

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. George Stevens

Revelation 8:2 to 11:18 – The Seven Seals

The First World War ended on the 11 November, 1918 and the people of Britain and other countries have held the day as one of remembrance ever since. During that day, the nation is cloaked by a minute's silence as those who had died in that war, and others since, are remembered with both sorrow and dignity. It is striking how long a minute seems to be when we stand still in silence. Here, in Revelation 8:1, we find that the heaven itself stands in stunned silence. In earthly terms, it lasts for thirty minutes. How solemn! It is not a silence produced by a remembrance. It is a silence caused by anticipation at what the seventh seal would contain for the earth. In Habakkuk 2:20, the LORD in His holy temple required silence. In Zechariah 2:13, when He rose up, silence was demanded in the earth. Now we find silence in heaven.

There have been interventions of judgement by God in the past. He intervened following the sin of Adam. He judged the world by a flood in the days of Noah. He dealt in judgement with His chosen people Israel on many occasions. When the Son of God came into the world, He took upon Himself the judgement of God because of sin. However, since then, evil has been increasing at an ever accelerating pace. God is now more often denied than accepted. Christ is dishonoured and His people are persecuted. Yet God has not intervened directly. But from our passage, we can see that the world had continued to increase in wickedness and became ripe for His judgement. His wrath was now to be poured out. The silence of the age was to be broken by trumpet blasts which would herald His judgements.

In verse 2, we see that the seventh seal embraces the judgements which would be introduced by the seven angels and the trumpets which are given to them. It is a detailed view of that which will occur in the last three-and-a-half years of what is termed the Great Tribulation period. These lead up to the time when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Revelation 11:15-18).

Overall, the first four trumpet judgements deal with the circumstances of life, symbolised by the trees, the rivers, the sun, moon, and stars. The last three trumpet judgements are more severe and terrible in their character in that they fall upon men, rather than upon their circumstances. They bring great sorrow to those who live in the region known as the "earth". This consists of the lands around the Mediterranean, including Europe and the Middle East across to the Euphrates River. In other words, the regions conquered by the empires found in the book of Daniel.

The incense found in verse 3 reminds us of the sweet fragrance of the perfection of the suffering Christ rising up to God. The testing judgements of God falling upon Christ always emphasised His perfection. Yet it was through suffering that He learned the cost of obedience. Now the angel at the altar saturates the prayers of all saints with these perfections. I think that "all saints" includes those on earth at the time. They plead with God to avenge them - even as the saints in Old Testament times. In this day of God's grace, however, Christians are to love their enemies and do good to those that hate them. They are to bless those who curse them and to pray for those who despitely use them. They must seek the salvation of the wicked - not their judgement.

The incense that goes up to God has an immediate answer in bringing judgement upon men. The same censer is filled with fire and cast to the earth. The same testing judgement which fell upon Christ now falls upon mankind. The voices, thunderings, lightning and earthquake show consternation in the heavens and division upon the earth.

The judgement under the first angel is accompanied with hail and fire mingled with blood. "Hail" symbolises destructive judgement; "fire" the all-consuming character of the judgement; and "blood" the violent death that follows the judgement.

This judgement falls upon the "earth". This is that region mentioned previously. The "third part" of this shows that the judgement is restricted - probably to the Western section as the Eastern part is dealt with by the sixth trumpet. The seventh trumpet extends this by telling us of a more universal judgement (11:15-18).

This first judgement falls upon the trees and green grass. Trees, in the Scriptures, often represent great men, while the green grass speaks of prosperity. Therefore, the human government and prosperity of the region will be destroyed by God.

In the judgement of the second trumpet, John saw “something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea.” In the symbolism of Scripture, mountains often represent great and long-established powers. For example, Babylon is spoken of as a “destroying mountain” in Jeremiah 51:25. On the other hand, the sea sets forth the nations in a state of unrest (Revelation 17:15).

This trumpet predicts the complete destruction of a great world power which will result in ruin and death upon a third part of the nations whose existence depended upon trade, particularly by sea.

The sounding of the third trumpet speaks of a great star falling from heaven burning as a lamp. The heavens tell us of spheres of government whether civil or spiritual. A great star sets forth some prominent, yet subordinate, leader (as with Joseph in the Old Testament) - one who is a source of wisdom and guidance. The name, “Wormwood”, however, shows that he is marked by injustice (Amos 5:7) and is the cause of bitter sorrow and calamity (Lamentations 3:15-19). The fountains of waters and the rivers represent the sources and channels of life and prosperity. So the ungodly wisdom of this leader results in the poisoning of men’s minds bringing corruption, sorrow and death upon the third part of them.

The judgement of the fourth trumpet, in verse 12, is set forth under the figure of a third part of the sun, and moon, and stars being smitten with darkness. The sun, moon, and stars are used in Scripture to set forth the highest ranks of governmental authorities allowed by God. Therefore, the symbols suggest that a third part of the greatest political powers will be extinguished, leaving people in darkness and confusion in every walk of life. It is a spreading atheistic anarchy.

In verse 13, the last three trumpet judgements are distinguished from the first four by the announcement of an angel or, better, “eagle” flying through the mid-heaven proclaiming woe to those living on the earth as the result of the three judgements to follow. The eagle was classed as unclean to Israel and speaks of vengeance without mercy (Deuteronomy 28:49; Habakkuk 1:8).

During the times of these judgements, God will seal a great number Israeli believers, who will be preserved for the reign of Christ. So the fifth trumpet judgement falls on the unbelieving of Israel - those persons which had not the seal of God on their foreheads.

This fearful judgement appears to be some Satanic delusion that darkens the minds of men. It is presented as being brought about under the symbol of a star fallen to the earth. As before, this sets forth some intellectual, high ranking leader who is given authority to open a “bottomless pit” or, the “pit of the abyss”.

Comparing this with Revelation 13:3, 12 and 14, we can see that the opening of the abyss speaks of a revival of the terrifying character of forces once restrained, possibly, an army empowered by evil spirits. The reason for saying this is found in Luke 10:18-19 where the Lord Jesus likens Satanic power to serpents and scorpions. The smoke preceding them depicts their anger which is poured out to partially darken the supreme human government of the time (represented by the sun) and the spiritual, life-giving environment (depicted by the air).

These evil agents are symbolised by a swarm of locusts that, with irresistible power, rape everything before them. Natural locusts would destroy the grass and every green thing, and strip the trees. But the evil influence set forth by these locusts will, just as the poison of a scorpion torments the body, torment the minds of unbelieving Israel. So much so that they will cry out for death, but it will not come.

Another evidence for this horde being evil spirits is the fact that natural locusts have no leader. This army does. Their king is named Abaddon or Apollyon. The name means “the Destroyer”. The description of the locusts is figurative. The likeness to horses prepared for battle shows an attitude of aggression. The crowns of gold would suggest that their cause is a righteous one having divine backing. They claim it to be a “Holy War”. Their long hair shows that they seek their own glory, rather than that of the true God. The faces of men speaks of intelligence. The iron breastplate suggests the hardness of unflinching fanaticism; the lion-like teeth reveal their ferocity; and the sounding wings the speed of their fearful progress. Thankfully, this judgement, or woe, is limited to five months.

Have we not had foreshadowings of such an army and delusion sweeping over Christendom from the East in the history of the invasion of Mahomet and those Saracen forces? Today, it is only the Spirit of God who is restraining the formation of a world-wide religion - a false church.

The golden altar was the place of intercession. Its four horns symbolise the power of that altar acting universally. In reply to the prayers for vengeance which had risen from it, a voice from the altar calls forth the sixth angel, or second woe judgement. This judgement is very similar to the previous one; but whereas the first woe fell upon the unsaved of Israel this one falls upon “the third part of men”. This is an expression which is used in chapter 12 to set forth the sphere of the revived Roman Empire, which would include a Christless Christendom.

The mention of the Euphrates signifies that this judgement comes from the East as this river is the natural barrier between East and West. Somehow, this barrier will be removed. Revelation 16:12 tells us that it will dry up. Hordes from the combined power of four Eastern nations (represented by four angels) will sweep over the western regions. The number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million: an army which is so aggressive and numerous that it cannot be resisted. The breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone suggest that they are characterised by punitive judgement. The heads of the horses were as the heads of lions. This indicates that their power was both devouring and majestic. Their mouths were the source of this judgement. By the fire, by smoke, and brimstone was the third part of men killed. That their power was Satanic is indicated in that their tails were like unto serpents.

Even though God will allow this second woe to fall upon men, there will be, sadly, no repentance. Verses 20-21 show us they will continue to worship devils and bow down to lifeless idols. They continue in murderous acts, sorceries, immorality and stealing.

Revelation 10 opens with a vision of another “mighty angel coming down from heaven.” This angel represents Christ. He is clothed with a cloud which is a token of God’s presence. The rainbow (like that in 4:3) shows that this is the One through whom God’s covenant of mercy with the earth will be carried out. His face like the sun reminds us that in this Person all the glory of God will be set forth and supreme authority displayed. His feet as pillars of fire indicate that He is treading a path of holy judgement against sin.

In verse 2 we find Him holding “a little book open”. In the light of verse 7, this refers to the prophecies of the Old Testament. His right foot upon the sea symbolises His authority over the unstable nations, while His left foot on the land symbolises His authority over the more godly part of the world.

The loud voice and the seven thunders indicate that the authority of Christ will be established through inescapable judgements. Verses 5-7 express the fact that there should be no delay in the establishment of the kingdom of God in this world. The “mystery of God” relates to God’s patience in regard to men’s sin down through the ages. He has intervened in the past in order to bless men; but now He steps in to deal with men in judgement. The cup of iniquity being full, God’s wrath is poured out and the millennial kingdom of Christ will be set up. The government shall indeed be upon the shoulder of the One who is called “Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Father of Eternity and the Prince of Peace.”

The event concerning the little red book in verses 9-11 tell us that John received a revelation from God which was sweet to his taste; but resulted in pain. This would be the character and result of the prophecy which he was commanded to speak again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings (verses 9-11). God’s revelation is like this for us today. We often receive His Word with joy, and then, realising the responsibilities which accompany it, we must judge ourselves.

In 11:1, John is then given a rod by which he is to “measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein”. The action shows that there is still a sincerely believing remnant. The temple is based at Jerusalem showing that the events are both centred around Jerusalem, and that the worship is Jewish, not Christian. The altar seems to be the altar of burnt offering here. This speaks of approach to God and acceptance by Him. The offerer is accepted in the perfection of the sacrifice.

Verse 2 tells us that the Gentiles will be allowed to subdue Jerusalem for three-and-a-half years. This refers to the last half of the final week (or, better, “seven”) in Daniel 9:24-27. These weeks were periods of seven years each. The last week of years finds the head of the revived Roman Empire entering into a covenant with the leader (Antichrist) in Israel. After three-and-a-half years, he breaks that covenant and causes the temple sacrifice to cease. This man then is said to persecute the saints of the Most High and would even try to change times and laws. So, sadly, the period relates to the time of great future trial which the Jews will pass through. It is called “Jacob’s trouble” in Jeremiah 30:7.

Verses 3 and 4 of our chapter show us that during this same time God will raise up two witnesses. They prophesy daily for 1,260 days. Their sackcloth proclaims that repentance is required. The metaphor of the olive tree and lampstands shows the source of their witness is the Spirit of God Himself (Zechariah 4:3-6). Furthermore, it is a witness which is secure for as long as God requires, for they stand before Him. Like Moses and Elijah, their service is one of power. Their witness is to the Lord who has claimed the heavens, the waters and the earth and is about to set up His kingdom. In so doing, they declare God to be “the Lord of the earth”.

Today Christians witness that God is love. His grace towards men is shown. Sinners are saved through faith in Christ. They are accepted in His Beloved Son. As a result, no outward signs of judgement accompany their witness. In the day of these witnesses, God’s intervention in judgement will begin the cleansing of God’s inheritance.

Verses 7 and 8 show us that the head of the revived Roman Empire, will be allowed to overcome and kill them at the end of the three-and-a-half years. Their dead bodies will lie in the street of Jerusalem, that great city “where also their Lord was crucified”, which is so degraded that it is likened to Sodom for its awful immorality, and to Egypt for its idolatry and worldliness. What a warning for our nation today where:

- fornication and adultery abound;
- perversions such as homosexuality are being tolerated and even encouraged by the media;
- Satanism, witchcraft and spiritism grow almost unhindered;
- people, marked by a love of money, increasingly grow covetous; and,
- ungodly worldly fads, fashions and opinions flood into the professing churches.

Whatever happened to the rallying cry of that hymn:

*“Stand up! Stand up for Jesus!
Ye soldiers of the cross!
Lift up His royal banner,
It must not suffer loss.”*

The corpses of these prophets are left in the street for three-and-a-half literal days. Most of the whole world sees them. Only sixty years ago, people asked the question, “How?” The birth of television and satellite technology answer that question. The hatred and contempt for these men was so great that their bodies were left unburied. Both unbelieving Jew and Gentile even celebrated the event by sending gifts to one another.

Verses 11 to 13 show that their gladness was short-lived. The two witnesses were resurrected. Those who saw them trembled. God then called them to heaven and they, in the sight of their enemies, ascended in the same manner as did the Lord Jesus Christ before them.

This event was followed by a great earthquake in which seven thousand men are slain along with a tenth of the city itself. Momentarily, terrified men gave glory “to the God of heaven”. It is a cry of fear rather than one of faith. Anyone who believes that there is one God does well. The devils also know there is one God; but they tremble. In other words, faith must be witnessed by an active response. Bow before God in repentance today, and turn in faith to His Son Jesus Christ by whom He shall judge this world. One day, every knee shall be forced to bow to Christ (Philippians 2:10). Bow to Him as Saviour today, or bow to Him as your judge in a future day.

The second woe is passed. The third woe arrives with the blowing of the seventh trumpet. Throughout Scripture, the number seven speaks of “completion”. Immediately, great voices announce that the kingdoms of this world had become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and that He should reign forever and ever. The great day had arrived. The government of this world was to be placed upon the shoulder of Christ. Heaven rejoices, and the saints, represented by the twenty-four elders, worship with thanksgiving to God: “We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is, and who was, and who is to come; because You have taken Your great power and reigned.” (verses 14-17) However, they also expressed the anger of the nations. To the latter, a thousand year reign of peace and righteousness was the last thing that they wanted. To them this was indeed the third woe. But to those who had remained faithful during this period of trial, whether martyred or otherwise, there were rewards. This reminds the Christian that his/her service will be rewarded at the judgement seat of Christ. Finally, those who have ruined the earth by their invasions will themselves be ruined. It is a fearful thing to fall in to the hands of the living God! Knowing these things, let us, as Christians rejoice more than ever in the greatness of the salvation which has been won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ at Calvary. He has delivered us from this wrath to come. We look forward to His coming for us, not as Judge, but as the One who will take us to heaven to be with Himself for ever. Perhaps today!

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