

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SEVEN TRUMPETS OF DIVINE JUDGMENT (Part 1)

Revelation contains three distinct sets of seven: (1) the seven seals; (2) the seven trumpets; (3) the seven bowls. How are these to be understood? One approach is to view them in some sort of chronological order, i.e., the fulfillment of the first trumpet follows the fulfillment of the seventh seal. A better approach, in my opinion, is to see the one set of seven actually recapitulating events from the other groups of seven. Hendricksen explains, "These trumpets of judgment, chapters 8-11, indicate *series* of happenings, that is, calamities that will occur again and again throughout this dispensation. *They do not symbolize single and separate events, but they refer to woes that may be seen any day of the year in any part of the globe. Hence, the trumpets are synchronous with the seals.* Again, these trumpets of judgment are clearly retributive in character. Terrible calamities befell the wicked in order to punish them for their opposition to the cause of Christ and for their persecution of the saints. Yet even by means of these judgments God is constantly calling the ungodly unto repentance. These woes do not symbolize God's final and complete displeasure. On the contrary, they indicate his *initial* judgments. They are charged with serious warnings, not with final doom. Remember: trumpets *warn*, bowls are *poured out*. It is for this reason that the trumpets affect a *third part* – not the whole – of the earth, sea, waters, sun, moon, stars. The very function of the *trumpet* is to *warn*, Ezek. 33:3."¹

- I. **THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND.** The trumpet judgments are sometimes understood as intended primarily to warn unbelievers that they will suffer the final judgment if they do not repent. The key to understanding the nature of these as "warning judgments" is the formative OT background. The first five trumpets are patterned after five of the plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians immediately preceding Israel's exodus:

the first trumpet (8:7)	corresponds to Exod. 9:22-25,
the second and third trumpets (8:8-11)	corresponds to Exod. 7:20-25,
the fourth trumpet (8:12)	corresponds to Exod. 10:21-23, and
the fifth trumpet (9:1-11)	corresponds to Exod. 10:12-15. ²

- II. **THE FIRST TRUMPET.** As Beale pointed out, there is an obvious parallel to Exodus 9:22-25. There is a distinction, however. The hail and fire in Exodus were literal. How are we to understand this? One commentator helpfully notes: "Consider the function of the Egyptian plagues. The well-known song, *Dayenu* ([It would have been] *Enough for us*), from the Passover *Haggadah*, says that God through the plagues judged both the Egyptians and their gods (compare 9:20). He did this by turning against the Egyptians the very things they worshipped. They worshipped the Nile River; it became blood. They worshipped beetles (scarabs); they got lice and locusts. They worshipped frogs and found them in bed.

They worshipped the weather and had their crops destroyed by hail. If these verses in Revelation are to be understood literally, then, since God uses nature to accomplish his purposes, one can imagine asteroids plunging into the earth, other materials from outer space darkening the skies and infecting the water, and heat flashes setting fire to the vegetation; and one can seek scientific explanations for such phenomena. But if these are graphic but figurative ways of describing God's judgment and the terror it will evoke such speculations and researches are irrelevant. There are intelligent, well-informed, God-fearing New Testament scholars taking each approach."³ Three points – which apply also to the next two trumpets – are noted. **First**, in our day we can imagine the mechanism for how this might happen more easily than people in the first century. A few nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl or an asteroid colliding with earth could produce such an effect. **Second**, John is not concerned to provide information about the mechanism for this disaster, other than the hand of God. God spoke into being the dry land and its vegetation on the third day of Creation (Gen. 1:9-13). By that same powerful word he soon cursed the dry land and its plant life because of human sin (Gen. 3:17-18). As human sin continues to multiply, why should we be startled that he finally extends his curse on the dry land in destroying a third of it? **Third**, this plague is devastating but not yet fatal. Modern environmental scientists doubt whether human life on earth could continue as we know it with just a few degrees of global warming. How much more alarmed will they be when a third of earth's vegetation is ruined? This plague on nature is meant as a divine warning of worse disasters to come, just like the ancient plagues on the land of Pharaoh (see Rev. 8:8-11:18).⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Wm. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Baker, 1977), p. 140.

² Greg Beale, *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 465.

³ D. H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (JNTP, 1992), p. 816. George Ladd writes, "There is no reason to follow those interpreters who find this plague a picture of civil disorder and anarchy resulting from man's rejection of God. Trees do not mean men of high rank and grass men of common standing. This pictures an actual catastrophe falling upon the physical world. Possibly the **fire** means an electrical display in a fierce thunderstorm." *A Commentary on The Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 126.

⁴ K. H. Easley, *Revelation: Holman New Testament Commentary* (Holman, 1998), p. 144.