

## INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 8

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## 1 THE THEME

### ***GOD'S CONTINUAL WARNING TO REPENT THROUGH THE SEVEN TRUMPETS OF JUDGEMENT***

God's continual warning to repent through the seven trumpets of judgement is directed to the godless and wicked people.

## 2 THE STRUCTURE

### **a. The seven trumpets in chapter 8 and chapter 9 belong together**

The theme is: "God's continual warning to repent through the seven trumpets of judgement."

Together these chapters reveal six of the seven trumpet judgements.

The seventh trumpet (11:15) represents the final end, the final judgement and the final phase of God's kingdom.

### **b. The seven trumpets are parallel to the seven seals**

The vision of the seven seals (6:1-17; 8:1) is followed by the vision of the seven trumpets (8:2 to 11:19).

The visions of the seals and trumpets are consecutive,

but the execution of the seals and the trumpets is parallel and simultaneous.

Both the sixth seal (6:12-17) and the seventh trumpet (11:15-19) represent the final judgement.

Thus the period of the seven trumpets of judgements is *parallel* to the period of the seven seals.

The seventh seal discloses the fact that there is a delay in Christ's second coming and the renewal of all things.

The sounding of the trumpets of judgement (chapters 8 and 9) and the eating of the little scroll (chapter 10) precede the final end.

The seventh seal also reveals God's moral principle of government of the world, namely, that "throughout world history from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming, the seals of oppression and persecution ever give rise to the trumpets of judgement".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen p. 132

The seven seals represent the revelation and execution of God's decree or plan, namely, the victorious course of Christ and his gospel and the opposition, oppression, persecution, trials and tribulation that follow. The conquering advance of Christ in the world receives all kinds of opposition and is the cause of many struggles, represented by the seals.

But whenever Christ or his gospel is rejected or opposed, God comes with all kinds of judgements, represented by the trumpets. The trumpets have two functions: on the one hand they represent God's punishments for rejecting Christ and on the other hand they represent God's means to bring people to repentance. The trumpets clearly have the character of punishments, punishing the godless and wicked world for their opposition, oppression and persecution of Christians.

### **c. The seven trumpets have a certain order: they are divided into four and three**

The first four trumpet judgements affect people *indirectly* through the forces of nature (8:6-12).

- (1) The first trumpet affects the sea.
- (2) The second trumpet affects the earth.
- (3) The third trumpet affects the water sources.
- (4) The fourth trumpet affects the bodies in the universe.

The first four trumpet judgements affect people in their *physical* being.

The last three trumpet judgements affect people *directly* (9:1-19).

- (5) The fifth trumpet affects only the people who do not have the seal of God in their *spiritual* being (9:4).
- (6) The sixth trumpet dumps all humanity *body and spirit* into war (9:15). The resulting destruction, terror and misery become indescribable.
- (7) The seventh trumpet brings the final judgement to all humanity: to all the servants of God and to all the destroyers of the earth (11:18-19; 10:7).

These last three trumpet judgements are also called 'woes' (8:13; 9:12; 11:14), because woes are terrible pains that affect people before the promised future is born (11:15; cf. Matthew 25:34).

### **d. The period of the seven trumpets constitutes the whole New Testament period**

The New Testament period begins with chapter 8. At his first coming Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice of atonement for sins for all those who believe. By his life, death and resurrection Christ earned the right to give complete salvation to believers and just judgement to unbelievers. As the Representative of believers in heaven Jesus Christ intercedes for believers (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2) and answers the prayers of believers, on the one hand with blessings (John 15:7; Ephesians 3:20) and on the other hand with his trumpet judgements (8:3-5). The prayers of Christians affect what happens in world history on earth throughout the New Testament period!

The New Testament period ends with chapter 11. At the second coming of Jesus Christ the seventh trumpet is blown, signifying that the mystery of God is accomplished (10:7). The mystery is God's decrees with regard to salvation and judgement. Salvation includes the proclamation of the gospel (Romans 16:25-26) and the reward of his servants (11:18a). And judgement includes the destruction of the destroyers of the earth in world history (11:18b).

### **e. The seven bowls are parallel to the seven trumpets**

While the seven trumpets (chapter 8 and 9) *warn*, the seven bowls (chapter 15 and 16) pour out God's wrath as a *doom*.

While the trumpet judgements are partial: they affect only *a third*, the bowl judgements are total: they affect *everything*: they affect all the enemies of Christ on the earth and every living thing in the sea.

While the trumpet judgements are God's *initial warnings*, the bowl judgements are God's *final doom*.

### 3 THE CONTENTS

#### a. The seventh seal: silence of half an hour (8:1)

The seventh seal represents the unfathomable phenomenon of delay or of slowing down the movement of history towards the end. The silence in heaven has to do with the delay of the final fulfilment of the end. The New Testament clearly reveals the reason of and the purpose for the slowing down of the apocalyptic events in world history. See the explanation of chapter 8.

#### b. The riddle about the delay (8:1)<sup>2</sup>

There is a riddle about the delay or slowing down of the movement of history towards the end. The end time seems to be shifted further and further back. Everything in heaven seems to be ready for the final great liberation. So why can't the apocalyptic events on earth not come to final fulfilment?

#### c. The delay in the Old Testament

The believers in the Old Testament period were convinced that the coming of the promised Messiah would be immediately followed by the perfect kingdom of God, which would end all oppression and misery on earth.

However, the prophet Isaiah (eighth century B.C.) proclaimed that there would be a delay. The Messiah would first be despised, rejected and crucified on a cross and then raised from the dead in order to justify very many people before he would be highly exalted. Nations and kings would jump up in utter bewilderment at beholding his impressive appearance and silently marvel at the astonishing change in his lot (Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12). The Messiah would reign with justice and righteousness on the throne of the kingdom from the time he establishes it to eternity (Isaiah 9:6-7). Only in the final phase of the kingdom would nothing and no one destroy anymore (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Also the Prophet Daniel (second century B.C.) proclaimed a delay. He saw four different kingdoms rise out of the turbulent sea of nations in world history before the appearance of one like a son of man, coming with the clouds, to whom everlasting dominion in the kingdom would be given (Daniel chapter 7).

The prophets of the Old Testament looked forward with great expectation to the coming of the Messiah. Nevertheless, they were not fully aware of the delay that would occur after his coming.

#### d. The delay in the proclamation of Jesus in the Gospels

The delaying factor moves to the foreground in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. He proclaimed the kingdom of God as a present and as a future reality.

The delay in the self revelation of Jesus. Jesus not only identifies himself with the suffering Servant of the Lord (Isaiah chapter 53), but also with the Son of Man coming with the clouds to establish his kingdom that will never be destroyed, but last forever (Daniel 7:13-14).

The delay in the teaching of Jesus. His teaching contained these two lines: the one focuses on his death, resurrection and establishing his kingdom at his first coming (Matthew 21:33-44; 16:18-19); the other focuses on the final renewal of all things at his second coming (Matthew 13:40-42; 25:34).

The delay in the task to go and make disciples. Jesus proclaimed that the time has been fulfilled and that the kingdom of God is *near* (has come, but not yet in its final glory)(Mark 1:15). He would see that those who prayed get justice *quickly* (Luke 18:7). The *signs* of the kingdom were already there: wherever Jesus appears, demons flee, the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the sick are cured, the lame walk, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (Matthew 11:5). The kingdom rises amidst the chaotic nations of the sinful world and yet it cannot be fully deployed. The final end is shifted further and further

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Bavinck pp. 194-208  
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away: the disciples are sent into the world to make disciples of Christ in all the nations. They are not given to know the times and dates set by God's authority to bring the kingdom to its final and full glory (Acts 1:5-6).

The delay in the task to gather a community. The parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14). Jesus Christ fulfilled everything (he made atonement for sins; he bound/curtailed Satan; he conquered death). The wedding banquet (the kingdom of God) is ready. But the people invited (the Jews) refused to come: they paid no attention; went off to their business in the world; mistreated and killed the prophets. The fact that people in unbelief rejected the Messiah makes it imperative that other people have to be invited. The future of the Lord is already there (the kingdom is a reality), but it cannot reveal itself in all its glory, because first a community (the Church) must be gathered that will have a part in that future!

The delay in the task to put their entrusted treasures to work. The parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27). The people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. But the parable teaches that a man of noble birth first went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. He already has the right to the throne, but a considerable time lapses before he can manifest himself as the king. In the mean time the disciples and their congregation must put their entrusted treasures to work. Christ will reward faithfulness and diligence, but punish unfaithfulness and negligence!

The purpose of the delay. Sometimes it seems that the times would be short (Matthew 10:23; 16:28). But more often the emphasis is put on a time of waiting (Matthew 25:1-13). And because wickedness on earth only increases, love only grows colder (Matthew 24:13). The wrong continue to do wrong and the vile continue to be vile (Revelation 22:11). But genuine Christians are called to persevere in this period of delay until the end (Matthew 24:13)! In the mean time the Church has one great task: to proclaim the gospel (Matthew 24:14), to train disciples (Matthew 28:19) and to perform social action on the streets (Luke 3:8-14; 14:21)! The purpose of the delay is the missionary task of the Church!

#### **e. The delay in the letters of the apostles**

The Old Testament people must wait for the New Testament people. The Old Testament prophets served the believers of the New Testament by predicting the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (1 Peter 1:9-12)! The believers of the Old Testament period did not receive the fulfilment of the promise, because they cannot reach perfection without the believers of the New Testament period (Hebrews 11:39-40)!

The delay first seemed short, but is really long. The apostle Paul in the beginning seems to have thought that the delay might be of short duration: "This world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31). "We will not all sleep, but will all be changed at the last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). But later he urges Archippus to see to it that he completes the work he had received in the Lord (Colossians 4:17). He urges Christians to pray and intercede for all kinds of groups of people, because God wants people from every one of these groups to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4). And he urges Timothy to endure hardship, to do the work of an evangelist and to discharge all the duties of his ministry (2 Timothy 4:5).

During the delay everything seems different than what we Christians think to may expect! Christ had come to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8) and yet the whole 'world' (in the sense of the world that opposes Christ) is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:18-19). Satan was defeated and hurled to the earth at Christ's first coming (12:7-9) and yet he is full of fury and persecutes the Church throughout the whole New Testament period (12:13-17). At his first coming Christ was raised above all human rulers and demonic powers (Ephesians 1:20-21) and yet Christians have to put on the full armour and take their stand against all their schemes (Ephesians 6:10-12).

The purpose of the delay. The apostle Peter records the apparent discouragement in the Church. The final fulfilment of the end seemed still far off. The scoffers were saying: "Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). And Peter said that one day with the Lord was like a thousand years on earth (2 Peter 3:8).

The reason of the delay was that God is patient with the elect (1 Peter 1:1-2), with those who would receive the precious faith (2 Peter 1:1). God does not want anyone of his elect to perish, but wants every one of them to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9)!

The apostle Paul says that God's plan is to bring all things in the universe under Christ (Ephesians 1:10); to bring believers from every nation to become God's family and a temple in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22). "He (Christ) must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. After he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power, the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father" (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

But first the great apostasy and the final antichrist must come. Then the Lord Jesus will overthrow and destroy him by the splendour of his coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

Thus, the purpose of the delay is God's desire to save many more people.

#### **f. The delay in the book of Revelation**

The delay in Revelation 2 and 3. The delaying factor is one of the key questions of the book of Revelation. Since Christ's first coming the Church has wrestled with this question.

The congregation of Ephesus faced a Christian problem: she courageously stood against the infection of false teachings by false apostles, but was in danger of forsaking her first love.

The congregation of Smyrna faced a religious problem: she endured religious persecution and suffering by the synagogue of Satan (the Jews).

The congregation of Pergamum faced a political problem: she endured political persecution and suffering by the totalitarian state, but was in danger of making a compromise with the worldly festivals of the kingdom of the world.

The congregation of Thyatira faced a sociological problem: she endured social and economic pressure of the guilds (trade unions) and their tutelary gods to compromise in order to gain acceptance with the world.

The congregation of Sardis faced the problem of a dead congregation: she was so absorbed by the monotony and superficiality of ordinary daily life that she no longer had a goal in life and no zeal for Christ and his cause.

The congregation of Philadelphia was the only congregation that took her missionary calling seriously and courageously tried to proclaim the gospel.

The congregation of Laodicea faced deadly self-deception: its citizens were worldly and completely self-satisfied and its congregation conformed to this worldliness and self-satisfaction.

The delay in Revelation 4 to 7. The Lamb has been slaughtered and was resurrected and stands in the centre of the throne (5:6). The BOOK IN HEAVEN in the form of a scroll is given into his hands. Only he has triumphed and can break the seals and open the book and thereby reveal its contents and set them in motion (5:1-5). The created universe, the Church and the angels in heaven proclaim in song that only Jesus Christ is worthy to open the scroll (5:8-14). No political, military or religious leader could do that! The contents of the scroll are God's eternal plan of salvation and judgement in the last days, that is, in the period between Christ's first and second coming. Everything lies ready for the final events to happen! But when the seals are broken, instead of victory follows disasters and instead of the salvation of the Church follows her persecution. The proclamation of the gospel results in the flow of the blood of the martyrs. Fear and trepidation rule the world. What we expect does not happen. If everything for the final decisive events is ready, why are they delayed?

The delay in Revelation 8 to 16. Just when the final seal is broken the revelation of events on earth experiences a delay: seven trumpets are sounded (chapters 8 to 11). And when the final trumpet has sounded, the revelation of events on earth experiences a final delay: three signs appear: the sign of the woman, the sign of the dragon and his allies (chapters 12 to 14) and the sign of the seven angels with the seven bowls containing the last plagues of God (chapters 15 and 16).

The breaking of the seventh seal (8:1) represents this unfathomable phenomenon of slowing down the movement of history towards the end. And this evokes silent awe in heaven. The reason for this silence is described in Revelation 8:3-5. Everything in heaven is ready to sound the trumpets of judgement, but there is a delay. First the Church on earth must pray in unison that God's will on earth will be done (Matthew 18:19).

The final events on earth can only be executed when the reality in heaven is fully answered by the reality on earth. There are four realities in heaven that are not yet realities on earth!

*The first reality in heaven that is not yet a reality on earth is that God answers prayer.* First the prayers of Christians on earth must be cleansed, refined and sanctified before God can and will act (James 4:2-3)! But the Church on earth is not ready: either she does not pray at all or her prayers are insincere, weak and immature!

*The second reality in heaven that is not yet a reality on earth is that the Church must be the light of the world* (Matthew 5:14-16) and proclaim the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20). But the congregations in Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea are still too occupied in the things of the world. Their clocks on earth are way behind God's clock in heaven! Everything in heaven is ready to be executed, the seventh seal has been opened, and yet the final events *cannot* take place. The delay is not caused by Jesus being powerless. Nor is the delay caused by the world not being ready for judgement. The delay is caused by the Church that does not proclaim the gospel as it should and does not pray as it should.

*The third reality in heaven that is not yet a reality on earth is that the Church must be fully committed to submit to the opposition and persecution in the last days.* In the eyes of God the Church is glorious and has authority (the woman is clothed with the sun, has the moon under her feet and carries the crown of stars). The Messiah was born, made atonement for sins, was resurrected from the dead, ascended and sits enthroned in heaven. Already Satan and his demons suffered their defeat (12:1-9). And yet the Church has to flee into the desert and seek her safety in separation. And Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare fighting against Satan by holding onto the commandments of the Bible and the Testimony of Jesus (12:6,13-17). The Church is learning to submit to God and his plan in history (the contents of the scroll). The Church must be fully prepared to enter tribulation and suffering with a completely submitted heart (Matthew 5:10-11; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 3:12).

That is why there is an unbearable tension and silence in heaven! The half hour in heaven projected against the history of the world on earth appears to have already lasted two centuries!

*The book of Revelation teaches that bringing the last things on earth to an end is also dependent on what happens in the Church on earth. God has incorporated the faithful proclamation of the gospel to all the nations (Matthew 24:14), the sanctified prayers of Christians in all the congregations (8:3-5) and the complete submission to God and his plan on earth (the contents of the scroll in heaven)( 6:1-17) in the process towards the end!*

*But the Church has lagged behind and has not kept pace with God in heaven and his mighty acts. The Church has been too occupied with worldly affairs (the power politics of church leaders, national and religious traditions in congregations that bring disunity among the congregations, false teachings, the prosperity gospel and comfortable living). The Church is not yet ready for the end-time events. The task of proclaiming the gospel has not yet been completed. The Church does not know how to pray anymore! Instead that the Church is waiting for the Lord to come, the Lord is waiting for the Church to act! It is not God who is the cause of the delay, but the Church! The Church must become more mission minded and must pray with greater sincerity!*

*The fourth reality in heaven that is not yet a reality on earth is that the godless and wicked world must be fully ripe and ready for the final judgement.* The sounding of the seven trumpets belong to the category of the intervention of God in heaven in the affairs of man on earth. The fourth trumpet reveals and sets in motion cosmic disasters in the world. The fifth trumpet reveals and sets in motion the release of the demonic forces on non-Christians in the world. The sixth trumpet reveals and sets in motion the release of demonic wars in the world that also affect Christians. The trumpets represent God in heaven who intervenes with his judgements in human life and human history on earth. When God takes away all human self-assurance and safety on earth, bitter opposition arises against God.

But God's judgements from heaven do not lead to repentance on earth (9:20-21)! In the last days "the time is always near", because the people who do wrong continue to do wrong, and the people who are vile continue to be vile (22:10-11). In the last days the opposition of Satan and his allies (the antichrist, the false prophet and the great prostitute) grows and reaches its highest point (12:13-17; 13:1-18). And in the final days the

Church no longer advances, but retreats; no longer grows, but shrinks until the Church as God's institute of proclaiming the gospel has been completely silenced and destroyed (11:7-10).

Nevertheless all these events seem to fit into God's unfathomable plan that has been written in the scroll. The scroll contains the unravelling of the apocalyptic events (the grand and violent events) within the history of this world.

The delay in Revelation 10 is nearing its end. The words in Revelation 10:6-7 announces the nearing of the end of the delay. "There will be no more delay! But in the days that the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

#### **g. The connection between prayer and God's action (8:2-5)**

God definitely responds to the prayers of Christians. But the imperfect prayers of Christians need to be perfected by the intercessions of Christ. The prayers of Christians are connected to the sounding of the seven trumpets. The sounding of seven trumpets is connected to the fire hurled from the golden censer on to the earth.

#### **h. The purpose of the first four trumpet judgements (8:6-12)**

The trumpets are a symbol of God's initial warning judgements on a godless and wicked world. These judgements serve as punishments for the oppressions and seductions of people who refuse to repent (9:20-21) and as warnings for the rest of mankind to repent before it is too late. The trumpet judgements cause suffering. Suffering is God's megaphone calling people to give attention to his reality, his nearness and his message (the Word). These judgements do not symbolise single and separate events that occur only once in history somewhere in the future only, but refer to woes and calamities that will occur again and again and at any time anywhere throughout the whole New Testament period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming. The trumpet judgements affect non-Christians and Christians alike, but because Christians are sealed they will never suffer damnation in hell.

The first four trumpet judgements affect nature and *indirectly people* (chapter 8).  
The last three trumpets affect people *directly* (chapter 9).

#### **i. The purpose of the eagle flying in mid-air (8:13)**

The eagle calling out three woes is a warning and a call to repentance and conversion for unbelievers. They will be worse than the first four trumpet judgements, because they will affect people *directly*. They will affect *the soul, the wellbeing and the eternal destiny* of people. Although Christians will also be struck by these judgements and suffer under them, they are sealed and protected against the final destruction (eternal doom) of their souls.

### **4 THE BACKGROUND**

#### **a. Incense**

In the Old Testament incense had to be offered on the incense altar in the tabernacle or temple every morning and every evening (Exodus 30:1-8; 40:26-27). The rising of the smoke of the incense signified the rising of prayers to God (Psalm 141:2; Luke 1:10; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-5).

#### **b. Trumpets**

In the Old Testament the trumpets sound warnings to people that God has come (Exodus 19:16-21), that judgement is about to be executed (Joshua 6:13-17) and that disaster is imminent (Ezekiel 33:3; Amos 3:6). Trumpets are also a sign of the coming final judgement (Zephaniah 1:14-17; cf. Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). In Revelation 1:10 the trumpet serves to make an announcement.