eagle cries its warning. However practiced we become at tuning out sounds that we do not want to hear, including the sound of God's displeasure at sin, God finds new ways to penetrate our defensive deafness. The eagle cry catches us off guard.

What we are seeing here in the judgments of the last days is really nothing new. It is simply commonly experienced penalties for evil increased in amount to an incredible degree. God has been sending judgments like this all through the history of mankind. There have been volcanic eruptions, meteors falling upon the earth, red rain from the skies, poisoned waters, etc. All these terrible disasters have struck before, but now they grow to a climax. Yet we must not misunderstand them, for they are for our own good.

I list for you five effects of judgment upon us since we are all being judged in some degree, more or less. Hardships, trials and difficulties are all a part of the judgment of God upon human evil, and we all experience it.

1. First of all, judgments frighten us. They are intended to. They are sent to arrest our attention. They chill our blood. They alarm us. They scare the living daylights out of us. Like children at a horror movie we are fascinated by them but we want to hide our eyes from them and not look fully at them. That is the first effect of judgment. It arouses fear.

2. Then, because it terrifies us, judgment also sobers us. How many people in the Bay Area immediately rearranged their priorities five minutes after the earthquake hit on October 17? We heard many testimonies during that time of people saying, "I'll never take life as lightly again. That taught me a lot. I began to see what is really important." That is also what judgments do. They help us reassess our lives. They change our priorities. C. S. Lewis well says that fear or pain or judgment is "God's megaphone to reach a deaf world."
3. And so judgments correct us. They force us to face unpleasant facts about ourselves. We do not like that. We do not like to be told that we are not perfect. We know we are not, but we do not like anyone else to say so. We are uneasy at having these things pointed out. But judgment strips away our illusions. It restores us to reality. We begin to think accurately, clearly, as God thinks. We plan more carefully. We live more thoughtfully. That is why God sends judgment.
4. And fourth, judgment humbles us. We begin to see that we are really not in control. We do not run everything about our lives. We are not autonomous creatures. We are not little gods, capable of making anything we want to of ourselves, as the media keeps trying to tell us. We are not in charge. We see how foolish we have been in the past, that we have made many mistakes when we thought we were right. We begin at last to welcome guidance, to listen to others, and especially, to seek out the wisdom of the Word of God.
5. Finally, judgment reassures us. It comforts us. It answers Habakkuk's great prayer, "In wrath, remember mercy," {Hab 3:2}. We learn that God does not like judgment either. He calls it, in Isaiah 28:21, his "strange work." He keeps it as brief as possible. He gives ample warnings before it gets unbearable. He sends anticipations of it, forceful reminders, that this kind of thing can happen so that we might pay attention and act before it gets out of hand.

All this supports the view that the Bible gives everywhere of a loving God, "slow to anger and plenteous in mercy," {Psa 103:8 KJV}. Is it not strange that people who do not read the Bible very much almost invariably say, when you talk about judgment, "Well, the God I worship is a loving God; he would never do anything like that!" My friend, it is the very love of God that makes him judge! God must judge in order to eliminate evil once for all from his creation and bring about the world of universal blessing which men have longed for throughout all of human history.

Last night I spent a quiet evening at home. The rain was falling, and that is always a comfortable sound. It was warm and cozy inside and quiet and peaceful without. There was no danger threatening me or my family. I spent a delightful time listening to good classical music. I had just been working through this passage of Revelation and it suddenly struck me how wonderfully protected I was.

- If you and I were living in Calcutta we might feel much closer to these scenes in Revelation than we do here in California.
- If we were living in a ghetto of one of our great cities, where violence stalks the street right outside the door and you dare not go out, we would identify much more readily with these judgments.

How wonderfully God has spared us, protected us and watched over us. All one needs to do to turn earth into the scenes we have here is to take the restraints off human evil for a little while. It could be like this tomorrow! But God has spared us, watched over us, loved us, guarded us, believers and unbelievers alike. How thankful we all ought to be for that! And how ready to hear and heed the eagle's cry!

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