



Our world is full of warnings. Sometimes these warnings are absolutely necessary; at other times they're so ridiculous we can only laugh. The following warnings were found on consumer products:

- On a Duraflame fireplace log: Caution—Risk of Fire.
- On a Batman costume: Warning: Cape doesn't enable user to fly.
- On a bottle of hair coloring: Do not use as an ice cream topping.
- On a sun shield for a car: Do not drive with sun shield in place.
- On a portable stroller: Remove infant before folding for storage.
- On a small tractor: Danger: Avoid Death.
- On a T-shirt: Do not iron while wearing shirt.

With warnings like that, it's a miracle we listen to some of the more important warnings that come our way. For example, in Thailand, ten-year-old Tilly Smith saved her parents and dozens of fellow vacationers from the deadly tsunami because she had studied a school geography lesson. As her family enjoyed a day at the beach, the sea began to bubble and rush away from the shore. While the adults were curious, Tilly was petrified with fear.

"Mommy, we must get off the beach now! I think there's going to be a tsunami."

The adults didn't get her warning until she mentioned a tidal wave. Then they believed her and evacuated the area. Minutes later the water surged over the beach and demolished everything in its path. The resort was destroyed, but that section of beach was one of the few places where no one was killed or even hurt.

People called her a hero, but she gave the credit to her geography teacher for explaining how earthquakes cause tsunamis.

The book of Revelation has many warnings contained within it. These warnings tell us that the world as we know it won't continue forever; a tidal wave of judgment is coming, and if we're not prepared, if we plug our ears to what God is saying, nothing can save us.

Few chapters describe this frightful end more graphically than Revelation 8 and 9 and few people need to hear this warning more than we Americans, including us in the American church.

Silence in heaven

These two chapters revolve around the blowing of seven trumpets. But before those trumpets are blown, the seventh seal of the scroll is opened. Look at 8:1–2:

"When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them."

It's kind of strange, really. This is the moment we've been waiting for—the opening of the seventh seal means the scroll can be opened and the plan and purpose of God can be carried out. But instead, there is nothing but silence. Up until now things have been very noisy. In chapter 7 we saw an angel crying out with a loud voice, and then we saw a great multitude which no one could count, crying out in worship. That's a lot of noise! But now the voices have faded and there is nothing but silence in heaven.

Why this strange silence? Perhaps this is the silence of hushed expectancy. It's the silence that happens right before something of massive significance takes place. Everyone in heaven is in breathless anticipation of God's final actions in bringing history to a close. The scroll has been opened and we can't wait for these events to take place. But this is also the silence that's an integral part of worship; a silence that prepares for prayer. In Jewish temple worship, incense and sacrifice were supposed to be offered in silence so that prayers could be heard. We have people here at CPC who like to show up a few minutes early so they can prepare for worship with just a few moments of silence.

It was during this silence John saw the seven angels who stood before the throne of God being handed seven trumpets. Somehow the contents of the seventh seal and of the scroll are going to be seen in the events associated with the seven trumpets. The six seals brought us through current history right up to the end. Now with the opening of the seventh seal and the blowing of the trumpets all of this is intensified into a time of great tribulation.

It's no mistake that one of the functions of trumpets in the ancient world was to warn. It's almost like the ancient equivalent of a fire alarm; when the alarm goes off you have a short time to act before it's too late. When the trumpets sound, judgment is right around the corner. The prophet Joel wrote, **"Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all**

the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; surely it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness... There has never been anything like it..." (Joel 2:1-2). That's what's happening here. With each trumpet, a plague is poured out on the earth as the expression of God's holy wrath. Now skip down to verse 7.

The trumpets warn of widespread destruction

The first four trumpets

The trumpets are in two groups. The first four trumpets bring destruction to nature, what we call natural disasters. Look at verses 7–12.

"The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, died; and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. The name of the star is called Wormwood; and a third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter. The fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be darkened and the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way."

It's fruitless trying to figure out exactly what's happening with each one of these disasters. Some see an asteroid hitting the earth, others see volcanoes or earthquakes in this. What's clear is they affect one-third of the four realms of the created world: the earth, the sea, the fresh water, and the heavens. There is no realm that's unaffected.

After the first four judgments John hears an eagle flying in midair, crying in a loud voice. **"Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound!"** (v.13b). **Woe!** is an expression of warning, specifically of God's judgment. The first four judgments were awful, but they're nothing compared to what remains. The first four trumpets targeted the world of nature, but the next two will target people, who the eagle calls **"those who dwell on the earth."** This phrase is used over and over again in Revelation to describe those who are "worldly" in the sense that they're at home in the world and ignore the reality of God.

The fifth trumpet

The fifth trumpet is sounded in 9:1–11.

"Then the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth; and the key of the bottomless pit was given to him. He opened the bottomless pit, and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit. Then out of the smoke came locusts upon the earth, and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. They were told not to hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (verses 1–4).

The fifth trumpet unleashes a huge army of locusts. In the Middle East the worst natural disaster was a swarm of locusts. Their swarms can number billions and stretch for miles. They consume everything in their path. In 1954 fifty swarms invaded Kenya, the largest swarm estimated at 10 billion insects covering over 200 miles. Locusts can eat their own body weight every day; that's 20,000 tons per day for that one swarm!

But these aren't just any old locusts. These locusts emerge from a bottomless pit called the abyss, unleashed by a star fallen from heaven. This fallen star is probably Satan. The abyss is the place where the demonic forces opposed to God hang out. These locusts are really demonic forces who wreak havoc on earth. Later, in v.11 he says: **"They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon."** This is referring to Satan himself, named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both names mean Destroyer. Satan is a destroyer.

The sixth trumpet

With the sixth trumpet God steps up the pressure.

"Then the sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, one saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' And the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released, so that they would kill a third of mankind. The number of the armies of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them" (verses 13–16).

Unlike the locusts the angels are ordered to kill, not just to harm. And they kill one-third of humanity. The agent they use is an enormous army of 200 million horsemen which comes pouring across the Euphrates River. Throughout history, this was the direction from which God brought judgment on his people. This would also be a terrifying image to the people of Rome because beyond the Euphrates were the Parthians, the only neighboring people Rome failed to conquer. They were a fierce people and renowned horsemen who repeatedly launched attacks into Roman territory.

God is in control

We don't get to hear the seventh trumpet until the end of chapter 11. Meanwhile, we need to stop and try to take in all of what we've just read. Let's face it, this sounds like something out of a movie like *2012*—part science fiction and part natural catastrophe. What are we to make of this? Why is all of this happening? We know that God is behind all of this. We know that because of how John describes it all. Several times he uses what's called "the divine passive." In 9:1 he says the key to the abyss *"was given"* to Satan. In 9:3 he says power *"was given"* to the locusts. In 9:4 he says *"they were told"* not to hurt the grass or trees or those with a seal on their foreheads. And in v.5 *"they were not permitted"* to kill anyone. Who is the unseen authority behind these verbs? It's God! It's God who calls the shots, not Satan. God is in control. That's why he can order the locusts to harm only those who do not bear God's seal on their foreheads. God's people are off-limits. So the question is, why is God doing this? I want to suggest God is doing this for two reasons; I think these two things will surprise you.

God listens to people

The first reason is that God listens to people. Did you know that? All of this happens at least in part because he listens to people. Look at 8:3-5. This brings us back up to what happens right before the first trumpet sounded. John is going to tell us what precipitated the awful judgments he's about to describe.

"Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake."

This reminds us of chapter 5 where the 24 elders were said to each hold a golden bowl of incense, *"which are the prayers of the saints"* (5:8). Now John sees a single angel at the altar. He's holding a golden censer. This was an open topped pan used to carry hot coals from the altar of burnt offering for making sacrifices. Often, incense would be placed on these coals in the censers and offered before the Lord. The incense symbolized the people's prayers as they ascend to God.

Remember the Christmas story from Luke's gospel? Luke begins his version of the story by telling us of a priest named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth. They were unable to have children and time had gone by and now it was too late. But he was given the once in a lifetime honor of being chosen to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Luke says while he was in the temple *"the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the*

hour of the incense offering. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.'" He then went on to explain that his son John would prepare the way for the Messiah. But you can see here the connection between the burning of the incense and the prayers of God's people. While he's inside the people are outside praying. And as the smoke from the incense is rising up to God, the angel says to him, *"Your petition has been heard."* God listens to his people.

Here in Revelation prayers have been heard as well. It says the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar and hurled it to the earth and there followed peals of thunder and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. In other words, all the judgments which take place in chapters 8 and 9 are the result of God listening to the prayers of his people. Not just some of his people. In v.3 it says *"the prayers of all the saints."*

Certainly among these prayers are the prayers of the martyrs we heard in chapter 6:10, *"How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"* It's no mistake that the plagues in these chapters are so similar to the plagues of Egypt we see way back in the book of Exodus: hail, waters turned to blood, the sun darkened. Those plagues were targeted against Pharaoh because he held God's people in captivity. God had heard the cry of his people in Egypt (Ex. 3:7; 6:5) and swung into action to liberate them. That's what God is doing here in chapters 8 and 9. He's bringing justice to his people.

It's like that story Jesus told about a judge who didn't fear God or care much for people. A widow who was being taken advantage of kept coming to him asking for legal protection. He couldn't care less about her but finally he gave in because she wore him out. Jesus closed that story by saying in essence, "Listen, if a hardened man like that acted on her behalf, don't you think God will bring about justice for His dear people who cry to Him day and night?" Of course he will!

This prayer for justice is reflected in another prayer we see throughout the book of Revelation: *"Come, Lord Jesus"* (22:20). When Jesus comes, all that's wrong will be made right. Do you ever pray this prayer? Sometimes we have a hard time relating to these kinds of prayers. I think it's because we're often far too comfortable here in this life. In fact we're often torn between getting what we want in this life or getting what deep down we know is better in the next. John White describes the confusion of my own heart, and perhaps yours as well: "We would like to believe that our treasure was in heaven and that heaven was our real choice. But earthly treasures continue to attract. We may not

want outrageous wealth and would be content with reasonable financial security.... But we don't want to miss out on anything either. We're ambivalent.... We're like the monkey with his fist trapped inside the coconut shell clutching a fistful of peanuts. The monkey wants freedom and peanuts and he cannot have both."

We can't have both. Somehow, even if God chooses to give us a relatively comfortable life, we have to learn to cultivate a longing for justice and for Jesus to come that will dominate our prayer life. We have to learn to unite in spirit with those who are suffering and who do know in a very palpable way what it is to long for Jesus to come and make all things that new.

God cares about people

The first reason God unleashes his judgments upon the earth is that he listens to his people. The second reason is that he cares about people. Look down at 9:20-21. Here John focuses in on those who are left after the terrible judgments. Remember, only one-third of mankind was allowed to be killed. What about the other two-thirds? Look what he says:

"The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts."

Twice he says they *"did not repent."* Why is that important? Because that was precisely the intended purpose of all those terrible judgments. God wanted to bring those who saw all of this and somehow survived to come to repentance. He wanted to change their minds about him and about the lamb. He wanted them to be willing to pull their hands out of the coconut shell. You see, that's why throughout these chapters only one-third is lost—God cares about the two-thirds. This was the only way to get them to change their minds. In the same way today, God is speaking through all the tragedies of war, crime and terrorism as well as the devastation of earthquakes, hurricanes and medical epidemics. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

But this chapter ends on a tragic note. They would not repent. Despite all they had seen, they wouldn't change their minds about the lamb. And look what he says: they wouldn't repent of five things: First, the works of their hands—idols of gold, silver,

brass and wood. This points to idolatry and materialism. Second, murder. Jesus warned us against thinking of this in purely literal terms. He said we murder quite effectively when we harbor resentments and bitterness in our hearts and lash out at people as a result. Third, sorcery. The Greek word is *pharmacia*. We get our word "pharmacy" from this. It points to the use of magic arts, but there may be a sense of drug use in this as well. Drugs and the occult go hand in hand. Fourth, immorality. This refers to any kind of sexual sin, including premarital sex, pornography and lust. And fifth, theft. These are things people are not willing to let go of in repentance.

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis tells of a ghost who arrived in Paradise with a lizard attached to his lapel. He was quickly informed by the gatekeeper that lizards were not welcome in the new Eden. He must throw it to the ground and crush it. Only in that brutal act could he show himself worthy of the heavenly city. The ghost agonizes over his decision. The reptile has been his constant companion and closest friend. How could he give him up? How would he bear the pain? Would heaven even be heaven without his dear friend?

These questions are those we're all faced with as we think about this call to repentance. This call isn't just for unbelievers. Remember the seven letters and how in the majority of these the church was called to repentance. Some of them were compromising with the world. Their hands were stuck in the coconut shell. Others were apathetic and self-sufficient. Jesus said you think you're rich and in need of nothing, but in fact you're wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Repent!

In Lewis's story, the man finally tears the lizard from his lapel and throws it to the ground. Despite its cries for help, he crushes it beneath his feet. At that very moment, the reptile is transformed into a powerful horse, and on this animal that ghost rides into the heavenly city. Can you hear in this story an echo of Jesus' promise, *"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it"* (Mark 8:35).

When the trumpets blow, and they will blow, make no mistake, they're blowing because God listens to his people. Are you praying? Are your prayers for justice and for Jesus to come rising up to God like incense? Or are you just too comfortable with this world? Those trumpets are also blowing because God cares about people. He's calling you and me to repentance. What do we need to let go of and repent of? Don't plug your ears. Whatever it is, do it now.

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