

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

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you have to admit that it would be difficult to ignore the increase in catastrophes and disasters which have been occurring in our world over the past few years.

From unprecedented natural disasters; like the 2013 flood here in Calgary, the ups and downs of the global economy, the geo-political conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the terrorist atrocities of Islamist groups such as El-Shabab, Boko-Haram and ISIS.

And just this past week a terror bombing occurred for the first time in Bangkok, and tensions between North and South Korea have been escalating, and who can ignore the fact that much California and B.C. seems to be burning.

And as we hear about all these sorts of disasters and catastrophes I'm sure many of us are thinking "what in the world is going on?"

Of course the pundits and news commentators have their explanations and theories which blame the usual suspects; climate change, radicalism, the nation of Greece defaulting on its bailout loans.

But I know that as Christians we often wonder if something else is happening – is there something else going on behind the scenes? Are all these events somehow related to the end of the world and the return of Christ and what exactly does that mean for me?

Well friends, the good news is that Jesus Christ gave the Church his Revelation through the Apostle John in order to help us understand what in the world would be going on in the time period between His first coming and His return.

And to help us understand and make sense out of the all the disasters, catastrophes, and political events which have occurred, are occurring and will continue to occur until Christ returns we're going look at John's 3rd vision in the book of Revelation this morning. (Let's read this together)

Now we've just covered a great deal of confusing imagery here, but the first step in starting to understand this vision is to remember the anger and outrage and the desire for retribution which we all felt when we heard about ISIS beheading our brothers and sisters in Christ and murdering hundreds of innocent people over this past year.

Because it helps us to understand how those who first received the book of Revelation, and many other Christians across the ages, have felt in the face of persecution.

So imagine friends – turning away from the gods you've worship your whole life, the religion which your parents raised you in and your society is built on - all because some Jewish travelers have told you about Jesus Christ the Messiah.

You are strangely 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, because He is the one true God.

So you are baptized into His name, and now you too have become His follower and His witness.

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.

Your family may disown you, you might lose your business, or find no one will hire you, you might be indicted with a trumped up charge of treason because Christians were convenient scapegoats to blame for whatever disasters people believed the gods had inflicted upon their nations.

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 during the time between Christ's first coming and His second coming.

But we do need to understand, and be able to relate to, the outrage and anger and desire for retribution which comes when those who follow lies, false gods, or worldly empires

seem to get away with attacking and killing the servants of the King of Kings and God Almighty, as King David cries out in Psalm 13: 2 *"How long will my enemy triumph over me?"*

You see friends, without this perspective – without our own echoing of calling for justice and retribution the 3rd vision of Revelation will make very little sense to us.

Because it is these kinds of prayers for vengeance and justice, the prayers of the saints which John sees accumulating at the altar before the throne of God in heaven.

And he sees an Angel add incense to them, representing the intercession of the Holy Spirit, who *"intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."* (Rom 8:27) So these prayers for the persecuted are sanctified and can thus be presented directly to God on His throne.

In response John sees the Angel take the golden censer, which previously held the incense, and fill it with fire from the altar... and hurl it down to the earth in judgment.

So at the start of 3rd vision we see its purpose is to show believers that God has heard and will respond to the cries of His persecuted people by sending judgment upon the earth.

And the rest of what John sees in this 3rd vision is a symbolic representation of how that judgement will occur and what forms it will take and what its function is supposed to be.

So John sees seven angels with seven trumpets. The first four trumpets are sounded, they are briefly described and then there is an intermission. Then 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 the results of each trumpet get significant more attention and detail than the previous four.

And then before the seventh trumpet is sounded, before the final judgment occurs – there is another pause where John is

told to eat a scroll, measure the temple of God, and He is told the story of the two witnesses.

Now in the 2nd vision the pause before the final judgment reminds us that many who persecute the church will end up becoming part of the church...

But here in the 3rd vision the pause before the Final judgment, and John's experiences in that pause communicated to us the truth that we will not convert everyone who opposes the Church, not all will be saved.

Instead right up to the very end there will be those *"from every tribe and tongue and nation"* who will oppose and celebrate the persecution and 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 proclamation declaring that *"the kingdom of the world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."*

Then the final judgment occurs where Christ returns and makes all things new and the twenty-four elders fall down in worship before the throne and they proclaim the purpose of the final judgment.

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

So the 3rd vision has spanned the time between times and given us a seven-fold, a complete explanation of God's response to the persecution of His Church and shown how that response will transition into the final judgement.

So with this overview complete 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 this means that these first five trumpets are actually five different facets of the one action of hurling 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, and 11:18 indicates that this destruction is actually the fault of those who necessitate it through their persecution of the church.

Now 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 it is only a third of humanity that is affected.

So this means that these judgments also function as warnings, which makes sense given that they are announced by trumpets. Trumpets signal, announce and warn and here 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 final countdown to the return of Christ.

And any attempt to interpret them in this way is wrong and disobedient because it will inevitably tempt you to try and calculate how near or how far away our Lord's return is. And Christ has explicitly told us it will not be revealed to us or the angels and it is known only to God the Father. (Matt 24:36)

Even in this vision, in 10:4, John is commanded by a voice from heaven to "seal up what the Seven Thunders have said and do not write it down!"

I don't know how much clearer it can be made that it is not for us to know the times and dates which the Father has set for the final judgment and the return of Christ, but so many people still try to interpret these trumpets as single one-time events that occur as a countdown.

So, it is helpful then to have some instruction on how we can properly determine what these trumpets are.

So the first four trumpets are all judgments which God has sent, is sending and will send all throughout the time between times upon that which we tend to idolize and believe sustains us.

That's why they are enacted upon the land and trees and grass, the sea and sea creatures and ships, freshwater sources like rivers and springs, and the sun and moon and stars.

So 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 that human beings might stop persecuting those who try to point out to that their idols are worthless.

The first four trumpets are a warning to humans not to turn good things, like the land and trees, seas and rivers, and so on, into god things and worship them, and persecute those who point them out as false gods.

Now today we may scoff at such naturalistic superstitions, but we still have idols. We've just evolved from worshiping nature to worshiping ourselves, our abilities, our accomplishments and our progress, and woe to the Christian who stands in the way and impedes our society's pursuit of happiness.

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

So, with that understanding you can probably think of all sorts of instances in the past and present and future which qualify as the kind of judgments which these trumpets signify.

Our 2013 flood here in Calgary for instance is a great example of *“a great star falling on the rivers and their waters turning bitter...”* (Rev 8:11)

Does that make sense so far? Do you see how this works?

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

In this judgement God allows the persecutors to experience what they want – so for a time He hands them over to the devil and his demons to experience hell on earth, and they undergo spiritual torment, demonic harassment in all its varied forms - from the subtle lies all the way to outright possession and everything in between.

But this torment is for a limited time – this is not the final spiritual torment of the lake of fire, and God allows it so that people are driven to seek salvation from the hell they experiencing from rejecting Him.

This is similar to what the Apostle Paul instructs in 1 Corinthians 5:5 where he writes *“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 allow demonic oppression and harassment 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 – He will give them 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.

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 these are the judgement of the seven trumpets which announce and reassure us that God does hear and will respond to the prayers of those who suffer persecution during this time between times.

We’ve seen six visualizations which give us deeper insight as to why God allows disasters, wars, demonic oppression and all the other bad stuff that goes on in this world.

But friends, this deeper understanding and insight is not to be used as an excuse to harden our hearts to suffering of those who oppose and even violently persecute the Church, and determine that we’ll just let them learn the hard way through God’s judgements that they must repent and turn to Christ.

It struck me that the 3rd vision reveals to us that those who *“were not killed by the plagues **still did not repent of the work of their hands**, they did not stop worshiping demons... nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts...”* (Rev 9:20-21)

You see Friends even though God’s judgments are a just response to persecution, and rightly deserved by those who actively or passively oppose and ignore God’s work of salvation for all humanity through Christ’s Church – as Jesus himself says in Matt 12:30 *“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”*

In spite of all this it doesn’t absolve us of the responsibility we have to help people understand what God is telling them and wants them to understand when disaster or calamity strikes.

If these trumpets are meant to draw attention to an issue, to warn people about something, to sound a call to repentance then we who know this have a responsibility make sure others know this!

So the next time the conversation with your family, or friends, or co-workers lands on the topic of all the forest fires that are burning in B.C. or the drought in California, or the atrocities which are being committed by ISIS, or remembering the Calgary flood of 2013, or the geo-political conflicts in the Middle-East...

And everyone is offering their opinions and explanations about these situations - you have a choice to make.

Will you nod in grave agreement at the plight we are facing because of “climate change” or share their moral outrage at the “barbaric atrocities against humanity” committed by ISIS, or join in condemning “aggressive nationalist policies” by power hungry leaders...

Or, will you take the opportunity to share the truth about what in the world is actually going on – the real purpose and meaning behind these events which is given to us in the 3rd vision of Revelation so that your family and friends and co-workers can understand these trumpets of warning.

Wars, natural disasters, outbreaks of disease and so on all provide us with the opportunity to gently and humbly share that God is responding to the persecution and rejection of His Church with warnings on a global scale so that the world will pay attention and people will turn away from opposing and persecuting His Church and the truth.

We need to pray for the Holy Spirit to give us the right words to say when these opportunities come across our paths, and give us the courage to speak - because I think we are aware that the irony of pointing out these warnings to others is that it may very well lead our own persecution.

So may the Holy Spirit reassure us through the message of the 3rd vision in Revelation that God hears, and has responded to, and will continue to respond to the persecution of his people.

And brothers and sisters, believe that the Holy Spirit will use this reassurance to help us release the need for justice and retribution to the hands of God, who has, and is, and is going

to deal it out appropriately - and leverage it for the good of His Kingdom in ways that we can't.

But what we can do is continue to share the truth about what is really going on in our world in the time since Christ first came and until He comes again.

So, believe and trust that Holy Spirit will enable us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that our lives may demonstrate what Paul writes in Romans 12:19

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord... ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

May the Holy Spirit work through this truth to help the world around us see that persecution doesn't pay, but that turning to Christ does. Amen.