

# **The Book of Revelation**

## **Week #9 – The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer**

### **I. REVIEW OF WEEK #8**

#### **A. The Faithful and their Persecutors**

The fifth seal predicted the persecution of the faithful [the souls under the altar crying out for justice], and the sixth seal the punishment of their persecutors.

#### **B. A Dramatic Pause**

There is a dramatic pause following the sixth seal. This heightens our suspense and delays the opening of the seventh seal.

#### **C. The Great Tribulation**

- The opening of the seventh seal releases the last and greatest of the woes to come, the great tribulation:
- In this coming tribulation there was to be a final assault by every evil power and a final devastation of the earth.

#### **D. Sealing of the Faithful**

But before this happens the faithful are sealed with the seal of God – the seal of salvation and divine protection - so as to be protected from the woes of the seventh seal.

- The sealing in Revelation does not symbolize protection “from” death, but protection in and through death.
- The faithful won’t be exempt from suffering and death but they will be brought safely through them.

The seal was shaped like the Hebrew letter *tau*, which means “mark” [Greek = *tau*]. In ancient Hebrew script *tau* looks like a cross [x or +].

- They were sealed or marked with the sign of the cross.

There will be no rapture of “born-again” Christians before the great tribulation.

**E. Summary**

There are three elements in this chapter: a warning, an assurance, and a promise.

1. There is a *warning*. The last unparalleled and inconceivable time of tribulation is coming soon.
2. There is an *assurance*. In that time of destruction the faithful will suffer terribly, but they will be brought safely through it because they are sealed with the seal of God.
3. There is a *promise*. When they have passed through that time, they will come to the blessedness in which all pain and sorrow are gone and there is nothing but peace and joy.

**II. OVERVIEW OF WEEK 9**

The seventh seal is the last, so we expect to see the end of God’s plan; the last of the judgments. But the end does not come. Instead we have another interlude of heavenly liturgy, then a new series of visions introduced by the seven trumpets.

**A. Role of the Seventh Seal**

The seventh seal establishes a sense of drama and suspense and provides a transition to the next series of visions, the seven trumpets [8:2-11:19].

**B. Series of Interlocking Visions**

This series of interlocking visions [for example, the seventh seal opening up another series of seven] connects the two sections of the book.

It enables John to describe the same events from different points of view.

The set of interlocking keys illustrates the growing intensity of the woes/judgments found in the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls – seven events told three times in different ways.

The connecting of the seals and trumpets is accomplished by assigning to the opening of the seventh seal three effects:

1. the silence (8:1);
2. the appearance of the seven angels with the seven trumpets (8:2);
3. the vision of the angel with the golden censer.

The whole series of the trumpets is included in the series of the events caused by the unsealing of the scroll.

### **III. THE SEVENTH SEAL**

#### **Read: Revelation 8:1**

*When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.*

#### **A. Silence in Heaven**

We have finally arrived at the seventh seal and what does John hear?

A thunderous silence!

The silence is a dramatic pause heightening the suspense. It is a kind of breathing space in the narrative – a moment of quiet before another shattering revelation comes.

#### **B. Liturgical Significance**

But it has a liturgical significance as well. The prayers of the saints are about to go up to God.

It recalls the *liturgical* silence that fell over the Jerusalem Temple when the priests offered incense and the multitudes prayed quietly in the outer courts.

Jewish tradition also speaks of an *angelic* silence in heaven when Israel prays and when the judgments of God are about to fall.

The Cherubim and Seraphim praise God day and night, but here the angels praise is interrupted in order to allow the *liturgical prayer* of God’s people on earth to be heard.

This prayer is more powerful than any earthquake, more dramatic than the sun being darkened and the stars falling from the sky.

### **C. The Power of the Mass**

What we do at Mass [liturgical prayer] is the most powerful thing imaginable. Its effects are far more profound than anything we can ever imagine.

## **IV. THE SEVEN TRUMPETS**

### **Read: Revelation 8:2-5**

*2] Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.*

*[3] And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne;*

*[4] and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.*

*[5] Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

### **A. Seven Angels**

The seven angels with the trumpets cannot blow them until the prayers of the saints have their effect [Rev 8:3-4].

Who are these angels?

Scripture tells us that seven archangels minister in the presence of God [Tob 12:15]. Raphael is one of these, and Gabriel and Michael are mentioned in the Bible. The others are named in Jewish tradition.

### **B. Angel with the Golden Censer**

An unnamed angel with a golden censer stands before the altar of incense – the heavenly counterpart to the altar of incense in the Jerusalem Temple.

In the Temple incense was burned before the first and after the last sacrifices of the day. The offerings and sacrifices of the people went up to God “wrapped in perfumed incense”.

### **C. The Prayers of the Saints**

In Revelation, the incense offered symbolizes the prayers of the saints. The angels offer our prayers to God in heaven. This is one of the reasons why Catholics ask the angels such as St. Michael and our guardian angels to pray for us.

- The prayers of the saints release the power of God to act in human history.

These prayers, previously identified by bowls of incense [Rev 5:8], are now mingled with the fragrant incense rising from the golden censer.

- This shows that the saints in heaven intercede with God on our behalf.

### **D. Censer Thrown Down to Earth**

In response to the prayers of the saints for justice [the souls of the martyrs], the angel throws down the censer, filled with fire from the altar, to the earth.

*I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" [Rev 6:9-10].*

This is an image of divine judgment similar to Ezekiel’s vision [Ez 10:2], where an angel fills his hand with burning coals and scatters them over Jerusalem.

Fire coming down from heaven is often used in the Bible as a symbol of God’s judgment, e.g., Sodom and Gomorrah.

This rain of fire now signals the start of God’s fury on the world and on mankind, which is described here in stages marked by trumpet blasts.

## **V. TRUMPETS OF JUDGMENT**

In the visions of the Old and New Testaments the trumpet is always the symbol of the intervention of God in history.

- Trumpets were used by the Israelites not only in battle, but also in the Temple liturgy, where they proclaim the presence of God.

- Seven trumpets were used in the Temple liturgy.

In terms of Our Lord’s Second Coming, trumpets signal that divine intervention is imminent.

*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with **the sound of the trumpet** of God [1 Thess 4:16].*

The seven trumpets of Revelation blast the earth with sevenfold judgment. They wreak havoc more severe than the seven seals but less severe than the seven bowls, yet to come.

These judgments apply to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end times.

### **A. First Four Trumpets**

The first four trumpets introduce natural disasters that ravish earth, sea, fresh water, and sky, and are separated from that of the following ones by a vision [v 13]; similar to the pattern of the seven seals.

The plagues initiated by the seven trumpets recall the plagues that ravaged Egypt before the Exodus [See table on page 123 of *Coming Soon* by Michael Barber].

### **Read: Revelation 8: 6-13**

*[6] Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.*

*[7] The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.*

*[8] The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea;*

*[9] and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*

*[10] The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the fountains of water.*

*[11] The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the water, because it was made bitter.*

*[12] The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.*

*[13] Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice, as it flew in*

*midheaven, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets which the three angels are about to blow!"*

**B. The First Trumpet: Hail and Fire**

The first woe is similar to the seventh plague of Egypt [Ex 9:22-24].

*And the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch forth your hand toward heaven, that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt . . ."*

*And the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. The hail struck down everything that was in the field . . . every plant of the field, and shattered every tree of the field.*

The devastation produced by the trumpets is greater than that of the first four seals; a third of the earth is affected, not just a quarter [Rev 6:8].

However, God is still in control; Divine mercy prevents total annihilation!

Josephus’ accounts of the historical events that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem bear a striking resemblance to what John saw in the apocalypse.

**C. Second Trumpet: A Mountain Cast into the Sea**

The blowing of the next two trumpets affects the seas and rivers. Many perish as a result of the pollution of the waters. Both of these calamities are connected with the first plague of Egypt [Ex 7:19-21].

The image of the mountain being cast into the sea is another image of the judgment of Jerusalem. The mountain is a reference to Jerusalem, which was built on a mountain range.

The sea is frequently used in the OT to represent the nations. Thus the image of a mountain being thrown into the sea indicates that the nations will “swallow up” the city.

This image is similar to Jeremiah 51 where God foretells the fall of Babylon. Thus the mountain here is the Babylon of John’s day [i.e., Jerusalem; although some say Rome].

The first plague on Egypt turned the Nile into blood. This is the background for the second and third woes.

***D. Third Trumpet***

Just as the image of the burning mountain cast into the sea referred to the fall of Babylon, the fall of the “great star” from heaven echoes Isaiah’s prophecy about Babylon’s coming destruction.

Wormwood was a bitter and poisonous plant used already in Jeremiah as God’s punishment of the ungodly.

The fallen star “Wormwood” makes one third of all fresh water poisonous, bitter and undrinkable – yet another disaster.

***E. Fourth Trumpet***

The fourth woe corresponds to the ninth plague, that of darkness, in Exodus 10:21-23, except that the darkness here is not total.

***F. A Pause***

An eagle or vulture interrupts to alert us to more disastrous woes yet to come, this time, on the inhabitants of the earth, who, we will see, are unbelievers or sinners.

The eagle provides a pause and a warning before the last three trumpet calls.