

Persecution doesn't pay
Rev 8:2-11:19, Romans 12:19

Friends, when something traumatic happens it makes it very easy for us to remember the details surrounding that event and how we felt, and responded to it.

For instance, I'm sure that most of us can recall exactly where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001 when we heard the news that the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had been targeted by terrorist attacks.

And I'm certain that we can remember what we felt as we watched that horrifying footage of the attacks and the subsequent collapse of the twin towers.

And I'm sure that we remember having the feeling - even as we processed our initial shock and disbelief - that because of the atrocity and scale of this attack... there was no way this would go unanswered - there would be payback for this, in a big way.

And there was – the United States and its Allies quickly determined who was responsible for this and “Operation Infinite Justice” was launched.

And again, we can probably remember where we were and what we were doing and how we felt as we watched the footage of those huge B-52 bombers deliver that payback – bombing the Taliban and Al Qaeda positions into oblivion.

Now, I need to clarify that I'm not referring to the events of 9/11 because I'm going to tell you that somehow it is a sign of the end times and that it won't be long now until all these seals and trumpets that we read about in Revelation are fulfilled and the end is near.

Instead I bring it up friends, because it illustrates – and most importantly it also evokes feelings in us – about what it is like to expect vengeance and retribution for being attacked, and this helps us to understand how the first recipients of the book of Revelation, and many other Christians across the ages

have felt about expecting God to respond to their being persecuted.

Friends, I want us to put ourselves in the place of a first century Christian and imagine what it might feel like to have your life and livelihood threatened because you have turned to the Son of the Almighty God.

So imagine friends – you’ve turned away from the gods your parents raised you with, the gods your society is built around, the gods you’ve worshiped your whole life – because some Jewish travelers have come to your town telling you about someone called Jesus the Anointed One...

And you are compelled to believe their testimony about him – that when the day of judgment and reckoning comes upon this world – He will stand in your place as your substitute and proclaim your sins forgiven!

What’s more this Jesus is actually God in the flesh – the Creator of all that Exists, and He is King of Kings and Lord of

Lords – and you’ve baptized into His name and you too have become His witness. You have a relationship with the Living God!

Only now – you find yourself on the receiving end of hostility and violence from those who still worship the false gods you have turned away from, and they are persecuting you for following the one true God.

You might face economic ruin and lose your business, or find no one will hire you, you might be indicted with a trumped up charge of treason, you might live in fear for your life – because you know that on occasion – Christians became convenient scapegoats to blame for whatever disasters and calamities the Romans believed their god inflicted upon their Empire.

Now - we don’t have the time to go into all the examples and gory detail of the violence and torture that so many Christians have suffered across the ages during this time between times – between Christ’s first coming and His second coming –

but at the very least we need to understand and be able to relate to the atrocity and outrage that is generated when those who follow lies and false gods and worldly empires... seem to get away with attacking and killing the servants of the King of Kings.

Because if we can't... then the 3rd vision of Revelation will make very little sense to us;

So friends as we look at this 3rd Vision this morning – it might help us to think about how death and violence still threaten Christians in northern Nigeria, in North Korea, and countries where Islamic governments are in power.

And if we are truly grasping the significance of who Christians are and what the Church really is... then we should be echoing King David's sentiments in Psalm 13: 2 *"How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall."*

And friends in the 3rd Vision of Revelation the apostle John sees that it is these kinds of prayers... these cries that accumulate at the altar before the throne of God in heaven.

And He sees they are combined with incense representing the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit, who as Romans 8:27 says *"intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."*

This incense sanctifies, and carries the prayers of those who are persecuted - directly to God on His throne.

So the purpose of the 3rd Vision is to show us that God has heard and is responding to the cries of the persecuted by sending judgment upon the earth.

So John sees the golden censer, which previously held the incense, now filled with fire from the altar... and hurled down to the earth in judgment.

So let's take a quick overview of how God's reaction to the Persecution of His Church determines the rest of what John sees in this 3rd Vision.

So there are seven angels with seven trumpets, the first four trumpets are sounded, they are briefly described and then there is an intermission. John sees an eagle flying and calling out Woe, Woe, Woe – because the remaining three trumpets will be worse than the first four.

And so the fifth and the six trumpets are sounded and they each get a significant amount of attention and detail in their descriptions.

And then before the seventh trumpet, before the final judgment occurs – there is another pause, similar to what we had in the 2nd Vision before the seventh seal.

And in this pause John is instructed to eat a scroll, and to go and measure the temple of God, and He is told the story of the two witnesses... and the effect of this pause and this story

is somewhat the opposite compared to the pause that occurred before the seventh seal in the 2nd vision.

Instead of reminding us that many of those who persecute the church will end up joining the church, this pause is meant to prepare us for the truth that we will not end up converting everyone.

The truth is that right up to the very end there will be those “from every tribe and tongue and nation” who will not join the Church but who will oppose and celebrate the silencing of the Church.

So, once this sobering reminder has been given – the seventh trumpet is sounded to announce the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven and John hears the heavenly proclamation stating that “the kingdom of the world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”

So it is time for the final judgment – the return of Christ and the renewal of all things.

Then the John sees the twenty-four elders fall down in worship before the throne and they proclaim the purpose of final judgment is all about...

Then the means by which this final judgment is carried out is very briefly described as a great hailstorm coming out of God's Heavenly Temple, accompanied by thunder and lighting and an earthquake.

And this Temple and the Ark of the Covenant that is inside are the symbols that will transition us to the beginning of the 4th vision where the powers and the spiritual realities that drive the persecution of the church are revealed in greater detail.

So the 3rd Vision ends with the final judgment of the great hailstorm, having given us a seven-fold commentary, a complete explanation of how God responds to the persecution of His church during the time between times and how that response will transition into Christ's return.

Now we are ready to take a look at some of the details surrounding these seven trumpets and there are a few things that I want to draw your attention to.

First, notice the downward motion that is repeated throughout this vision. The golden censor is *hurled down* to the earth in judgment, the hail and fire and blood is *hurled down* upon the earth, the huge mountain is *thrown* down into the sea, a great star *falls* from the sky, and as judgment is cast down – so too the celestial bodies are struck as well, and in the fifth trumpet there is another star that has *fallen down*

So we can regard these first five trumpets as five different aspects involved in that initial action of hurling down the golden censor to the earth in judgment.

Now you might be tempted to think “aha- I knew it! Everyone tries to make God out to be this nice loving God, but here He is smiting the earth with punishments – He really is a judgmental vindictive God after all!”

Friends.... this is why it's important that we remember that sense of atrocity and outrage generated by the persecution of innocent Christians – the judgment that God hurls down to the earth is justified.

So, the second thing we need to notice is that these are partial judgments – they are measured responses. God put limits on these judgments, for example in the first four trumpets for example only a third of things are affected, in the fifth trumpet killing is not permitted and in the sixth trumpet again only a third of humanity is affected.

This means that these judgments also function as warnings, which makes sense given that they are announced by trumpets – trumpets signal, trumpets announce, they symbolize the opportunity given during the time between times to those who are persecuting the church, to repent and become part of the church themselves.

Now, the big question on everyone's mind –what exactly are these judgments?

Well friends I can tell you what they are not with more certainty than I can tell you what they are – meaning they are not one-time specific events that happening in a specific order and thus function as a countdown to the return of Christ.

And any attempt to interpret them in this way is wrong and disobedient because it is inevitable that it will cause you to attempt to calculate how near or how far away the return of our Lord is... which He explicitly told us has not been revealed – will not be revealed and is known only to God the Father.

In fact in this 3rd Vision, John has an experience which confirms that God will not reveal these sorts of details about the coming judgment to us and we ought not to be speculating about them.

John is about to write down what He has heard the Seven Thunders speak, but a voice from heaven says “seal up what the Seven Thunders have said and do not write it down!”

In other words it is not for us to know the times and dates which the Father has determined will lead to the return of Christ – the end of the time between times.

So – what then are these judgments?

Well the first four judgments all have to do with God sending judgment upon that which we tend to idolize and believe sustains us – the land and trees and grass, the sea and sea creatures and ships, freshwater sources like rivers and springs, and sun and moon and stars.

These first four trumpets represent any and all instances in the time between times where God acts and withdraws his blessings that we receive from His creation – such as land and sea and sky – so that we might realize the impotence of the things we’ve come to idolize, and so we might stop persecuting those who try to point out to us that idols are worthless.

Friends the first four trumpets are a warning to us not to turn good things into god things – people in the days of the early church believed in the spirits of the land and trees, the gods of the seas and rivers, the gods of the sun and moon and the astrological houses of the stars.... And woe to those who pointed out that these were not actually gods...

Today we scoff at this kind of superstition, but we still have our idols – we’ve just evolved from worshiping rocks and trees and skies and seas to worshiping human beings – we worship ourselves and our abilities, our accomplishments and our progress and woe to the Christian who stands in our way and impedes our pursuit of happiness.

So friends, if the first four trumpets of Revelation predict anything – it is that in some way shape or form God will act to remind us that human beings are not gods – and that there is no source of life apart from Him.

Now the fifth trumpet graphically describes the spiritual consequences of persecuting and rejecting the followers of Jesus Christ and their message of salvation.

God essentially allows the persecutors to experience what they want – and so for a time He hands them over to the devil and his demons to experience hell on earth – spiritual torment that leads to physical deterioration and destruction –

...so that they are driven to seek salvation from the Hell they experience from this demonic harassment in all its varied forms - from the subtle lies all the way to outright possession and everything in between.

This is similar to what the Apostle Paul refers to when he writes in 1 Corinthians 5:5 *“hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.”*

So the abyss and the locusts of the fifth trumpet represent how God will use even satanic and demonic oppression to both judge and warn those who persecute His Church.

Finally the sixth trumpet announces the final judgment of warning – the four angels of death are released to kill one third of humanity.

These angels have been held back – meaning God has waited specifically until this time between times to use them for the purpose of judging and warning those who would war against His Kingdom – they shall be delivered over to the gods of war

So these angels of war and the mounted troops of the sixth trumpet represent any and all instances during the time between times where God allows nations and empires to build up and accumulate military power, to develop destructive weapons, and unleash their armies and plunge the other kingdoms and empires of this world into war.

And this conflict is used to deliver judgment on those who have persecuted God's church, and at the same time through witnessing and experiencing the kind of devastation that comes from such warfare... to warn those who persecute the Church in the hopes that they will repent and seek the peace of Christ instead.

So, seven trumpets to announce and to completely reassure us that God does hear and will respond to the prayers of those who suffer persecution during this time between times.

Six visualizations which give deeper insight as to why God allows disasters, demons and wars and all the other bad stuff that goes on in this world – He uses them for judgment.

But friends, we must be cautious about these insights we are given about these judgments. We must not allow our hearts to become callous to the suffering of those who persecute the Church.

You see as I struck by the fact that it is necessary for John to tell us that *“the rest of humanity that were not killed by the plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands, they did not stop worshiping demons, idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, wood... nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts...”*

As if we might be tempted to say – we'll just let God send his judgments down and let them all learn the hard way...

Friends we can't absolve ourselves of the responsibility that we have to stick around to try to help them understand what God is telling them when disaster or calamity strikes.

This 3rd Vision is all about reassuring us that God hears and responds to the persecution of his people – but the purpose of reassuring us friends is so that we can leave our need for justice and retribution in the hands of God, who will deal it out appropriately and leverage it for the good of His Kingdom,

And also so that we are freed up to love our enemies and pray
for those who persecute us – as our Lord did on the cross
“Father forgive them for they know not what they do”

Friends - may God give us the strength to believe and trust
that He will deliver justice and avenge us so that we can love
our enemies and pray for them.

Amen.