

Week 6

A series in REVELATION

20 July Monday

Read Revelation 8:1-5

In today's reading, we come to final 'seal': the seventh. Again, we are reminded that numbers communicate things in the type of literature we are reading; namely here, completion or fullness. This seventh seal establishes a new set of seven: seven angels with seven trumpets. What is being communicated, perhaps, has less to do with chronology than it does with completion and perfection. God's purposes, plans and activity will not be found wanting or lacking. He is 'perfect in all of his ways' as we sometimes sing.

It's fascinating to notice, too, that it is the prayers of the saints (those persecuted for their faith, the down-trodden who cry out for justice, those in the churches of Laodicea, Smyrna and the rest, you and me, with our unique wrestles against darkness) that are brought before God and, in true apocalyptic literature style, lead to the fire and thunder and earthquakes we see on the earth. Of course, we should be careful not to jump immediately to literal interpretations but perhaps recognise here the turbulence that accompanies the righting of wrongs, the exposing and routing of evil, and the toppling of powerful and oppressive structures and systems. The turbulence, perhaps, of the painful and invasive surgery that must happen if the tumour is to be removed. And, in short, this action of heaven comes as the result of prayer. N.T. Wright puts it this way: 'the main point, however, is that the seven trumpets and what they bring, will be part at least of God's answer to the prayers of his people... it is not a mechanical plan which will grind forward irrespective of human agency... God is committed to working in the world through human beings... prayer is a vital element in this mysterious co-operation.'

Perhaps if we could 'pull back the curtain' and see, like here, the 'mysterious co-operation' between our prayers and heaven, we might be encouraged, as I'm sure the 1st century church were, to prioritise and press-in to such an endeavour with even more fervour and regularity.

21 July Tuesday

Read Revelation 8:6-13

Genre, genre, genre. We must remember that we are reading literature that paints with vivid colours, strong arresting images and symbols. John sees seven angels who start blowing seven trumpets. By this point, angels are familiar territory. Trumpets were often used as a warning, to sound the alarm, and they seem to carry that sense here. The number seven, as we have already seen, means perfection, wholeness or completion, thus drawing attention to the perfection of God's plans.

It is similar, too, with the imagery that results from the blowing of the trumpets (the first four in our reading). The strength of it can understandably leave us feeling uncomfortable and uncertain, but we must remember that it points beyond itself. Perhaps, here, to the depth of evil in the world, as it weaves and weeds its way, causing all sorts of horror and harm. And to the corresponding depth of healing work the surgeon must undertake to remove it - the depths to which the gardener must dig to expose the weed at its root. Such intervention causes necessary but significant upheaval, challenge, trouble.

It is worth observing, too, the similarities between these verses and the Old Testament story in which the people of Israel are freed from slavery in Egypt. If you know the story, you will recognise recycled imagery from the plagues that come upon Egypt. God judges the oppression of the Egyptians in order to liberate His people. Christians in the first century would not have missed the parallel; they too were under oppression, that of Rome. They too were without the power, strength or ability to change anything. They too were without any hope – except, of course, for their confidence in a God who is on the throne, who cares deeply about right and wrong, and who, like with Israel in Egypt, will not forsake or abandon them.

This is a profound hope; God is not unaware or unmoved by our troubles and trials and there is no wrong that he will not put right in the end.

22 July Wednesday

Read Revelation 9:1-12

We read today of the fifth trumpet blast: the 'first woe'. And we are very much in the thick of the vivid and alarming pictures with which revelation is replete. We have a star falling from the sky – often imagery in the Old Testament for fallen angelic activity. We have the 'abyss' - the underworld - in Jewish thought, a place where dark and demonic forces dwelt, pictured here as a 'black pit' out of which the 'destroyer' or 'destruction' comes. (It's worth noting that John does not think that, somewhere on the earth, there is a deep dark hole in the ground. "Once again" one writer says, "we must insist on reading symbols as symbols"). And then we have monstrous locusts, again the imagery is leaning heavily on Old Testament stories, particularly here from the book of Joel and the story of the ten plagues in Egypt. (Some have interpreted the locusts as a pre-modern description of military helicopters, 'perhaps,' they say, 'John is looking at a future he did not have a descriptive framework for.' While the destructive power of such weapons may well come from such a place of darkness, few have found these interpretive attempts compelling.) These 'locusts', these monstrous and destructive evils, rising from, as one writer puts it, a place of 'anti-creation and chaos', bring devastation. Without wanting to venture into the wide and divergent interpretations offered for such things: few of us, having watched the news over the years, would fail to recognise the horror that evil leaves in its wake. That is not to say, 'this is that', but it is to recognise how monstrous such things are.

God's purpose, it seems, in allowing or no longer restraining the destructive nature of evil is that it might show itself for what it is and, in reaping what it has sown, ultimately steer people towards Jesus; towards life. From whatever dark hole it arises – at times our own hearts being the source, as Jesus himself points out – God will rid the world of evil, as he works to make all things new.

The situation is sobering but not hopeless. The 1st century believers would have been encouraged that Jesus – the lamb – was at work. That he knew about their struggle and was not deaf to their prayers or blind to their pain, that he was their protection in this storm (like in Egypt, where God's people were protected by the blood of a lamb put on their door posts). To be sobered about sin, personal and cosmic, but reminded too of the lamb – **Jesus who died and rose to deal with that very thing – is perhaps part of what it means to engage with this text.**

23 July Thursday

Read Revelation 9:13-21

The ancient north-eastern boundary of the land of Israel was understood to be the Euphrates River. Various 'enemies' lay across it and, so, when John in his vision sees armies gathered there, everyone knew what that meant. It was, as N.T. Wright puts it, 'their worst political and military nightmares.' The combination of the locusts from yesterday's reading with these armies and fiery horses create a dark picture. Some see here real armies, but many don't, recognising instead yet more shades to the growing and darkening picture of trouble, evil and God's judgement of it. Still, for others these are the spiritual and demonic powers truly (but often imperceptibly) behind many of the horrors that we see in the world. For the 1st Century church, and the immediate struggles they faced, I imagine that each could have been true.

As we have seen, the story of Israel's escape from Egypt has a strong presence in these chapters. In that story, Pharaoh continually rejects God's command to liberate the downtrodden people of Israel and it's this cold commitment to slavery and oppression that ultimately leads to the destruction of the Egyptian army. Pharaoh has lots of time to change, but as Wright says, '[God's] patient mercy always risks the possibility that people will use the breathing space to make matters worse...' Those who 'use the breathing space' to make matters worse – like Pharaoh did – those who participate in weaving chaos and death in the world, who reject and set themselves against the life and new creation that God wants to bring, ultimately put themselves outside of that very life.

In one sense, there is natural cause and effect here; if you put violence into the world, then you end up living in a world that is violent; If you poison the well you drink from, you have become the architect of your own end. Alongside

that, we also see the energising power of spiritual evil here, hiding often just out of view, sowing chaos and death. But we would be amiss not to notice there is also the weight of God's 'NO' to the destructive enterprises of sin here, too. 'No', He will simply not permit evil to carry on forever, to be ignored or swept under the carpet, only to rear its ugly head at some other point.

Jesus says, not uncontroversially, that He is 'the way, truth and life.' If we reject life, then, we reject life – but he has done everything, given everything, held nothing back – not even his own life – for us. **To say 'YES' to Jesus' invitation to life and join his 'NO' to the chaos of sin, is the most significant decision we'll ever make.**

24 July Friday

Read Exodus 10

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written, these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening up a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. **As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.**