

**Justice with Mercy  
Revelation 8 and 9  
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There is an almost universal fascination with knowing the future.  
Where is this world headed?  
If there is an end to this world as we know it - what then?

The December 15 issue of U.S. News and World Report cover story was on the subject of prophecy and people's belief in the end times.

A U.S. News poll taken in November indicated that 66% of Americans believe Jesus will return to earth.

A professor at the University of Oregon says Americans are attracted to the "promise that human existence and history have purpose and that an imminent golden age will soon put an end to evil and injustice." (U.S. News p63)

A book, The Bible Code, based on the prophecies of Nostradamus, is widely read.

Movies like "Contact" and "The Seventh Sign" draw viewers to ponder the end.

As the end of millennium approaches, it seems the fascination increases.

In the midst of a great deal of confusion and speculation God has spoken in the Bible to tell us what to expect - to tell us what we need to know about how history will come to a close.

While many portions of Scripture speak to the issue of the end times, the book of Revelation is the most extensive treatment of the subject.

Starting last September we have been studying this book together on Sunday mornings.

Today we come to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chapters - vivid descriptions of earth-shaking events that will happen just before Jesus comes - Events that could begin happening at any moment.

Before we read this somewhat lengthy text I want to remind you of the context - the setting for what we will read.

OT - Cross - Now - Trib - S.C - M - E

Several times in weeks past I have shown you this simple time-line in an attempt to help put the chapters and events of the Book of Revelation in perspective.

Reading from left to right we see letters and words that cover history from creation to eternity.

The Old Testament - over 2000 years of history from Creation through Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and the prophets).

The Cross represents the period of time that Jesus was on earth.

Now represents time from the resurrection of Jesus to the present.

Trib represents the tribulation - a period of intensified turmoil, destruction and death on the earth just before the return of Jesus.

S.C. represents that literal, physical return of Jesus to this earth - called the Second Coming.

M indicates a 1000 year reign of Christ on this earth called a Millenium.

E represents eternity - The final destruction of this world and the creation of the new heavens and earth on which God's people will live forever.

Those of you familiar at all with the book of Revelation know that there are three sets of seven descriptions of the events marking the end of the age:

seven seals , seven trumpets and then seven bowls.

Seals, trumpets and bowls may sound odd to you. A simple way to understand this is to think of seals as being unsealed to reveal something, trumpets as being blown to announce something and bowls as containers that pour something out on the earth.

OT - Cross - Now - Trib - S.C - M - E

The "seals" in chapter 6 (with the exception of the 6<sup>th</sup> seal) describe this present time, leading up to the tribulation. The trumpets and bowls describe the tribulation period itself.

So what we are going to read next is the first full description of what it will be like in that period of intense turmoil and destruction called the great tribulation just before Jesus comes again.

We saw a brief description of it in Chapter 6 with the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> seal but that was a preview -now we have the fuller description of what it will be like in that time - a time which could begin at any moment:

READ chapters 8 and 9 (standing)

Can you imagine that?!!

As we read did your imagination attempt to picture what John was seeing?

Horses with lions' heads breathing fire, smoke and sulfur.

Tails like snakes on the horses with heads on the tails.

Locust insects that looked like horses but had what resembled human faces and with long hair, lions' teeth.

It rather boggles the mind doesn't it?

When will this take place?

Just before Jesus comes again.

Why does he describe those days with such vividness?

What is his point in telling what those days will be like?

I think John has two different audiences in mind when he writes these chapters.

Like bookends, he puts one audience at each end of the descriptions of the trumpet judgments.

Chapter 8 opens with clear reference to those who are believers - Christ-followers who have been praying to God - even crying out to God over the years.

8:4 "The smoke of the incense together with prayers of the saints, went up before God..."

John draws attention to believers before he describes this terrible time.

Chapter 9 closes with clear reference to those who are unbelievers - those who were unwilling to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus.

9:20 "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands..."

John draws attention to unbelievers as he closes this description of devastation and death.

The Holy Spirit, who superintended the writing of these words through John, evidently wanted both audiences to see ahead of time what will happen.

Because he wanted a different response from each.

You see if you can determine what response each should have.

Let me give you a clue:

Regarding believers - for what have they been praying throughout the time of injustice and evil that has dominated so much of history?

Regarding unbelievers - what truths do they desperately need to understand so they will repent and turn to God?

Let's turn our attention now to John's description of those terrible days of the great tribulation.

8:1 "When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."

Have you heard the expressions "waiting for the other shoe to fall" or "the calm before the storm"?

When I was a fairly young boy I remember visiting a school friend for the first time in his home.

We were playing in their basement and his mother called him.

He ignored her much to my surprise.

And then she came down the stairs and in a very loud and stern voice said,

"Larry, come here!"

Just as loudly and sternly he said, "No!"

Then silence descended on the room - maybe it was only a fraction of a second but it felt like half an hour.

Given my relationship to my mother and father - I thought the world was going to come to an end right then.

The silence only heightened the tension.

That's what this silence does in Chapter 8.

The sixth seal had given us a preview of what was coming and now the time has come - the devastating events of the tribulation are about to begin.

In his vision John sees seven angels stand before God and to each of them is given a trumpet.

In verse 6 John sees them raise the trumpets to their lips.

You can almost feel the tension mount as you anticipate what will happen next.

And then it comes:

The first angel blows trumpet number ONE:

And with that blaring sound comes the first of four disasters of nature:

8:7 "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."

Every indication is that this is a violent storm of some kind the likes of which have never before been experienced on the earth.

In Exodus 9 it is recorded that when Moses was trying to convince the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt God poured out a plague on Egypt the likes of which had never before been experienced in that country - thunder, lightening and hail devastated all the vegetation in the country except in the province of Goshen where God's people lived.

I've seen what hail can do to crops and vegetation.

I drove through Yellowstone Park following the fires there.

Is the "fire" a reference to lightening? And does the lightening start fires all over this earth?

Is the "blood" a reference to the color of the rain such as in 1901 in southern Europe when there was a rain storm that was blood-red from fine red sand that blew into the rain as it fell. (Swete in Mounce 185).

It says that a 1/3 of the earth is "burned up".

When we studied the "seals" in chapter 6 we noted that John refers to ¼ of everything being affected.

Here we see 1/3, more than a ¼, but not as extensive as when we get to the "bowls" in chapter 16 when the destruction is complete.

There is no particular reason to take the 1/3 as meaning precisely 33 percent but it is probably better to take it as a reference to an extensive portion of the trees and vegetation being burned.

This is not just an outbreak of a forest fire here and there.

This is destruction of such a large portion of the earth that no one can miss it's uniqueness.

Exactly how it is destroyed I don't think we can say with certainty but somehow hail, lightening, and fire or their equivalent are involved AND what we can know for certain is that the destruction to the flora and fauna of this earth is extensive.

No sooner does the first Trumpet sound then the second one blasts its destruction:  
8:8-9

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.

Just as the first plague brought destruction to the land so the second plague brings destruction to the sea.

Can we even imagine what this would be like?

Somehow the water is fouled making it unfit for many of the fish.

Something happens that sinks ships.

Does God use some meteor? Does a volcano erupt, the likes of which we have never yet seen? Do many volcanos erupt?

Are oil tankers and other shipping all over the world suddenly inundated by water from a tsunami - a tidal wave caused by a meteor?

Very recently scientists have projected the kind of damage that would be caused worldwide by a large meteor hitting our oceans - whole cities submerged, entire islands gone, the suddenness and extent of ship destruction would make the Titanic look insignificant.

We don't know but whatever it is it causes unprecedented destruction.

John sees what he sees and its result is that great destruction occurs in the oceans and commercial shipping is interrupted.

8:10-11

"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.

"Wormwood" means bitter - whatever fell on the earth made much of the fresh water on the earth poisonous.

Again the similarity to one of the Plagues in Egypt is striking.

The first plague in Moses' day was when God turned the waters blood red and they were made undrinkable and many died.

So in the tribulation 1/3 of the waters will be unusable.

A star blazing like a torch may mean literally a meteor that falls.

However it happens many die as a result of this natural disaster.

Imagine the state of affairs in this world after these events.

There have been a number of natural disaster movies made recently and in each case the chaos that reigns is quite graphically imagined.

Imagine what it will be like in the great tribulation.

A third of the earth is devastated, a third of the oceans are affected, a third of the fresh water is altered and now the skies themselves are affected.

8:12

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.

Is this a partial eclipse (1/3 of the light gone) or a full eclipse for 1/3 of a day? Or both? It's difficult to tell.

But certainly we are reminded of the 9th plague that fell on Egypt when it was total darkness for three days.

Imagine complete darkness, no sun, no moon, no stars, no natural light of any kind for 8 hours

Jesus said it would be part of what would happen:

"The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." Mk 13

Imagine! Even an eclipse causes quite a stir in the world today.

What if it was totally pitch black, no light - the panic would be widespread to say the least.

8:13

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.



These next three trumpets herald a disaster worse than the first four.

“Woe, Woe, Woe!

If you thought what preceded was bad wait until you see what's coming next.

9:1-12

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months...”

This time a star falls from the sky but the star is evidently a person - an angel.

The angel opens a pit, an Abyss, or in other words gives permission from God for the creatures of that place to work their evil on the people of the earth.

These evil beings are depicted as locusts because throughout the OT this insect, the locust, is a symbol of destruction.

Locusts have been seen in concentrations 100 feet deep and up to four miles in length as they sweep in from the skies and do their damage - eating everything.

But these locusts are unique they are horse-shaped, long-haired, flying locusts with scorpion tails and golden crowns over human faces with lions teeth."

How grotesque!!

All of these characteristics combined give us the impression of an evil, powerful, unstoppable plague of misery that spreads out over the people of the world in plague of misery.

The pain people will experience will be so severe they will want to die but they won't be able to, John says.

It says the torment will last five months - or in other words some relatively short period of time but long enough.

9:14-15

"It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates. And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind.

The fifth trumpet had released unprecedented suffering but this sixth trumpet announces death.

John sees a great horde of horses and riders in his vision and they were even more grotesque and terror producing than the locusts:

Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur.

John reminds us that this is a vision he is having and so we don't take the descriptions as reference to literal horses with lions' heads but we understand they are demonic.

These are not God's angels who will move across the world to kill but are demonic forces released by God to show what they have all along wanted to do - destroy everything they could.

They are allowed to kill a third of mankind.

This is not the normal millions that die every day in our world but 100s of millions - even up to a couple of billion.

Imagine such death occurring all over the world.

You've seen pictures of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City following the bomb blast two years ago.

You've probably seen pictures of Nagasaki or Hiroshima following the A-Bomb explosions toward the end of WWII.

Maybe you saw pictures of downtown Souix Falls South Dakota after the flood this past summer.

Any and all of them give you some idea of the kind of devastation being envisioned by the Apostle John.

Am I exaggerating?

Am I sensationalizing it?

Whether these are literal locusts and horses or meteors and fire or not it is impossible to exaggerate the destruction Jesus says will come to this earth in those coming days.

I want to come back now to the two audiences I said, I believe, John has in mind as he writes this description of those days:

The believer and the unbeliever.

What response does John expect each to have to what John shows them?

Look first with me at the unbeliever:

9:20 “the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent... they did not repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

When those days of tribulation come - when the world is thrown into the kind of physical chaos described - when millions and millions of people are in unbearable pain and then millions and millions more are killed.

When everything Jesus predicted comes true.

When the end is obviously coming.

When every evidence of God’s power and this world’s instability has been made apparent.

You’d think people would flock to Christ!

You’d guess they would get the message and finally run to Jesus for the safety of his grace.

But what does the text tell us? They refuse to repent.

When we get to the judgments of the bowls in chapter 16 we will see it again - instead of turning to God they will curse God!

Like Pharaoh of Egypt the obvious intervention of God only revealed the growing hardness of people's heart.

There are people who think they can know the truth and wait until some later time to respond to it.

They know they should submit to Jesus but they would rather wait a while.

They'll quit smoking just before they get cancer.

They'll put their seat belt on before the accident.

They'll stop playing around with sins just before they get hooked.

They'll repent and come to Jesus when they are nearer the end of life.

"Fools" are what God calls them - for continuing to reject Jesus only increases hardness.

I'm convinced John wants unbelievers to realize that God's warning of the future is that they might repent now before it is too late.

What about John's desired response from believers?

Look at the beginning of chapter 8.

What is there pictured is the prayers of God's people rising to God and then God answering their prayers.

Pastor Scotty Smith of Franklin, Tennessee speaks of the day in 1996 when he got a call from a member of his church to come to an associate pastor's house immediately. The family-ministries pastor of their church - Don Beasley had been murdered in his home.

As Scotty looked at that body on the garage floor he said he couldn't help but ask, "Lord where are you in the midst of such injustice? This makes no sense. How could you let such a thing happen? Why didn't you intervene?" (Smith p 124)

How many times have you wondered where is justice?

How many times have you found it almost unbearable to think about what has happened to you or worse yet to someone you love?

Can God be both good and all-powerful?

What God is doing in these chapters in Revelation is demonstrate to his people that he has not forgotten.

God is declaring that justice will eventually prevail.

Back in the chapter 6 when the 5<sup>th</sup> seal was opened we saw the souls of those who had been killed for their faithfulness to Jesus crying out,

“How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”

In Chapter 8 God declares the answer - It won't be long now.

What's the effect? I can trust God.

I don't have to try to convince myself that evil doesn't matter, that I just have to get over injustice, that unfair, evil things, just happen.

They don't just happen - they are the result of sin and sinful people and sin and unrepentant sinners will meet justice one day.

Now this is not an attitude of vengeance but an attitude of justice.

I know what I do matters - I know God will make wrongs right.

I can trust him.

Eugene Peterson wrote, “When we know that delay is not procrastination, that our waiting is not because of someone's indifference, that we have not been forgotten, then the waiting is tolerable.” (Peterson p94)

One other very important note for God's people:

Did you notice who is protected while all this destruction and death are taking place?

9:4 Those who caused terror, torment and death were not allowed to touch anyone except who? - “Those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” Those who belonged to God were protected.

This is just what God had declared in 7:3 "Do not harm the land and the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

The message of Revelation 8 and 9 is two-fold - Justice and Mercy.  
Justice will ultimately prevail - we can count on God.  
Mercy is extended even today - will you turn to Jesus now?