

CHAPTER 8

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVENTH SEAL

In order to correctly interpret this book, we must have a clear understanding of the similarities that exist among the visions of the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven plagues. Once we understand that they are arranged in almost identical fashion, it then becomes possible to use one to help interpret another. In each of these series, the first six accounts deal with events which take place upon this earth with the sixth taking us up to the end of time. The seventh division then describes the time of judgment and eternity. (For an example of this, read the following passages and notice their similarities: 8:1-5; 11:15-19; 16:17-21.)

This interpretation also agrees with the use of the number “7.” Since the number “7” symbolizes divine completeness, it follows that the seventh division in each of these series describes events which will occur when God completes his plan for man. This is identical to the procedure God followed while creating the world. All things were created in six days, and God rested on the seventh. In these visions, God’s plan for man upon this physical earth is completed in the first six divisions of each series. The seventh division then takes us into that period of eternal rest for the faithful or eternal destruction for the unfaithful.

THE SEVENTH SEAL: SILENCE IN HEAVEN

Verse 1. And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.

As this seventh seal was opened, there occurred a period of silence of about half an hour. As discussed in the introduction, this seventh seal must be interpreted as it relates to the overall structure of Revelation. The sixth seal takes us up to the second coming of Christ, and it follows that this seventh seal must deal with eternity. Why then is the description of silence used? Two possible reasons have been proposed. First, the things that await us in heaven are not revealed. Concerning this Coffman says, “What will it be like in heaven? The scriptural answer to that question is this half hour of silence. It is not revealed.” In 1 Jn. 3:2, we read, “It doth not yet appear what we shall be.” Probably, it is not within man’s ability to understand what heaven will actually be like. The second proposed reason for the silence is that it describes the peaceful state which will exist in heaven.

The reason for the length of this period of silence being about half an hour is not clear. Possibly no significance should be placed on the half hour because it is an approximate time. We know this from the use of the term “about.”

There is one other possible meaning of the silence in heaven. It could be used to show that this seventh seal takes us into the presence of God. Hab. 2:20 states, “But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.” As we move from the time of the sixth seal into the time of the seventh, we are entering into the presence of God. As we come before God, there is a period of silence. This helps us understand that the seventh seal definitely deals with judgment and the time of eternity.

Verse 2. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.

This verse presents some difficulty because of its placement in the text. It is obviously an introduction to the series of seven trumpets which follows, but why it is placed here instead of between verses 5 and 6 is hard to determine. Many commentators hold the view that verse 1

concludes the series of seven seals and this verse begins an introduction to the series of seven trumpets. We must reject this theory because of the close correlation in the structure of the writings of the three series. The series of trumpets and plagues both end with a description of thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. (See 11:19; 16:18-21.) It follows that the series of seven seals would also end with this same wording which is used in verse 5. (See the introduction to chapter 8 for additional comments on this subject.)

Another reason for believing this seventh seal ends with verse 5 is because verse 5 is closely associated with the symbols of the fifth seal. In fact, it answers the question that the Christians under the altar were asking in 6:10. (See v. 5 for a complete explanation.)

Some even believe this verse was misplaced in the text by copiest error.² We also reject this theory because the wording of verse 6 would be awkward if it immediately followed verse 2. Therefore, we believe this verse is correctly placed, but we are uncertain why. The introduction of the seven angels with the seven trumpets is similar to the introduction of the angels having the seven last plagues in 15:1,6. The book sealed with seven seals was also introduced in chapter 5 before the seals were broken in chapter 6. In each of these cases, the introduction of the series took place in heaven directly in the presence of God. (See 5:1; 15:6.) The seventh seal took us into the presence of God. Therefore, the seven angels with the trumpets may be introduced here specifically to show that the warning sounded by these trumpets came directly from God.

Verses 3,4. 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 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.

As the vision of the seventh seal continues, an angel comes and offers much incense upon the altar with the prayers of the saints. In order to understand this, we must first determine the symbolic meaning of this altar. Under the law of Moses, priests offered blood sacrifices upon an altar to make atonement for the sins of the people (Ex. 29:11-14). We are no longer under that law. We are under the law of Christ which has made us all priests of God (1 Pet. 2:5). All Christians today may directly approach the throne of God through prayer in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins. We do not need a priest to do this for us. This altar is symbolic of our ability to commune with God through prayer.

An incense is a substance with a sweet smelling fragrance. For this angel to offer incense along with the prayers of saints indicates that our prayers are a sweet fragrance to God. They are very pleasing to him. (See v. 4.) God desires that his people should continually come to him through their prayers. Christians are told, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). Prayer is a marvelous privilege that Christians have today under the law of Christ. We should understand that it pleases God to hear our prayers, and we should commune with him often.

Verse 5. 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.

This angel took fire from the altar and cast it into the earth. The earth is sometimes used as a symbol to represent those people who oppose God. (See 12:12, 16; 13:11; 16:2.) With that in mind, this angel is casting fire upon those who have been unfaithful to God. The last phrase of this verse says there was a great earthquake, which must represent the shaking or fear of these people. This is a symbolic description of the fiery destruction, which those people will suffer for all eternity who have been disobedient to God.

The purpose of the opening of the seals is to reveal things that must absolutely take place. The silence in the first part of this seal shows that these events take place in the presence of God, and the fire cast into the earth refers to the sinner's eternal destruction in hell. This is the complete picture of judgment. This seventh seal describes the final conclusion of God's plan for mankind. These events have been set into order because Christ died and ascended to the throne of God, thereby becoming worthy to open the seals of God's book. (See 4:5,6.)

As the seventh seal concludes, there are voices, thunderings, and lightnings. Chapter 4 described the throne of God, and 4:5 says, "And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and

thunderings and voices.” These symbols are used to represent the presence of God. (See Ex. 19:16.) This is a powerful conclusion to the final event God has planned for mankind that will usher us into eternity.

This phrase, “voices, and thunderings, and lightnings,” helps tremendously in understanding how Revelation is structured. This same phrase is used to conclude the seventh trumpet and the seventh plague. (See 11:19; 16:18.) This helps us understand that these three series are parallel in form. They all cover the same period of time which is this present Christian dispensation. The first six divisions of each series describe events that take place on this earth, and the seventh division describes the time of judgment. In the case of this seventh seal, it helps determine where the vision of the seven seals ends and the vision of the seven trumpets begins. The natural division is between verses 5 and 6, with the only problem being the introduction of the angels who are given the seven trumpets in verse 2. We readily confess that we have no conclusive explanation concerning the placement of that verse. Perhaps someday it will be understood. The point is, we must not let something we do not fully understand destroy the obvious meaning of those things that we are capable of understanding.

The latter part of this seventh seal also answers the question that the martyrs under the altar were asking in the fifth seal (6:9-11). They asked, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” They were told that they should wait for a little season. When the events of this seventh seal occur, this prayer will be answered. These martyrs were described as being “under the altar.” The altar represents our ability to commune directly with God because the prayers of the saints are “upon the golden altar.” Fire was taken from this altar in answer to those prayers and cast into the earth where those people dwelt who had slain Christians. This shows that God will avenge the blood of his people.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

Without any doubt, this is an extremely difficult section of Revelation. It has been interpreted in many ways. Some say these trumpets are descriptions of specific events that took place during the time of the Roman Empire. Others say they are pictures of God’s judgment on wicked people, possibly causing them to repent. We will interpret these trumpets as warnings about certain events that take place throughout the Christian age and may cause people to turn from God.

Although our class studies and sermons we hear dealing with Revelation seldom include lessons from this section, we believe this may be one of the most enlightening and important sections for Christians to study in the entire book, since it deals with events which could cause one to lose his faith. In this series, God is warning Christians of trials and persecutions occurring on this earth which could cause a person to lose his soul in hell. At the same time, these warnings should help Christians to understand these events more clearly, thereby helping them to hold fast to their faith during the trials of life.

In the discussion of chapter 8, we are forced to devote most of our time interpreting these symbols instead of making application to our lives. This is unfortunate! Perhaps someday Revelation will be understood well enough that time can be devoted to teaching the lessons contained therein, instead of trying to determine what the symbols represent. We encourage you to meditate upon the great lessons of this marvelous vision and make your own applications as the symbolism becomes more understandable. We certainly do not desire to emphasize one section of Revelation over another, but we truly believe that having a good understanding of this vision, and especially how it relates to the rest of the book, is one key to understanding Revelation.

A “TRUMPET”

First, we must examine why each part of this vision is announced by the sounding of a trumpet. A trumpet is used many times in the Bible to announce great events which are about to occur and also to warn of impending danger. The great and final coming of the Lord will be announced by the sounding of a trumpet. In 1 Thess. 4:16, we read, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God." Ezek. 33:1-6 is a good example of the trumpet being used as a warning. Verse 3 of that passage says, "If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people." Both of these meanings should be applied to these seven trumpets. They announce great events that are to take place during this Christian age and warn of their dangers.

The symbolic meaning of a trumpet explains one difference between this vision and the vision of the seven seals. A seal signifies events that are absolutely certain to take place, but a trumpet warns of events that we can prepare ourselves against in order to avoid their consequences. We have no control over the events described by the seals, but we can and must prepare ourselves to avoid the consequences of the trumpets because we have been warned.

The key to interpreting this series of seven trumpets lies in understanding the symbolic meaning of the "third part of man." As has been explained before, many of the numbers in Revelation are descriptive. They are not intended to have a specific numerical value. Therefore, we must determine the descriptive meaning of the fraction "1/3." In order to do this, we must consider a few passages which have a bearing on its meaning. In 9:4, the locusts out of the pit were commanded not to hurt the grass or trees or "any green thing," but only those men who did not have the seal of God in their foreheads. Those who do not have the seal of God in their foreheads would be non-Christians. These locusts were allowed to "hurt" these people, but they were not allowed to hurt "any green thing." Therefore, "any green thing" must represent a class of people other than non-Christians. This obviously would be Christians. These locusts were commanded not to hurt Christians, only non-Christians or sinners. (For a more complete discussion of this, see 9:4). This symbolism is taken from nature itself. Almost any plant that is alive and growing must be colored green. The life which Christians have, that sinners do not have, is spiritual life. Those who are spiritually alive and growing in Christ would be symbolically "any green thing."

If we apply this meaning to verse 7, the third part of all Christians would be destroyed by the events of this first trumpet. We know this could not possibly be the correct meaning of this passage, so we must determine the correct meaning of the "third part." This answer lies in comparing this "third part" with the "fourth part" in 6:8. In that passage the rider of the pale horse had power to take man's physical life, or "fourth part," but not his spiritual life. "Any green thing" represents those who have spiritual life. Therefore, the "third part" of man represents the spiritual part of man's being.

Man has two parts. He has a physical life and a spiritual life. The physical things of this world are symbolically described in Revelation by the number "4." The spiritual matters are described by the number "3." If we identify a "part" of anything, we use a fraction. Therefore we understand that the physical part of any man would be described by the fraction "1/4," and the spiritual part of any man would be described by the fraction "1/3."

The "third part of man" is used throughout the trumpet series. Therefore, the warnings that are sounded by these trumpets are to prepare man so he will not lose his spiritual part. This would condemn his soul to hell. In other words, they describe events taking place all during the Christian dispensation which affect the spiritual part of man.

THE FIRST FOUR TRUMPETS: SPIRITUAL TRIALS

Verse 6. And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.

With this verse the vision of the seven trumpets begins. According to verse 2, the angels who sound these trumpets received them from God. This shows that the following events are messages directly from God.

Verse 7. 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.

Just as the series of seven seals tells of events that are to take place here on earth, some of which could cause our physical bodies to suffer or even be killed, this series of seven trumpets warns of events that will take place on earth and could destroy the spiritual part of man. Notice again that the trumpets sound warnings. It is not sealed that man will lose his spiritual life because of these events, but, rather, warned that this could happen if he is not prepared to face them.

To properly interpret this verse, the figurative meaning of the trees and green grass must be determined. In Judg. 9:7-15, trees are used to symbolize men who went forth to select a king. In Is. 40:6-8, grass is also used as a symbol for people. This provides a biblical foundation for interpreting trees and grass as people. In 9:4, the locusts, which came up out of the earth, were not allowed to hurt the grass, or trees, or any green thing, but only those men who did not have the seal of God in their foreheads. It should be obvious that the comparison being made in that verse is not between plant life and sinners. The comparison being made is between Christians and non-Christians. The locusts were not allowed to harm Christians. From this we understand that trees, grass, and any green thing are symbols used to represent Christians.

The use of the green color to symbolize Christians is easy to understand once we understand that it is referring to the Christian's spiritual life. For almost any plant to be alive and growing, it must be colored green because the green coloring substance, chlorophyll, is necessary for a plant to carry on its life-sustaining processes. When this symbolism is applied to people, it would represent those who are alive and growing spiritually. The trees, green grass, and any green thing represent those people of this world who have attained spiritual life. They are Christians. (For more on this, see 9:4.)

With this understanding of trees and green grass as representing those people who have spiritual life, and the third part as representing the spiritual part of their being, it becomes apparent that this first trumpet warns of persecutions and trials which could cause one to lose his spiritual life. The third part of trees and all green grass being burned up symbolizes the possibility of Christians losing their spiritual life because of these persecutions. The hail and fire mingled with blood represents the trials and persecutions of this life, which Christians must overcome daily. To be mingled with blood shows the severity of these persecutions. Some may be so severe as to cause one to lose his physical life.

This is a tremendous lesson for all Christians today. We must keep a constant watch for our souls. There are all manner of temptations and persecutions in the world today which can cause Christians to lose their spiritual life. This is the warning sounded by this first trumpet.

There is also a difference between the meaning of trees and green grass. A tree represents Christians who are strong and deeply rooted in the faith, while the grass represents weaker Christians who are shallow rooted and, therefore, more susceptible to these persecutions. This is why we see all green grass being burned. It represents those who are not strong enough to overcome these persecutions.

To understand this verse, one must remember that the "third part" represents the spiritual part of any person. Therefore, the lesson presented here is that even strong Christians are capable of losing their spiritual life because of the terrible persecutions that they may have to suffer. The grass is also green indicating that it represents those who have spiritual life, but all of it is burned up. This shows that those who are weak spiritually will be especially vulnerable to the persecutions of this life.

Verse 8. 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;

In 17:1, 15, the symbol "many waters" is defined as "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues." In Is. 60:5, the sea is used to symbolically represent masses of people. It states, "The abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee." Therefore, the "sea" symbolically represents

the masses of people on this earth. In this verse, a great mountain burning with fire is cast into the sea of people, causing their third part or spiritual part to become as blood or to die. In Amos 4:1, a mountain is used to symbolize a great government of this world. This mountain is burning with fire, representing the persecutions a government is capable of bringing upon the people under its control. This is exactly the situation of the people in the Roman Empire during the time of the writing of Revelation. The government was persecuting and even killing those who were not willing to submit to the emperor-worship. The government was levying tremendous persecutions upon the people and causing those who were not strong Christians to deny their faith. This, in turn, caused those people to lose their spiritual life or third part. By using this example of Roman persecutions, we are by no means confining it to that period of time. Throughout the history of the world, governments have persecuted their people and will continue to do so until Christ comes again. Therefore, this trumpet is warning people of all ages not to lose their spiritual life by giving in to persecutions from any source, regardless of how severe they may be.

Verse 9. 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.

The third part of a person is that part which is spiritual in nature and does not necessarily represent the saved state of an individual. For instance, we know many people today who are spiritually-minded but are lost. They believe that God exists and by their own standards are trying to please him; yet they have never obeyed the commands of God which would put them into that saved state. They still have a spiritual part to their total being. On the other hand, there are many people today who do not believe God exists, are not interested in finding out anything about him, and are offended if you try to talk with them about any religious matter. These people have lost the spiritual part of their being. Their lives deal totally with the physical or material things of this world with no thought of the spiritual. The warning being sounded by this trumpet is that some of those who still have a third part to their life may lose it because of the great persecutions pictured in verse 8. Notice also, verse 9 states that these creatures in the sea had life but died because of these persecutions. This "life" must be referring to spiritual life. Those people who live upon this earth and have spiritual life are Christians. For them to "die" would mean they lose that spiritual life. We must always be aware that many events in this world can test our faith and possibly cause us to lose our spiritual life. Therefore, we must constantly be on guard.

It is impossible to say exactly what the ships represent in verse 9, but they may represent the spiritual leaders of the people here on earth. If that is correct, this verse warns that even those people who are spiritual leaders may succumb to the persecutions of verse 8 and lose the spiritual part of their being. These warnings are given so we may be able to prepare ourselves for these trials and persecutions, and thereby avoid losing our spiritual life.

One other possible meaning of the "ships" can be derived from Paul's comments concerning the ship when he was shipwrecked. In Acts 27:30, 31, upon being shipwrecked, the ship-men were about to flee the ship, but Paul told them, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." Many believe that a spiritual analogy can be made from this statement which would show that one must remain in the spiritual ship, the church, in order to be saved. If we apply this analogy to verse 9, the ships that sail the sea would represent those individual congregations of the Lord's people which exist among the people of this earth. If this is the correct interpretation of the "ships," this trumpet is warning that, due to persecutions of this life, entire congregations of the church may be destroyed. This means that entire congregations may become unfaithful and no longer be considered a true church by our Lord.

Verses 10,11. 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 water, 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.

As the third trumpet sounds, a great star named Wormwood falls from heaven upon the third part of the rivers and fountains of waters. Because of reasons already given, we interpret the “third part” as being the spiritual part of any man’s being. Therefore, we are dealing with symbols that affect the spiritual part of man, not the physical. The star fell upon the third part of rivers and fountains of waters, and we obviously know that literal rivers and waters have no spiritual part; so these symbols must be figurative, representing certain groups of people.

To decide exactly who they represent, we must determine how each of these symbols is used in the Bible. First, water is a life-giving substance that is necessary to sustain our physical life. In Jer. 2:13, God refers to himself as “the fountain of living waters.” This is obviously referring to God’s ability to supply the water necessary for our spiritual life, which would be his Word or the gospel. Jn. 7:38 says, “He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” This, of course, is referring to the teaching of the gospel by those who believe and obey it. In Job 29:6, the term “river” is used to indicate abundance. Therefore, the rivers and fountains of waters represent the abundant teachings of those who attempt to direct the spiritual life of people on this earth.

These rivers and fountains of waters are made bitter as a great star named Wormwood falls upon them. This star was burning as a lamp, which shows how it hurt the rivers and fountains of waters. The star appeared to be a lamp, or a spiritual light, but, in actuality, must have been deceptive teachings from Satan. In 2 Cor. 11:14, we read, “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.” This is further supported by the fact that the star is named Wormwood. In Prov. 5:4, wormwood is defined as a bitter substance. As this star of deceptive teachings from Satan named Wormwood falls upon the spiritual rivers or fountains of waters of this world, their teachings become bitter. “Many men died of the waters because they were made bitter.” They die spiritually, not physically. They listen to these false teachings, believe, and follow them. In doing so, they turn from the true teaching of the Bible and lose their spiritual life.

It is easy to look around in the world today and observe that many of our spiritual waters are “bitter.” Almost daily we turn on our radios or televisions and find programs that teach false doctrines and affect the spiritual lives of millions of people. As people believe and follow these false teachings, they turn from the true teachings of the gospel and are lost. They die spiritually because of these “bitter” teachings.

Verse 12. 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.

The fourth angel sounds the warning that the third part of the sun, moon, and stars will be smitten, and also the third part of the day and night. We must not expect a literal fulfillment of this where one-third of the sun, moon, stars, day, and night cease to exist. Instead, we should look for the spiritual fulfillment of this trumpet. It may be impossible to say exactly who is represented by the sun, moon, and stars, but we do know they represent someone who is responsible for giving light unto the earth. Since we are dealing with the third part of these objects, this must be referring to “spiritual” lights that shine upon the earth. Those people who preach, teach, and guide people spiritually would be those who provide spiritual light.

If the “third part” or spiritual part of these lights cease to shine, this would indicate that there will be times upon this earth when man’s spiritual lights will be darkened. There will be no one to stand up and proclaim the true light of the gospel. This has already happened during the period of time known as the Dark Ages and may very well be taking place in certain areas of the world today.

We are also told that “the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise.” This means there will be times upon this earth when no spirituality will be found day or night because these spiritual lights have ceased to shine. Again, there are places in this world today where little or no spirituality exists among the people. We should not think of this as a worldwide situation, although it could happen, but rather, a situation which could take place at any time when men

cease to teach and obey the spiritual light of the gospel. The spiritual thoughts of man will cease to exist day or night, and he will concentrate wholly upon the physical things of this world.

An important warning is being sounded by this trumpet. There will be times when the spiritual lights of man will cease to shine, and this will cause spiritual darkness upon the earth. Men will cease to be interested in spiritual matters. Therefore, there will be no spiritual activities day or night. Christians must heed this warning and always let our lights so shine as to be seen among men (Mt. 5:16).

THE EAGLE'S WARNING

Verse 13. And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!

Verse 12 concluded the sounding of the fourth trumpet, and 9:1 introduces the sounding of the fifth trumpet. But, between the warnings of these trumpets, John hears an angel (eagle, ASV) flying through heaven saying, "Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth," because of the three trumpets yet to sound. This places great significance on the events of the last three trumpets as they warn of events that will bring tremendous grief upon those whom they affect.

Verse 13 also serves to divide the series of trumpets into two sections. The events of the first four trumpets affect anyone upon this earth who chooses not to heed their warnings. The last three affect only those who are not Christians. (See 9:4.) In the series of seven seals and seven plagues, there also appears to be a 4-3 sequence, although they are not as clearly defined as in this trumpet series.

These last three woes are directed to the "inhabitants of the earth." First, this shows that these events are to take place here on this earth. Since we are in the "last times" upon this earth, they must be taking place now. (See 1 Jn. 2:18.) They take place all during the Christian dispensation. Second, this also helps define who the "inhabitants of the earth" are. In Revelation, the "earth" is sometimes used to symbolically represent the dwelling place of those who follow Satan. The best example of this is in 12:9, 12. (See the comments on 12:9, 12). We know that the "inhabitants of the earth" refer to those who follow Satan in this passage because 9:4 says the fifth trumpet affects only "those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads." Those who are not sealed by God are sinners, and they are symbolically referred to in this verse as the "inhabitants of the earth."

¹James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1979), p. 175.

²William Barclay, *The Revelation of John, Vol 2* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 39.