

## **“The Lord’s Strange Work”**

**Revelation 8:6-9:21**

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The title of the sermon comes from Isaiah 28 where we read of the Lord’s judgment as his strange and alien work. It is a reminder that while the Lord in his justice will and must punish the unbelieving and the wicked, his love, mercy and desire to save lie still closer to the center of his heart.

We said last Lord’s Day that some interpreters of Revelation take the seven trumpets to recapitulate the history described by the breaking of the seven seals – the trumpets tell the same story over again that we have already read in chapter 6 – while others take them to describe the Lord’s still more implacable wrath toward and judgment of the unbelieving world at the end of history when the rebellion of man against God reaches its final climax. I said that I was not going to spend any time attempting to decide that question as the burden of this material did not depend upon it.

The judgments represented by the first six trumpets, sounded in turn, come in two groups: the first four are natural catastrophes with consequences for human beings; the last two are direct attacks on mankind.

### **Text Comment**

v.7 You will notice the similarities between the woes that befall the earth at the sounding of the first five trumpets and the plagues that the Lord visited upon Egypt at the time of the exodus.

v.12 All this material, by the way, is full of allusions to statements made by the OT prophets. There is no book in the NT so indebted to the OT as Revelation though, interestingly, Revelation never actually directly cites any OT text.

The partiality of the judgments indicates that we are not yet at the *last* judgment. We seem to be at the last judgment at the breaking of the sixth seal in 6:12-14 where we also hear of the darkening of the sky, but there it is total not partial.

v.13 The sounding of the first four trumpets were, in a way, preliminary. Woes had befallen the natural world but worse was to come for mankind. The eagle flew at midday so that it could be seen and heard by the largest number of people. The phrase “inhabitants of the earth” occurs seven times in Revelation and always to designate the pagan, unbelieving world in its hostility to God.

9:2 The star apparently symbolizes some angelic being because we now read of what *he* did.

v.3 As you remember, in the book of Joel, a plague of locusts represented the judgment of God. In what follows John’s description of these locusts clearly depends upon Joel’s

description of a swarm of locusts as an invading army sent to punish people for their sins. Once again, a swarm of locusts was also one of the ten plagues that the Lord visited upon the Egyptians before the exodus.

- v.5 The locusts were given an unusual mission. Usually locusts consume green foliage, but here, having been given the power to sting like a scorpion, they were told not to consume vegetation but to torture men but only those who did not have the seal of God. We read of the sealing of God's people in 7:3-8.

The five months probably refers to the five month dry season during which locusts appear. That the torture lasted the entire five months indicates its severity and that it has this supernatural purpose that comes from God and heaven. Usually locust swarms came and went.

- v.11 *Abaddon* means "destruction" and is found six times in the OT as a synonym for *sheol* or *Hades*, the place of the dead. John personifies *sheol*, which in some of its uses is the equivalent of *hell*, as Apollyon, a name that occurs nowhere else in the bible. Here it obviously refers either to the Devil himself or one of his representatives.

There is some thought that John in coining the name may have been taking a swipe at the god Apollo, one of whose symbols was the locust, all the more because Domitian, the Roman emperor at the time Revelation was written, imagined himself as Apollo incarnate.

- v.12 That is, the first of the last three trumpets that are distinguished from the first four and grouped together as a unit; all of which we read in the last verse of chapter 8.
- v.13 Remember, this altar is where the prayers of the saints were received in 8:3. The idea continues to be that the reign of God is established on the earth – both by judgment and salvation – in answer to the prayers of his people.
- v.14 These four angels are clearly not the same four we encountered in 7:1 and are otherwise unknown in the literature of the period. The fact that they are bound suggests they are evil spirits and can only do their destructive work when released to do so. To the Romans the Euphrates River represented the eastern frontier, to the Jew it represented the northern frontier, across which Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian armies had advanced into Palestine to impose their pagan rule upon the people of God in punishment for Israel's betrayal of God's covenant. So enemies coming from the Euphrates is a natural image of great trouble to come.
- v.20 Remember, the summons to repent was a feature of most of the seven letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3. There too the problem was compromise with the surrounding culture. There too that compromise was also likened to idolatry.
- v.21 As Paul teaches in Romans 1 idolatry, the rejection of the living God, the worship of the creature rather than the creator, inevitably leads to all manner of corrupt behaviors.

As we begin to consider this material, it is important to make the point again that we do not have here literal descriptions of anything. John has employed highly figurative images of divine judgment, most drawn from the Old Testament. All of this dramatic imagery in the account of the six trumpets is typical of apocalyptic writing. Attempts to make the second trumpet's woe into some particular volcanic eruption don't explain how the entire mountain was cast into the sea. The scene depicted at the sounding of the fourth trumpet is impossible for the reader even to visualize. What would it mean for a third of the sun to be struck? We are then given to see locusts that sting and who have human faces, horses with the faces of lions, plagues that come out of the horses' mouths and so on. John's repeated use of the words "like" and "likeness" demonstrates that he was himself struggling to describe to his readers what he saw in his vision. [Beale, 499]

What is important about that is that we should not think that the trumpets represent anything other than the woes, the miseries, the catastrophes, the sorrows, and the pains of human life that we are already well familiar with in this world. John is talking about what happens in the experience of human beings; what happens even *now* to people in this world. We don't see mountains being cast into the sea or armies of locusts with faces like human faces and teeth like lions' teeth. But every day we witness the woes that those dramatic images are intended to describe. One fine scholar on Revelation describes the trumpets this way.

“Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by the Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms [he means in terms that draw from other such descriptions in other books of the Bible]. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.” [Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 20]

One striking demonstration that this is, in fact, John's perspective is the warning that we read at the very end of the book. In 22:18 we read:

“I warn anyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, *God will add to him the plagues described in this book.*”

In other words, these plagues are with us now. People can suffer them now. They are present reality. Even if one takes the trumpets to describe divine judgment in its greater intensity at the end of the age, the plagues so described are obviously already with us today and have been with us throughout human history to this point, as they will be with us to the end. The end brings only more of the same.

And what *this* means, in turn, is that we are to see the woe in this world – evil of both kinds: natural catastrophe and the misery visited upon human beings by other human beings – as the personal visitation of God! The misery of human life is God’s judgment upon the world’s sin. Remember, as we said last week and as Paul reminds us in Romans chapter 1, what John describes as fiery mountains, swarms of locusts, and invading armies of fiery horsemen, is very often God giving man over to their sinful desires and letting their sinful patterns of thought and life work themselves out to their bitter end in human experience. The mountain being cast into the sea and the swarm of locusts are a way of describing in dramatic form how society corrupts itself and how then it suffers from that corruption when God gives itself over to sin and to its rebellion against God. When man worships the creature rather than the Creator, all manner of bad things ensue! As Augustine put it long ago: “sin becomes the punishment of sin.” And, then, there are also catastrophes of a natural kind. This world is a world of woe because it lies under the judgment of God! That is John’s great point in this material.

Surely much suffering in the world is not divine judgment, as the Bible is careful to say and to say repeatedly. Suffering has many uses, we know. The scalpel hurts but it hurts to heal. But, much of the world’s suffering, much of humanity’s pain, much of the fear, sorrow, despair and disappointment that human beings suffer is, as the Bible often and emphatically says and as we read *so* emphatically here in Revelation, much of it is punishment that God is imposing upon unrepentant sinners.

We must never be unwilling to face this fact because *this is everyone’s greatest problem with our Christian faith*. It has even been a great problem for real Christians in thinking about their own Christian faith. The incomparable Origen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century argued that the OT texts describing divine judgment taken at face value present an impossibly harsh view of God and so must be interpreted allegorically. Well, there is some truth in that to be sure: we should not take many of the biblical descriptions of divine judgment with a wooden literalism. It is perfectly obvious that the Bible employs figures of speech to talk about the outworking of God’s holy justice in the world. But the problem of those passage is not thereby removed. And we have the same stern, implacable description of divine judgment in the NT as we have in the Old and certainly this judgment is a central theme of the book of Revelation.

The objection people have to the Bible’s assertion that God avenges man’s sin and rebellion will not be overcome simply by recognizing the figurative and apocalyptic character of the descriptions of this vengeance. The fact is in the straightforward, literal accounts of this divine vengeance, of which there are many in the Bible, the fact and the ferocity of the divine wrath is asserted in unmistakable terms. And even the figures of speech that we find here in Rev. 8 and 9 obviously mean *something*! They are intended to make a point and that point is that God punishes the wicked. Their dramatic character, indeed, is designed *to emphasize that point*, to force the reality of divine judgment upon our unwilling minds.

Whatever other objections people have to Christianity, they all come to rest here. Take away divine judgment and none of the other objections amount to anything much at all. Charles Darwin once wrote:

“I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brothers, and almost all my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.” [Cited in *CT* (Dec 2008) 62]

Napoleon is said to have had no religion since the occasion when, at the age of nine, he heard a preacher insist that his hero, Julius Caesar, was suffering in hell. [Johnson, *Napoleon*, 30]

And a great many lesser people think the same way and an enormous number of people in our day. They may tell a survey taker that they believe in the existence of hell but their hell is an irrelevance, reserved only for the Hitlers and Jeffrey Dahmers of the world. What they do not believe in is a God of vengeance whose judgments are already falling upon the world in token and pledge of worse to come. Their objection to the idea of hell is, in fact, an objection to the very idea that God actively and personally punishes the wicked and that such wicked people are the ordinary people of this world.

We Christians who so love and admire God because of his grace and mercy, his wisdom and power, because we know him as our Creator, our Savior, and our heavenly Father, must face the fact that a great many human beings think that our God, the God we worship in this house Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day, if he were to exist at all, would be a *horrible* being. And they would think that almost exclusively because this God punishes the wicked with an inflexible and irresistible will, the very thing that John is teaching us about God and about human history in the passage we have read.

So relentless is this criticism of the God of the Bible in respectable culture that the Christian church itself has often succumbed to the pressure and attempted to fashion a form of the faith that either diminishes the connection between the living God and the woes of this world or severs it altogether. The price of this, however, has always been far too high. Such revisers of the biblical faith, to be sure, give us a Christianity that does not offend outsiders, but at the cost of making the faith irrelevant both to outsiders and to us who believe. Without a serious doctrine of divine judgment, of God’s holiness and justice demanding his punishment of the wicked, nothing of any real importance is left. There is no great salvation because there is no fate worse than death to be saved from. There is no great Savior because we have no need of such a figure. There is no Christmas, no incarnation of God the Son, because whatever problems man may have they are not such that only the mighty God can solve and certainly are not such as require the suffering and death of the God-man. Christ was bearing our judgment on the cross, but what is the point of that if there is no such judgment? You can take divine judgment out of Christianity but both logic and history combine to prove that there is nothing of any importance left when it has been removed. Florence and I saw one of the almost innumerable versions of *The Christmas Carol* the other evening and I was reminded of this again. There can be no redemption of Scrooge without Marley’s chains.

But there is something else. If you deny divine judgment, if you deny that the woes of this world are in large part the will of the living God who is avenging human sin, if you are unwilling to see them as having such a purpose – personal, specific, such an intention – you are left with despair and nothing but despair. For the fact is, there is nothing in John’s description of this world such

as we have it in the sounding of the six trumpets, that everyone does not see day after day. We see it in the small scale of individual human life; we see it in the large scale of men and nations. Everywhere we look there is the mountain being cast into the sea, the locusts torturing human beings, the vast armies of fiery horsemen, and the plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur. The one thing both the believer and the unbeliever know is that these tragedies and troubles, these fearsome happenings of nature and of men are the story of life in this world. About that there can be no disagreement. The newspaper, the television, and the internet bring news of more of this without fail every morning and every night.

But, if these terrible things – from the abuse of a child in his home or a wife in her marriage to a thief stealing someone's property; from a famine induced by an evil or incompetent government to diseases that threaten to kill human beings by the multitudes; from car accidents to wars; from tsunamis and earthquakes to financial meltdowns and economic crises – I say, if these terrible things *are not the will of a just and holy God who is addressing this world* what are they? They are nothing. They mean nothing. They are only what happens; nothing more. Be careful what you wish for. By denying that God visits this sinful world with the constant reminder that he will not be mocked and that man must find peace with him or be punished for his sin, you end up with human existence that means nothing, goes nowhere, and with all that makes bleak the life of untold numbers of human beings coming to pass for no reason whatsoever.

The fact is, divine judgment is all that stands between us and a life absolutely bereft of meaning. Divine judgment is the proof that our lives matter, that there is meaning to what happens to us and to others, and that the moral issue of human existence is a fact not merely a sentiment. There is something going on in this world that has everything to do with right and wrong, with the fulfillment of the universal longings of the human heart for peace, for love, and for goodness. Thank God for the locusts for without them peace, love and goodness are only words not real things. Thank God for the locusts; without them we would find ourselves in a world utterly without purpose, to live for a few short years, often brutal years, for no reason whatsoever, and then to surrender to the eternal night.

The one thing you will find in the Bible from beginning to end, and we are near the end of the Bible, is a relentless realism about life. Unbelieving readers of the Bible purport to be shocked that God would intentionally destroy large numbers of human beings in punishment for their sins. There are many reasons for their dismay, chief among them, of course, that they don't think people like themselves really deserve such treatment. They indulge a deeply dishonest view of themselves and others and content themselves with an absurdly sentimental view of human goodness. Terrorists are content with themselves! Mobsters are content with themselves! Everybody is generally content with himself or herself however much pettiness, selfishness, cruelty, and disinterest in all that is holy fills up his or her life. John is a great deal more realistic about the hard facts of life in this world. He knows how much suffering there is. He knows that everyone dies. He knows full well that the question raised by the fact of death and of the troubles of life that accompany us to our graves cannot be satisfactorily answered in any other way than by appeal to the sovereign will of the infinite personal God who has all along promised both to punish the wicked and to save those who trust in him. And John knows how pervasively wicked, immoral, unjust, and undeserving mankind is!

This world is about all of *that* and about nothing else. This temporal life is about the eternal life that follows it. Suffering here is either punishment for sin that warns of still greater punishment to come or it is the opportunity for God to prove to his people that he can keep them safe even in the midst of the greatest danger.

This is why human life is as miserable as it is. *It is in that misery that human beings anticipate their fate!* The world is suffering all of the misery of the disease with the death still to come. Unbelieving human life is built on an anti-God foundation, whether religious or irreligious in its particular idolatries is immaterial. It breathes the Devil's anti-God state of mind. And so it is inevitable that divine judgment will follow; judgment that is in this world both judicial – that is, punishment – and remedial – that is, a warning. Notice verse 20: “the rest of mankind still did not repent...” They could have repented, they *should* have repented. The purpose of the woes that befall this world is in part to warn mankind of what must come if it remains unwilling to repent and turn to God. The world rings with divine judgment, divine vengeance against sin. Every morning when we open our eyes we can hear that bell tolling in the background. It *rings* with divine judgment precisely to prove to human beings the impossibility of escaping that judgment. Life does not work out as every human being knows it ought to work out and as every human heart longs for it to work out. Why? Because man is estranged from God from whom alone his true life can come. He was made for communion with God and for happiness in communion with God. Without God life must fail to find its true purpose and true fulfillment. The plagues that befall our world every day are the persistent warning that this remains the inescapable fact of human existence. God is speaking, warning, calling!

Or, as John puts it here, one must have the seal of God on his or her forehead to be safe from the harm that will befall mankind because of its rebellion against God. There are two and only two communities on earth: the unsealed and the sealed. John calls the first group the “inhabitants of the earth” precisely because they are the ones who have made themselves completely at home in this transient world. [Caird, 113] The judgments of the Lord are a constant reminder that this world is no place to make one's home! The fact that the world rings with divine judgment is one of God's kindnesses. He has made it unmistakable that man without God will not succeed in establishing himself. It is the one truth human beings *must learn, that they are most loathe to learn* and so God rubs their noses in it day after day.

Remember, now, John is writing to Christians. He is writing to us. And he is telling us what the nature and purpose of human woe actually is. It portends the end of the matter. It forces us to reckon with the great issue of human life. That is its great purpose. And so we must always think of it in this way. And we very often do not. We think very often about the woes of this world as the other side thinks.

You military history buffs know the story. General Meade had defeated General Lee at Gettysburg but utterly failed to seize the opportunity to destroy Lee's battered army. Lincoln knew, of course, that the objective was not to take Richmond but to destroy the Confederacy's ability to make war, which meant to destroy Lee's army. So Lincoln had urged Meade to strike Lee as he retreated toward the Potomac before he could get his army back to safety. Meade, however, held back and lost the moment. The general telegraphed the president to say that Lincoln could take consolation in the fact that Meade had been successful in driving the invader

from our soil. Lincoln, in near despair, wondered if he could ever make the point to his generals: “Will our generals never get that idea out of their heads? The whole country is our soil.” [In F. J. Beckwith, in *Darwin’s Nemesis*, 105] General Meade, Lincoln said, had adopted the premises of the enemy. He was acting as if the Confederacy owned the Southern states and Union owned only the North which was, after all, the assertion that created the war in the first place!

So often in this world Christians find themselves similarly assimilating the premises of the other side. We worry about the troubles and catastrophes of life for every other reason than the main one: viz. that they portend the ultimate issue of human existence, the judgment of God, and the absolute necessity of man finding his salvation through faith in Christ and repentance from our sin. We worry about the plagues of life because of their effect on our own immediate happiness. We wring our hands for fear that our lives in this world will be disturbed. They are supposed to disturb our lives in this world! They are supposed to have an effect on everybody’s happiness! That is their point! This world rings with judgment, with punishment, with vengeance from heaven for one reason only: that we might never forget what life in this world is all about and the one thing and one thing only that matters. Do we have the seal that protects us from harm in this world and the next, the seal that is given through faith in Jesus Christ, or do we not? Compared to this question, there are no other questions!

Every human being, without exception, must either worship the God who made him or her, or worship gods of his or her own making. There is that alternative only. We cannot help but worship, for that is what we were made to be: worshipping beings. We are hungry. We know how our bodily life is driven by hunger. But so also the life of our souls. We are hungry for God. “Behind all the hunger of our life is God.” [A. Schmemman, *For the Life of the World*, 14] Men will seek to satisfy that hunger with the real God or with false gods. Again, that is the single alternative. And each choice comes inescapably with a future: woe or weal, death or life, sorrow or unending joy. Divine punishment sent from heaven to earth; the sounding of these trumpets over and over again in the midst of human life, serves one great, noble, vital, gracious purpose: to force us to remember what in the world we are doing here and where we are going.