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REVELATION 8: 6 – 13

GOD'S JUDGMENTS CONTINUE TO UNFOLD – ROUND 2

In February 2013 a large meteorite, weighing about ten tonnes entered the earth's atmosphere in Russia with a speed of about twenty kilometres per second and exploded. About eleven hundred people were injured. Some folks in the area thought that this was the end of the world.

But this was not the biggest meteorite ever. In 1908 a huge one came down in Siberia with an impact of incredible magnitude. The sound of an enormous explosion was heard thousands of kilometres away. And where this meteorite struck the earth, a pillar of fire rose to an estimated height of about twenty kilometres.

Throughout western Siberia and Europe, the meteoric dust in the atmosphere turned the daylight into a dim, reddish dusk for awhile. In a circle of about ninety kilometres all the forest was levelled to the ground, and in a circle of about twenty kilometres everything was entirely burned up. Now this really sounds like something from Revelation 8, does it not?

In fact – it is something from Revelation 8.

Dramatic things are happening when the Lamb opens the seventh seal. No, not right away. Seven trumpets are given to seven angels in 8:2. But they are going to sound only after what happens in 8:4, 5. We have looked at this in the previous chapter. These trumpet blasts are going to be God's response to the prayers of his children for Jesus' return.

But now all is ready for the next round of God's judgments, to be announced by these angels, as they sound their trumpets. That these judgments are unfolding after the trumpet blasts shows that there is still opportunity to repent.

So, yes, these trumpets set in motion seven judgments. You and I generally see trumpets as musical instruments. But they are also used, and in the Bible most of the time, to announce special events or to start a battle. Here, in Revelation 8 – as for instance in Joshua 6 – the trumpets sound alarm. They warn of imminent dangers. You could compare it to the sirens that are used for alarming people in cities, urging them to find shelter during air raids in modern warfare.

In our text, the glorified Christ is warning the world. God's judgments are unfolding. We have seen the first round in Revelation 6. Now it continues. Time and again in the history of our world the sirens are sounding. Is anybody listening?

A LARMING TRUMPETS

As mentioned, the opening of the seventh seal in Rev. 8:1 introduces the seven angels who are getting ready to sound the seven trumpets. Now, in 8:6–13 we will only listen to the first four of those trumpets. That has a practical reason: all together it is a bit much for one chapter to look at Revelation 8 and 9, and these four trumpets will give us enough to think about for now.

But it also makes sense on a different level. It is clear that these first four trumpets belong together. They are of a somewhat different nature than the other three.

You can actually see the same when you look at the seven seals. You may remember from Rev. 6 that breaking the first four seals describes the four horses and their powers.

In this passage, 8:6–13, you can see something similar when you look at the effect of these four trumpets. They all trigger disasters, harmful calamities that have a major impact on all life, including human life, on this earth.

You could call those events “natural disasters”. That is indeed what they often look like. And that is what people think they are. They will always try to find natural, scientific explanations when terrible things are wreaking havoc on this earth. And quite often scientists can do that. But remember, this is the limited view from here below, which is not able to detect what’s behind it.

However, John’s vision will show us the view from above, the view from where the Almighty God rules from his heavenly throne. And then we learn that in fact there is nothing natural about these frightening events. The Holy God is unfolding his judgments over this world.

Of course, the effects of the first four trumpets are not identical. They affect the earth and all life on earth in four different areas: the earth, the sea, drinking water, and the sky. But what sets them apart from the fifth and the sixth trumpet (the seventh has its own unique character again, just as the seventh seal had) is the different kind of harm, and the different target for the harm that is being caused (see Rev. 9).

What we find in 8: 6–13 is about physical harm and destruction that affects all human life in this world. Although the judgments of God’s wrath are aimed at the godless and the wicked, here they affect the life of believers and unbelievers alike. God’s alarming trumpets are warning all of us in this world.

When we listen to the angels sounding these trumpets, the intensity and also the speed with which all this is unfolding is overwhelming. Imagine standing there and seeing all these things. It is just breathtaking and again, so loud! The sounds are ear-splitting, deafening. You can imagine that John would hardly know where to look first, and then there is something else. Everything seems to be happening at the same time, everywhere.

When John hears the first angel sounding his trumpet, the effect is dramatic and, just as with the other trumpets, the impact is felt worldwide. *There followed hail and fire mixed with blood...* a terribly destructive mixture of hailstorms and thunderstorms with lightning flashing all over, is attacking the earth.

In connection with this passage from Revelation 8, it might be helpful to read parts from Exodus 7, 9 and 10. John describes these judgments in language that reminds us of some of the plagues in Egypt. But now it is something that happens on a much larger, global scale. And the impact is much wider, of course. What is happening after the first trumpet recalls the seventh plague in Egypt (Exodus 9:13-25).

That all this hail and fire is mixed with blood emphasizes the horrible character of what is going on. “Blood” could indicate that there will be a large number of victims of this disaster. It could also refer to the blood-red sky that is the result of the huge razing fires, when one-third of the earth goes up in flames. Such an enormous area. It is hard to imagine! Have you ever driven through an area recently affected by forest fires? Have you ever seen pictures of a landscape wrecked, blackened, and scarred by those fires, thousands of hectares sometimes?

John points out that all this hail and terrifying lightning *was thrown down upon the earth*. You will find similar expressions in what it says about the other trumpets. And it all shows that what is happening is controlled from heaven. The Almighty God on the throne in heaven is once more the “hidden actor”, so to speak, in this unfolding drama of God’s judgments. Something we only recognize because John’s visions show us the view from above. Christ had called him, remember: *Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this* (Revelation 4:1).

The consequences of these ongoing frightening hail and thunderstorms are horrible and disastrous; *one-third of the earth was burned up, as well as one-third of all the trees and of all the green grass*.

This ratio, one-third, is a verbal thread throughout this passage. It is used twelve times in chapter 8, and its frequent use heightens the tension. It is no longer one-quarter that is affected, as in round one, when the seals were opened (Rev. 6:8). Now it is one-third. What is next? It gives a feeling of

urgency. Two-thirds are not affected, and so there is still room to repent, but the total destruction is coming closer, and time is running out.

When all this greenery, all these agricultural products, the fruit, the herbs, vegetables, and you name it, when all these things are consumed by the roaring flames, God's judgment destroys a considerable part of the world's food supply. But it also talks about *the green grass*, the essential food for sheep and cattle. And those things affect all of us because we all live off the land.

But while all this is going on, there is already the warning sound of the second trumpet. And look what is coming. It is gigantic! It is really big! John sees something so immense, he is looking for an adequate image to describe it. It was *something like a great mountain, burning with fire*, he says. It is not a mountain, but it is "something like it". An enormous, a huge ball of fire, *thrown into the sea*.

This monstrous colossus hits the sea with an enormous bang and splash, and given the size, you can imagine the terrible consequences: huge flooding and destructive tsunamis everywhere. The terror of God's judgment is felt on the sea, but also by all the coastlands, and the people that live there.

We hear again the ratio one-third, *a third of the sea became blood*. It reminds us of the first plague in Egypt (Exodus 7:14-21). Here it can be the blood of the victims that colours the water. History tells about naval battles that killed so many, that for miles around, the sea was red because of the blood.

And one-third *of the living creatures in the sea died*. Everywhere there are dead fish, dead whales and all kinds of sea creatures. And then it also destroyed *one-third of the ships*, which includes, of course, crewmembers, passengers, cargo... All gone! And through all this God's judgment does severe damage to all international trade.

Nevertheless, two-thirds of the ships remain sea-worthy. And so, this trumpet blast is again an urgent warning to repent and turn to the living God. Throughout the centuries such maritime disasters always have this warning character. Every sailor can tell you that the power of the sea in turmoil is awe-inspiring.

But there is not much time to think. The next trumpet is sounding already. It is number three. Yes, the disasters come quickly, one after the other. The

food has been affected already, now it is going to be the fresh water, the rivers and springs, the sources of drinking water for people and animals.

John sees *a great star, blazing like a torch, falling from heaven*. A star is supposed to be high in the sky. Could it be a comet? Or a meteorite? Or an asteroid? Have you seen the YouTube videos of what happened in Russia on February 15, 2013?

Well, whatever the exact identity of the burning projectile John sees dropping from above, it is like a nuclear missile from heaven, bombing *one-third of the rivers and all the springs of water*.

Indeed, God himself is acting again. His judgment moves the universe out of joint and shakes what seems like immovable structures. It is utterly devastating and ruins a large portion of the supply of drinking water. Clear drinking water sustains life and health on earth. When that is lacking life becomes difficult. Polluted, contaminated water causes sickness, diseases and sometimes death.

Well, that is exactly what happens, says John. He emphasizes how serious this impact is, by telling us that the name of this great star is *Wormwood*. That is the name of a shrub with a bitter taste. This is symbolic for the effect: *one-third of the waters became wormwood*. It means that the water turned bitter. It has an awful taste and becomes undrinkable, useless. And many people who do drink it, are dying from it.

And while all these judgments are rapidly unfolding, the fourth angel sounds his trumpet. The terrifying turmoil continues, scarier than ever. It becomes dark, not pitch-dark, as in the ninth plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:21-23), but God's judgment is dimming the lights on earth on a global scale! *One-third of the sun was struck, and one-third of the moon and the stars*. And this affects one-third of the light during the day and during the night.

Just as food and water, so also light is needed to make life flourish on earth. This gloomy darkening of the atmosphere is sinister and frightening. It is an evil omen that makes people feel uncomfortable. When the lights in the sky fail, you know you can expect catastrophic events with cosmic dimensions.

And yet, the failure of the light is still partial. The urgent call to repent remains. The Holy God employs his judgments to throw heaven and earth

into chaos. In doing so he issues his warnings for this world that is heading for Jesus' second coming.

WARNED PEOPLE

What do we do with the loud warnings of these sounding trumpets? It is incredibly loud and impressive alright. But is anybody listening? And if there are people out there who are listening, is there anybody in this world who does something with it and takes these warnings to heart?

We have to admit that we do not necessarily understand everything and every detail of this overwhelming mass of visions. It can get puzzling and confusing when the dramatic events keep piling up, when God's judgments are rapidly unfolding, one after the other with no break.

Throughout the centuries people have often tried to identify specific political, economic, or military events in the time in which they lived, as the specific fulfilments of some of these visions. But that becomes very arbitrary, especially when people try to find out how what we have experienced was announced by this or that trumpet. Or when they try to calculate where we are today on the scale of judgments. But then, perhaps everything is still to come.

Let us watch out for speculation. When people get carried away by their imagination, you can get pretty bizarre interpretations.

However, that does not mean that we can do nothing with it. That does not mean that it does not refer to our reality in the world in which we live. On the contrary. Revelation does reflect our world, our reality, also the reality we see and experience today. This tells us already that God's judgments in the events of this passage cannot be restricted to a short time, just before the end of the world.

No, John pictures events that look like 'natural disasters'. More than that, God shows those to him, as cosmic calamities on a huge, worldwide scale. He does this to show that the fulfilment of these things cannot be boxed in, in one single and separate event.

The point is that these unfolding judgments will be fulfilled in a series of happenings that will occur again and again throughout this dispensation.

We all know that throughout the ages all these things have ravaged our world. And they still do - devastating hailstorms and hurricanes; threatening thunderstorms and wild-fires that are out of control; crops failing because of flooding or drought; devastating earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis; people starving to death or dying from disease or from drinking contaminated water.

The world has been, is and will always be full of these things. But do not shrug your shoulders. Do not say, "that's just natural misery; what else? It's terrible if you're in the middle of it, but what can you do about it?"

Do not let the view from below fool you. We live in 'the last days' of a world that more and more turns its back on God. Such a world becomes increasingly dark. And therefore, in the final stage of our history - the time between Jesus first and second coming - God's judgments are unfolding any time on any part of the globe.

That is threatening. It is also a warning. All these disasters indicate how God is going to obstruct and break down life on earth to punish the godless and the wicked. When he affects life on earth in such a destructive manner, the living God lets the world know that he is on his way to the day that all the walls will crumble, and the whole world will face his judgment and be brought to its knees.

Is the intensity of God's judgments increasing as time goes on? Will it get worse closer to the end? Perhaps, although those things are hard to measure. But even if that would be so, you can never put it on a scale with dates attached to it!

And yet, when one angel after the other comes forward to sound his trumpet, it does add a tone of increasing urgency. Many people think they will eventually be able to control what is going on in this world. They think they will be able to prevent what they call "natural disasters", or to eradicate diseases, or to control climate-change.

They will not. To be sure, to some extent they may be successful here or there. Science and technology are not without progress. But because of

God's unfolding judgments, controlled from heaven, the situation in this world will never be stable and harmonious – never! This is the world we live in today.

But with these judgments God is also constantly urging people to repent. Do we recognize his serious warnings? Do we live as warned people when we hear his trumpets and see the impact in our world? Are we willing to see, in everything, God's hand? Are we willing to alert others to see this, to show them the view from above? And do we urge them to repent and turn to Jesus Christ?

Our history, including the disasters, pandemics and other calamities that shake up our lives, is all the work of the Almighty God. These things are not just random events, or accidents. They are God's judgments. That is a hard sell nowadays. People do not want to hear that a tsunami or an earthquake or a drought comes as God's judgment and warning. And this includes many Christians.

“How can you say that God has a hand in these terrible things,” they say. “So many good people are innocent victims of those disasters. How can a God who is love allow such things to happen?” Some people get upset. “This is so hurtful and judgmental,” they say. “You add insult to injury when you tell the poor folks who are already suffering, that they suffer because of God's judgment.”

But the point is not that God picks on certain individuals or on particular groups or categories of people. What ever happens throughout the world, it is all part of God's judgments with cosmic dimensions. But the view from here below fails to recognize this.

Mankind lives as if they control life and do not need God. But time and again the Lord reminds us in a drastic manner that he alone is God. He keeps reminding us that it is not safe to ignore him. Holy, holy, holy is his Name!

We have seen the remarkable parallels with some of the plagues in Egypt. The only true God beats up and knocks down the Egyptian gods. Why does he do that? So that people would acknowledge him and obey him. Well, here the same happens on a global scale. The only true God beats up and knocks

down all man-made gods today, with the urgent call to repent and discover his love and grace in Jesus Christ.

The fact that only one-third is being destroyed, means that two-thirds is still functioning in the last days. Life is still possible. Repentance remains possible. God's trumpet blasts are clear warning signals that should strike terror in human hearts so that people may turn to Jesus Christ and find salvation and hope.

What about us? Do we hear the sound of the trumpets, calling us out of complacency and self-confidence? What about our future and the future of our children in this frightening world, groaning under God's unfolding judgments?

Let us go back for a moment to the time that Israel was in Egypt. Remember the ultimate purpose of those horrible plagues that terrorized the Egyptians (Exodus 6 – 11): liberation and freedom, freedom from slavery for God's children.

The same is true here. These trumpet blasts trigger devastating judgments. But they are at the same time the prelude to God's deliverance. The liberation of God's people is coming. He will lead his church out of the darkness of suffering and persecution, to the new Promised Land, the New Jerusalem.

Yes, just as the Israelites in Egypt, God's children today suffer from many of the same judgments as anybody else in this world. We live in this world and we are reminded that salvation is by grace alone. All we can do is trust in God's good plan. But the forecast is great. We are heading for the grand feast of Jesus' return.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 we read that one day we will hear again a loud trumpet blast. But then it will no longer be an alarming sound. Then it will be the festive announcement of the resurrection of the dead and the grandiose new beginning. Death and destruction will not have the final say, but the last word is for him who says: *I am making everything new...!*

A CALLING EAGLE

It is good to keep this hopeful perspective in the midst of all the upheaval we read about in this chapter because it is not over yet. After the fourth trumpet has sounded it is actually quiet for a moment, and so the reader or listener can relax a bit.

But the respite is very short.

In John's vision a flying eagle appears, which briefly interrupts the trumpet blasts. It could be a reference to one of the living creatures around God's throne. Remember that the fourth one was *like a flying eagle* (Rev. 4:7). In this way we can know that here we have a direct messenger from the Holy God himself.

A golden eagle is one of the largest, most impressive, and majestic birds, when it soars overhead, high up in the sky, *directly overhead*, it says. This means also that this bird can be seen and heard everywhere.

John hears this eagle crying out with a screeching, terrifying loud voice: *Woe! Woe! Woe to those who dwell on the earth.....!*

In the Bible the word “woe” is a typical introduction to ask attention for a serious prophetic message. The prophet Amos uses it in 5:18 and 6:1. And Jesus uses it in Matthew 23:13–36, *Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees*. In the words of the eagle, the last three trumpet blasts that are still to come, are grouped together as “three woes”. That sounds pretty threatening, scary even.

Here again we have an urgent, three-fold warning for the calamities that are still approaching. But there is one significant difference. The frightening disasters that follow the three trumpet blasts still to come, are targeting in particular, *those who dwell on the earth*. Now, of course, we all dwell on the earth. But in Revelation this expression always refers to the unbelievers, God's godless enemies. Think of the cry of the souls of the martyrs under the altar in Rev. 6:10.

This is also confirmed in Rev. 9:4, where we hear that the coming terror, whatever it is going to look like, will only affect *those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads* (see also Rev. 7:4-8; 14:1).

So yes, three more trumpets to go. And what is to come will be worse than what has happened so far. This three-fold 'woe' makes you shiver because of the doom and gloom that is coming over a decaying humanity in a rebellious world. How dreadful will it be to fall into the hands of the living God, who is a consuming fire.

But in the end, both God's children and God's enemies, all will see the great glory of the Holy and Almighty God, when he has reached the ultimate goal of all his judgments.

And everyone will acknowledge, either with joy in Jesus Christ, or with gnashing teeth and filled with hatred that the Lord is just and gracious and therefore worthy of all praise.

2. The list of the twelve tribes of Israel in the verses 5 – 8 is different from the list(s) in the Old Testament (like in Genesis 49). Find the differences and explain what you think the reason might be for those differences.
3. If *the prayers of the saints* (meaning: the believers or the church) are going to have such a major impact on what is going to happen on earth, what do you think was the content of these prayers? What did the believers pray for?
4. When we pray – either personally, as family or as church – we pray that God may bless mission, evangelism, and that the Holy Spirit may open hearts and minds for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we also pray for justice and righteousness? For Jesus' return and the coming of God's kingdom? For the Last Judgment? What should we pray for?

Chapter 14 – Revelation 8:6-13

1. Can we recognize the disasters, triggered by the first four trumpets, in the time in which we live? How does God want us to respond to these disasters?
2. How does Revelation 8 help us to respond to people that say: 'If God is responsible for, or even involved in all the terrible things that are happening in the world, I cannot believe in a cruel God like that'....?
3. Read Romans 8:18-25. How can this passage help us to understand what is happening in Revelation 8:6-13?
4. The disasters following the trumpet-blasts in Revelation 8:6-13 are at least partly the results of *the prayers of the saints*, the church (Revelation 8:3-5). What does this teach us about what the church should be praying for?

Chapter 15 – Revelation 9

1. What does Revelation 9:6 mean? What is the only way out of the human misery?
2. In verse 13 we hear about *a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God*. In Revelation 6:9 this same altar was connected with the voices of the martyrs, and in 8:3,4 it is connected with the