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The Four Trumpets
Revelation 8:1-13

Introduction
I have a confession to make, and I think it will help you understand why I believe our time in Revelation is the most important series I have ever preached at Meadowbrooke—and perhaps in my life as a pastor. Here's why: I believe the book of Revelation has been hijacked by well-meaning Christians.

Before I explain what I mean, let me qualify that statement. This sermon series is the fruit of hundreds of hours spent studying Revelation, tracing its parallels throughout the Old and New Testaments, and writing two volumes on this remarkable book. That work does not make my conclusions beyond correction, but it has deepened my conviction that what I am showing you is, at the very least, what these passages are teaching. There may be more here than I have recognized, but my aim is to help us understand that message and respond faithfully to what Jesus is saying to His church.

The reason I believe this apocalyptic masterpiece has been hijacked is that it has too often been reduced to a puzzle to be decoded. Many who have claimed to have "cracked" the code have left Christians with the impression that it is not a book for today but for tomorrow.

Two passages often used to support this approach are Daniel 9:27 and 1 Thessalonians 5:9. The first is the primary passage used to establish a future, literal seven-year tribulation. The second is used to assure Christians that they will be removed—raptured—before that tribulation: "**For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ**" (1 Thess. 5:9). But you need to consider this verse in the context of the verses surrounding it:

> **Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober,**

> **having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.** (1 Thess. 5:1–8)

These verses do not promise that we will be raptured before the tribulation. They call those who have been redeemed by the Lamb and made "**children of light**" to stay awake and sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Paul uses the same armor imagery in Ephesians 6:10–18. These verses tell us how to live as we await the day of the Lord, which I understand to come at the end of the tribulation. Paul then explains why we can live as His people with confidence: "**For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing**" (vv. 9–11).

The Second Cycle of Judgments

As you know, Revelation has three cycles of judgment: the seven seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath. Their opening groups of four affect the earth with increasing intensity. Under the fourth seal, Death and Hades are given authority over a fourth of the earth. With the trumpets, we repeatedly read that a third is affected. With the bowls, we no longer read about a fourth or a third, for God's wrath reaches its fullness. Do not forget that it is the Lamb of God who breaks each seal. The seventh seal leads into the trumpet judgments, and the seventh trumpet announces the judgment brought to its fullness in the bowls of wrath. None of these judgments comes unless the Lamb permits it to be so.

When we come to the final three seals and trumpets, the focus broadens. When the fifth seal is broken, we hear the cries of those killed for their faithfulness to Jesus: "**O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?**" (6:10). Listen—the trumpets and the bowls serve as God's response to the cries of those saints!

With the breaking of the sixth seal, we hear the cries of the wicked on the day of the Lord: "**Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?**" (6:16–17). The answer comes in Revelation 7, where we see a great multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Listen to their cry: "**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!**" (7:10). Who can stand? Those whose salvation belongs to God and the Lamb.

We see another distinction when the fifth trumpet sounds: the powerful and horrific locusts released from the bottomless pit are permitted to torment only those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4). As you may recall, those who worship the beast have his mark on their foreheads or on their right hands, and those who worship the Lamb have His name and the Father's name upon their foreheads (14:1).

Revelation describes only two types of worshipers. There is no third category, no fourth category, no seeker category, no purgatory category, and no good-intentioned person category. Only two types of worshipers exist in the world: those who worship the Lamb and those who worship the beast. In case you doubt what I just said, consider what the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:

> **And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.** (vv. 1–3)

If you are dead in your sins, you are a child of wrath and a follower of the "prince of the power of the air," who is the devil and who empowers the beast. Then you have those who belong to the Father and the Son by no effort of their own but by the mercy, love, and grace of God made possible through His Son: "**But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved**" (vv. 4–5).

There are two types of worshipers in God's economy.

Now I can explain what Revelation 8 is about, why it matters to us today, and why we must heed the warning of the trumpets.

We Must Listen to the Trumpets

When Jesus opens the seventh seal, we are told that there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. I believe this silence is connected to what the prophet Zephaniah said: "**Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests**" (Zeph. 1:7). What happens next is why I believe the trumpet judgments serve as God's answer to the saints beneath the altar, which I understand to be the altar of incense in the heavenly temple. We heard their cries in Revelation 6:9–11. Now an angel stands at the altar with a golden censer and is given incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense rises with their prayers before God. Then the angel fills the censer with fire from the altar and throws it onto the earth!

What does this mean? The prayers of the saints are heard, but that does not mean that they will be spared every trouble or delivered from all suffering. But God has heard them, and His answer comes as the trumpets begin to sound. The prayers of the saints pleading for God's kingdom to come, for the curse of sin to be removed, the scales of justice to finally be balanced, for suffering and death to be swallowed up by life, and for all things to be made new are heard—and they will be answered!

After the angel hurls the flaming censer to the earth, "**peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake**" follow (v. 5). Then the blowing of the trumpets.

Just as Revelation 6 and 7 spoke to the first-century Christians of John's day, they speak to us today—and the same is true of Revelation 8. The imagery in these verses draws upon the apocalyptic language of the Old Testament. In particular, the trumpet and bowl judgments echo the plagues God brought upon Egypt, exposing the powerlessness of its gods and judging Pharaoh and his empire for oppressing His people.

Say what you want about the language used to describe what comes with each trumpet blast, but if all you see in the first trumpet is actual hail and fire mixed with blood, burning up a third of the trees and all the green grass, then you have missed the point of the first trumpet! If all you see in the second trumpet is a giant asteroid striking the sea and turning a third of it into blood, then you have missed the point of the second trumpet! If all you see in the third trumpet is a star named Wormwood poisoning a third of the drinkable water, then you have missed the point of the third trumpet! Finally, if all you see in the fourth trumpet is the light of the sun, moon, and stars being reduced by a third, then you have missed the point of the fourth trumpet!

So what is the point of the first four trumpets? To answer that question, we must see the trumpets through the lens of the Old Testament, particularly the ten Egyptian plagues that God brought upon Pharaoh and his people. Before God judged Egypt with the plagues, He said to Moses, "**I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.... And now behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them**" (Exod. 3:7-9). Before God brought the plagues upon Egypt, He heard the cries of His people. Likewise, before the trumpets sound in Revelation, the prayers of the saints rise before His throne (Rev. 8:3-5). So here is the point: The God who heard the cries of His enslaved and suffering people and judged Egypt again confronts a rebellious world in answer to the prayers of His people.

The First Trumpet: Hail, fire, and blood (Rev. 8:7)
With the first trumpet, the land and vegetation are affected in a way that recalls how the seventh plague affected the vegetation and trees in Egypt, demonstrating the powerlessness of Egypt's gods. The Egyptians worshiped Nut as the goddess of the sky and Geb as the god of the earth, yet neither could protect the land from the judgment of its Creator.

At the very least, the warning conveyed with the sounding of this first trumpet concerns the things we believe we are entitled to, such as our food and provision. We depend upon the harvests, the people who produce our food, and the systems that deliver it. We go to places like Sam's Club, King Soopers, and Albertsons expecting to find, purchase, and walk out with what we want. We can place our confidence in those provisions without giving a thought to the God who makes them possible. We get up and go to work so that we can eat, drink, play, and go to

bed with the conviction that we are entitled to it all. That sense of entitlement echoes Pharaoh's conviction that the Hebrew people belonged to him to serve his purposes.

The trumpets warn us that judgment is coming on a world and a people who behave as though they are entitled to all that the Creator's land produces, making the gift a god while ignoring the Giver.

The Second Trumpet: The sea becomes blood (Rev. 8:8-9).
With the second trumpet, something like a great mountain burning with fire is thrown into the sea. A third of the sea becomes blood, a third of its living creatures die, and a third of the ships are destroyed. The burning mountain recalls God's judgment upon Babylon, which He called a "destroying mountain" and declared He would make a "burnt mountain" (Jer. 51:25). Mountains can symbolize kingdoms (Dan. 2:35, 44–45), but even the strongest remains subject to the One who raises up kingdoms and brings them down (Dan. 2:21; 4:17).

The blood recalls Egypt's first plague; the destroyed ships foreshadow the collapse of Babylon's maritime commerce (Rev. 18). Don't miss the warning: political powers and economic systems cannot guarantee the prosperity and security they promise. Kingdoms that appear immovable can fall, and wealth that seems secure can disappear. That is why I feel such urgency! Egypt, Babylon, and Rome could not secure their futures, and no nation today is immune to God's judgment. If you think America is exempt, your ears are already deaf to the second trumpet!

Your wealth, your sense of independence, and your citizenship in one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nations cannot shield you from God's judgment.

The Third Trumpet: Bitter, deadly water (Rev. 8:10-11).
With the third trumpet, a great star named "Wormwood" falls from heaven, blazing like a torch. It strikes a third of the rivers and the springs, making the waters bitter and causing many people to die. This recalls Egypt's undrinkable waters during the first plague and God's warning that He would give His rebellious people bitter food and poisoned water to drink (Jer. 9:15; 23:15). The water we depend upon for life becomes an instrument of judgment.

In the same way we walk into a grocery store expecting food, we turn on our faucets expecting clean water, rarely considering our dependence upon the God who provides it. The human heart oozes with idolatry! We trust the water and the systems that deliver it while ignoring the God who supplies it. The third trumpet warns us that even life's most basic necessities cannot give us security apart from Him. It is the same kind of nonsense James wrote about in his epistle:

> **Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. For you are just a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we**

> **will live and also do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.** (James 4:13–16, NASB)

Let me ask you a question. What keeps our technology and infrastructure from collapsing? Forget what other nations could do; consider what a severe solar storm could disrupt.

The Fourth Trumpet: The lights are darkened (Rev. 8:12)
With the fourth trumpet, a third of the sun, moon, and stars are struck so that a third of their light is darkened. This recalls the ninth plague, when God covered Egypt in thick darkness for three days (Exod. 10:21-23). We go to bed expecting the sun to rise and another day to unfold according to our plans. We set our alarms, fill our calendars, and live as though we are entitled to another day—that somehow tomorrow belongs to us and not to the One in whose image we are made. The lights (stars) that mark our days are subject to the God of whom the prophet Isaiah testified: "**Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing**" (Isa. 40:26).

The fourth trumpet warns us that what we take for granted cannot give us security apart from its Creator. Our plans depend on the rhythms of creation—an order we did not create and cannot ultimately control.

Application
For starters, let me say this. The God who hears the prayers of His redeemed people rules creation, on which the enemies of His people depend. One difference between those who worship the Lamb and those who worship the beast is their sense of entitlement. Those who worship the Lamb know their God to be Sovereign, holy, and true (see Rev. 6:9–11). They know their lives belong to Him. Those who worship the beast live by a different creed, echoed in William Ernest Henley's *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

Now, my dear brothers and sisters, please do not ignore the sounds of the trumpets. Yes, they announce judgment on a godless world, but their warnings are for us too. Do you not see that every godless pursuit, every attempt to cling to earthly treasures while ignoring the God who gives every good gift, and every deliberate step into sin reflect the same spirit of self-rule? Whenever we insist on our own way over God's, we embrace the creed of those who worship the beast: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

That mindset, as we will see throughout Revelation, belongs to the spirit of Babylon. It is the same spirit of self-rule that characterized Pharaoh, the Babylonian Empire, and Rome, and that persists among the nations today. Regardless of our earthly citizenship, the trumpets warn us against such foolish and godless idolatry. We are commanded to flee Babylon: "**Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues**" (Rev. 18:4; see also Jer. 51:6).