

Sermon – 01/07/2007 am

Trumpet of Death

Study Text: Revelation 9:13-21

‘What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age’ the disciples asked Jesus. ‘You will hear of wars and rumours of wars’ replied Jesus, ‘but do not be troubled for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet’ (Matthew 24:6). When will wars cease? When Jesus comes again in power and glory! In these last days, in these days approaching the end, there will be wars.

In a vision John saw a mighty cavalry advancing to kill one third of the human race. What was this war about? It was about divine judgment. The enemy is the enemy of God and his people, the ‘unsealed’ ones. Paradoxically the destroying army is also one of evil horses and horsemen, a demonic host released at the command of God.

Heavenly Horns

With the sounding of the sixth trumpet John again saw the golden altar which is before God (9:13). What does this altar represent? John saw an angel offering incense upon this altar when the seventh seal was opened. This incense was associated with the prayers of the saints going up before God (8:4). And prior to this he had seen the souls of the martyrs under this altar (6:9, 10). These martyrs were crying out for divine vindication upon those who dwell on the earth.

We are reminded yet again that these divine judgments are a response to the prayers of the saints. God hears the prayers of his people and comes to deliver them. God comes to vindicate his people, to bring divine justice to a world that makes a mockery of justice and truth.

God delights in the prayers of his people and he is powerful to answer their prayers. This book of Revelation ends with the cry ‘even so come Lord Jesus’. Is this your prayer? Are you hastening the day of his return with your witness and your prayers? (II Peter 3:12).

Whilst the Scriptures speak of hastening the coming of the Lord they also speak of this day being divinely predetermined (Matthew 24:36). John heard a voice from the altar telling the sixth angel to release four killing angels. He says that these angels had been prepared for this very day, with divine precision to the very hour, the very moment when they were released (9:15). God has a sovereign timetable for all things. Nothing happens apart from his will, his eternal purpose and permission (Ephesians 1:9, 10).

All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:25). These judgments may not seem to be good but remember God has graciously sealed his servants – only the wicked are killed in this demonic onslaught.

Hellish Horses

Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates (9: 14). Who are these four angels and what is the significance of the Euphrates? There may be some kind of

relationship between these angels and the four angels holding back the four winds of the earth that John saw earlier (7:1), although those angels were not as directly related to the harm coming upon the earth as with these four killing angels.

The Euphrates is one of the four rivers in the Garden of Eden. It is the river which bordered the holy land to the north. The city of Babylon was on this river. Beyond this river were hordes of heathen kingdoms, symbolic of the enemies of Israel and of God. Ezekiel prophesied of a mighty army of horsemen coming from the north in the latter days (Ezekiel 38:15).

John's first readers would have been familiar with this symbolism of evil kingdoms beyond the Euphrates. In fact at that time even the Romans feared the Parthian hordes beyond the great river. These longhaired horsemen were skilled fighters with the bow and arrow.

With the four angels came a horde of horsemen on hellish horses. They came in their millions to kill in the millions. One third of the world's population was wiped out. John heard the number of these horsemen – two hundred million. Some point to the red army of China as the fulfilment of this prophecy, but is this number meant to be taken literally? The Greek is similar to that in 5:11 where the worshippers around the throne in heaven numbered 'myriads of myriads'. Here it is 'two myriads of myriads'. This is a mighty horde of hellish horses.

John goes on to describe these horses. Everything about them is symbolic of evil and death. They had *heads like lions and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and brimstone/sulphur* (9:17). They were like the proverbial dragon. Moreover, they had tails like serpents or snakes (9:19). The Jews would remember the plague of snakes the Lord sent among them when they spoke against God and Moses (Numbers 21). These horses were not unlike the tormenting locusts – like – scorpions of the previous trumpet. But they did more than torment the heathen, they killed one third of them!

Out of the mouth of these apocalyptic horses came fire, smoke and brimstone. Fire and brimstone remind us of a previous judgment of God, that in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom, Egypt and Babylon are all evil cities mentioned in Revelation. The Lord overthrew Sodom, raining fire and brimstone upon it to kill all the wicked inhabitants (Genesis 19). Abraham looked down and saw the smoke rising like the smoke of a furnace. God remembered the prayer of Abraham when he destroyed those cities.

Hardened Hearts

Fire, smoke and brimstone – *by these three plagues a third of mankind was killed* (9:18). What about the rest? What about the two thirds that survived? Did seeing these hellish horses and watching them slaughter people all around them have any affect on them? Did the survivors ask 'why'? Did they search for a reason for this death? Why is their war, and why do people die?

The rest of mankind did not repent. They did not turn from worshipping their idols, nor did they turn from immorality (9:20, 21). They went on breaking all the commands that God gave to us through Moses. They went on denying that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, denying that he is the way the truth and the life.

The whole challenge confronting the Christians in John's day was that of worship. Is it not the same today! 'Who do you worship?' they were asked. Do you worship only Jesus, or do you worship other gods. Will you bow the knee to the idol of Caesar? Those who refused faced suffering and even death. 'Let us go along with the heathens' many were saying; 'God does not see, God does not care'.

John saw the tables being turned upon the persecutors of God's people. The time for divine justice had come. The opportunity to repent was given but they kept on with their idolatry and immorality despite the destruction and death around them. Their hearts were hardened. What will their future be?

Pharaoh hardened his heart after each plague God sent upon the land. Most people do the same thing. The sad truth is that few repent of their wicked ways despite the signs and wonders the Lord does in their midst. In desperation farmers pray for rain, men pray for jobs, women pray for healthy children. When their prayers are answered, do they acknowledge God and worship him? Their hearts become as hard and cold as their empty pew in the church.

The Bible clearly tells where death came from, and where life can be found. But many choose not see or to listen. *Although they knew God they did not glorify him as God nor were thankful...but changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man* (Romans 1).

The remaining two thirds of the world's population went on worshipping demons and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see, nor hear nor walk. The Old Testament prophets laughed at idolaters and the gods which they made. Elijah laughed at the prophets of Baal, for their god was powerless to send fire. But still millions around us still worship metal, wooden or plastic gods – all having a use by date!

Those who make them will be like them said the prophets. Idol worshippers are immoral for they do not obey the commands of the holy God. The rest of mankind did not repent of their violence and murder, their stealing, sorcery or sexual immorality (9:21). Their hearts were hardened and they continued in their sinful ways. Beware *lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin* (Hebrews 3:13).

O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death. This was the cry of the apostle Paul as he acknowledged the sinfulness of his own heart. We can either harden our hearts when we see evil around us, and in our own hearts, or we can confess and cry out as Paul did. We can be like the 'earth dwellers', the 'unsealed' and refuse to repent, or we can be like Paul who repented and was saved.

Thanks be to God though Jesus Christ our Lord was the answer Paul received (Romans 7:25). He was delivered from death by the only one who can give life, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. *Having been justified by the blood of Jesus we shall be saved from wrath through him* (Romans 5:9). The wrath of God is being revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness as Paul said (Romans 1:18), and as John saw in this vision of the sixth trumpet.

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