THE KINGDOM

Revelation 8:2–11:19

Key Verse: 11:15b

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

Today’s passage covers John’s vision of the sounding of the seven trumpets. The sounding of trumpets has to do with time. When a trumpet blows, it signals that a certain time has come. With each of these trumpet judgments God gives people time to repent and turn to him. Finally, God’s time comes, and there is no more delay. God will use his great power to eliminate all who are against him and usher in his gracious kingdom. Today’s passage shows us some important truths about God. It challenges us to take God seriously and repent. The allegory of the two witnesses is meant to inspire us. Finally, the passage encourages us, no matter how troubled this world is, to have faith in God’s final victory. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In 8:2 John sees “the seven angels who stand before God,” and they are given seven trumpets. It anticipates the second series of seven judgments of God on the earth. But before it commences, John sees something else. Look at verses 3,4. This angel has a golden censer. He’s given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God’s people. He’s at the golden altar of incense in front of God’s throne (Heb9:4). Through this angel, the prayers of God’s people go up before God. It reminds us of the 24 elders carrying golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people (5:8). In Revelation, God on his throne in the heavenly temple can seem so far removed from the real world, where his people have to live and suffer daily. But in a vivid sense it’s the prayers of his people that are the vital connection between heaven and earth. John sees the angel do something surprising. Look at verse 5. After God hears the prayers of his people, the angel hurls this censer full of fire to earth. Probably God told him to do that. What does it mean? It signifies that the seven judgments to come are in answer to the prayers of his people. It tells us that God wants us to pray for his justice to come on earth (cf. Lk18:7,8). We may feel uncomfortable praying for God to judge the world. But coming from people suffering great injustices and persecution for their faith, it’s a prayer God is pleased to answer. To some people prayer can seem like a waste of time. Nothing seems to happen. But God surely hears the prayers of his suffering people and will answer in his time. Prayer in accordance with God’s will is very powerful. Such prayer has power to move heaven and earth, if it’s done in faith (Mk11:24; Jas5:15,16).

In verses 6–12 John sees the first four trumpets sounded. At the first trumpet, hail and fire mixed with blood are hurled to the earth, and a third of all vegetation dies. At the second trumpet, a huge blazing mountain is thrown into the sea, a third of the sea turns to blood, a third of living creatures in the sea die, and a third of the ships are destroyed. At the third trumpet, a star named Wormwood, falls from the sky, a third of earth’s rivers and springs turn bitter, and many people die. At the fourth trumpet, a third of the sun, moon and stars are struck, so that a third of the day and a third of the night are completely dark. These four acts of judgment are on the natural world. They’re similar to God’s plagues on Egypt, but now they’re experienced not just in one nation, but all over the world. And they’re all limited to a third. During the opening of the seven seals, God’s judgment was limited to a fourth (6:8). Why now a third? God seems to be turning up the dial of heat on his judgments. But he’s also restraining himself. He’s not exploding and venting his wrath and anger haphazardly. He’s hoping that through these measured events, some people might wake up spiritually, see that he’s real, and repent. The Bible says that we sinful people “show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead [us] to repentance” (Ro2:4). The Bible also says that God “is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2Pe3:9).

Then John sees an eagle flying in midair calling 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!” (8:13) It means things are about to get way worse. Look at 9:1–6. The fifth trumpet brings essentially a plague of locusts, similar to the locust plague on Egypt in Exodus. But these locusts do not harm vegetation, as locusts usually do; instead, they're instructed to attack only people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads (3:12; 7:2,3), meaning those who've accepted the blood of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (7:14; cf. Eph1:13). But these are not literal insect locusts; they come from the Abyss, or hell, they sting like scorpions, and they cannot kill; they can only torture for five months. But their torture is so bad that many people would rather die. Then John notices that they have highly unusual features. Look at verses 7–11. They have crowns of gold, human faces, women’s hair, lions’ teeth, iron breastplates, wings that sound like horses and chariots in battle, tails with stingers, and the king over them is basically the devil. So they seem to be a huge swarm of demons. God lets them loose on earth to help people experience such suffering that they might turn to him and repent. But even five months of torture is not enough; there are two more woes to come (9:12).

Then John hears a voice coming from the four horns of the altar in heaven, commanding the sixth angel to go and release four angels bound at the great river the Euphrates. Verse 15 reads, “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.” Again, there’s an emphasis on time. God is in complete control of time. He’s been holding back this act of judgment until his right time. This plague is not on the natural world, but directly on human beings, and now it’s not to torture them; it’s to kill them. But again, it’s only a third. God is still containing his judgment. These four angels release an army of mounted troops of 200 million (16). But like the locusts, they’re not ordinary mounted troops we would imagine. The riders had breastplates with three colors: fiery red, dark blue and yellow as sulfur; that’s not too strange. But the horses have heads like lions, and tails like snakes. And out of these horses’ mouths come red fire, blue smoke and yellow sulfur. These become three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that kill a third of mankind (17–19). These mounted riders again seem like demons, even more powerful than the locusts, released to attack humanity. God allows even more suffering, to somehow get people to turn to him.

And what happens? Read 9:20,21. Through the judgments of the first six trumpets God revealed that he’s the living God who controls heaven and earth; all other so-called gods are useless idols. But people are addicted to their useless idols. These idols are described as made of gold, silver, bronze, iron and wood—they cannot see or hear or walk. It means they’re fake, not real. These idols are powerless to help anybody. But people still stubbornly worship them. Today people are still stubbornly worshipping modern day idols—idols such as money, nature, or the human body—thinking these things will give them health or success or happiness. But little by little, without even realizing it, worshiping idols leads people to even grosser sins. Even though people may know these things are wrong and destructive, they just can’t stop. Why can’t people repent? It’s because we’re too proud. Ultimately, these are all acts of defiance and rebellion against God. Earlier we saw that Jesus repeatedly challenged even the seven churches to repent. Repentance is not just for non-Christians; it’s for believers, too. Jesus is calling us to repent of our compromise with the world and its sins, of our self-love, materialism and self-reliance. We shouldn’t compare ourselves with others and think we’re not too bad; we should really struggle to see ourselves before God. And we shouldn’t misunderstand God’s patience with us. The Bible gives us a serious and deadly warning: “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed” (Ro2:5).

In between the sixth and seventh trumpets there's an interlude in chapters 10 and 11. First, in 10:1–4 John sees a mighty angel with a little scroll. He also sees the seven thunders. But then John is told not to write down what the voice of the seven thunders is saying, but to seal it up. What does it mean? Basically, it tells us that there’s much more about his judgment that God doesn’t want us to know (Dt29:29; cf. Da8:26; 12:4,9). We need to just trust and revere God. Then John sees the mighty angel again (5a). The angel raises his right hand to heaven and swears by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and says, “There will be no more delay!” (5b,6). It means the living Creator God will release the full fury of his wrath on the world living in rebellion against him. We see this in Revelation 12–20, especially in the seven bowls of chapter 16.

Read verse 7. Here we find the expression “the mystery of God.” It may include the seven thunders. But it definitely includes God’s greater plan. God's plan was revealed in the seven seals that Jesus opened in chapters 6 and 7. What is God’s greater plan? 7:9 reads, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” In 7:14 we find that they are those “who came out of the great tribulation…who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Simply, God’s mystery is to save all peoples of all nations. Ephesians 3:6 says, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” It’s a mystery for many reasons, one of which is how hard it is for people who were so far away from God to be reunited with him and with all his people. But it’s also a mystery because it happens in this sinful world, where it seems like most people are way too stubborn to ever really repent. Still, God will accomplish this mystery. God will carry out his salvation plan. No one, no amount of rebellion against him, no demons or devil, can stop God from accomplishing this mystery. God will do it in fulfillment of all his promises to his servants down through history.

Look at verses 8–11. John is told to go and take the little scroll in the angel’s hand and eat it. At first it tastes sweet, but then it turns sour in his stomach. It is an allegory for accepting God’s prophecy against the nations. It’s painful to digest how God will judge the world. But John has to digest it and give this message to the nations. This allegory is for us as well. We need to not just listen to God’s word superficially, but deeply digest it, and then share it with people, even though its truths can be painful.

11:1–14 has been called one of the most difficult passages in the whole Bible to understand and interpret. It’s the finale of the second woe (11:14). Some think it’s the contents of the little scroll that John ate. In any case, it’s really a simple allegory. The temple stands for all God’s people who worship him (1Co3:16,17). Measuring it would mean protecting God-worshipping people from being trampled on. The two witnesses are a fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 4. They symbolize what all God’s true people are supposed to do in this dark world full of rebellion against God. We’re supposed to testify to the truth of God and to the good news of Jesus, even when we’re rejected and persecuted. We’re not to compromise with the world, but to testify as God’s true witnesses, by faith, even though it may cost us our lives. People may celebrate when we’re dead because they’re so sick of us and so sick of our message. But we’re to testify just as our Lord Jesus testified, even to the point of being crucified. When we do, we’ll see that God will raise us and exalt us. Moreover, we’ll see, perhaps only from heaven after our death, that many people will repent at last and give glory to God. Read verse 13. This repentance is none other than God’s miracle.

Now let’s read our key verse, verse 15. This verse is the climax of the seven trumpets. It proclaims God’s eternal victory, even before the last judgment and the great battle against Satan and his agents. It also tells us the point of all these acts of judgment. Through many painful events God is working to bring this world under his reign. This chorus is fulfilled at the end of Revelation, in chapters 21–22. God will strike this world until all the arrogant, all the mockers, all the unrepentant, all the rebellious, are no more, and only his true worshippers, the repentant people, remain. God will destroy Satan and bring this whole world under the reign of Jesus. We need to celebrate God's victory in our hearts, even while we live in a world opposed to him. We need to be confident of God's victory. We need to have hope in God's victory. When we do, we can persevere through any kind of suffering we may have to endure. We persevere not for the sake of success in this world, not even for successful ministry, but because our hope is in God’s kingdom, where Jesus will reign for ever and ever.

Read verses 16–19. We learn here that God is the Lord God Almighty, the Eternal God. He will reign with his great power. He will judge the living and the dead and reward his servants, all who revere him. And he will destroy those who destroy the earth. The ark of the covenant symbolizes God’s holiness and his precious promises to save his people.

Today we learned how patient God is to lead us to repentance, and how he’s the Lord of heaven and earth and all that is in it. We learned how much we need to repent. We learned that he wants us to live as his true worshippers and testify to our faith, even at the cost of our lives. And we learned that we need to celebrate God’s final victory, even when it seems like we’re defeated.