

# Revelation 8 — When Heaven Falls Silent

## Introduction

Chapter 7 ended with a great multitude standing before the throne, worshiping God and the Lamb. Their voices filled heaven with praise: “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10). Then Chapter 8 begins, and suddenly there is silence. “When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (8:1).

The contrast could hardly be greater. After the thunderous worship of Chapter 7, heaven becomes still. John does not explain the silence, and we should be careful not to explain what he does not. But the effect is unmistakable. Something solemn is about to happen. Something similar happens before a tsunami, when the water suddenly retreats before the destructive surge. I grew up in Kansas and that strange stillness seemed to haunt the land just before a tornado crashed onto the scene. This then, is like that strange stillness before a violent storm, when the wind drops, the air changes, and everything seems to wait.

The seventh seal has now been opened. The scroll that no one was worthy to open except the Lamb is fully unsealed. What follows is not random disaster or a universe spinning out of control. The judgments that come from the trumpets proceed from the presence of God. They are severe, but they are also limited. Time and again John says that a third is affected—a third of the earth, a third of the trees, a third of the sea, a third of the creatures, a third of the ships, and a third of the heavenly lights. Judgment has come, but even judgment has limitations.

Before the trumpets sound, however, John draws our attention to something else: prayer. An angel stands at the altar with a golden censer, and “the prayers of all the saints” rise before God with the incense (8:3–4). The people of God may appear powerless on earth, but their prayers are not insignificant in heaven. Revelation has already shown us the martyrs crying, “How long, O Lord?” (6:10). Their prayers have not disappeared. God has heard them. And when God hears, God will answer.

This chapter is filled with disturbing images—hail and fire, blood, a burning mountain, poisoned waters, darkness, and the announcement of still more woe to come. Yet the purpose of Revelation is not to frighten believers or tease them into trying to decode every earthquake, war, meteor, or catastrophe. John is writing to people who already knew

suffering. His message is that even when the world appears to be coming apart, God has not surrendered His throne.

That leaves us with three questions. 1) What is God doing? 2) What is He not doing? 3) What are we supposed to do as a result? Those questions will help us hear Chapter 8 not simply as a catalogue of disasters, but as part of the Revelation of Yeshua the Messiah.

## **1. Silence in Heaven — Revelation 8:1**

The silence lasts “about half an hour.” We do not need to turn thirty minutes into a prophetic formula. John simply tells us what he experienced in the vision. What matters is the dramatic interruption. Heaven, which has been filled with worship, becomes silent.

There are several possible ways to understand that silence. It may provide a pause before the trumpet judgments. It may allow the prayers of the saints to come to the foreground. Or it may represent the awed stillness of heaven in anticipation of what is about to happen. We cannot be certain which John intended, and perhaps we are not meant to choose only one.

The Hebrew Scriptures sometimes associate silence with the approach of divine judgment. Habakkuk declares, “The LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him” (2:20). Zephaniah similarly says, “Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near” (1:7). John’s Jewish hearers would not necessarily have needed an elaborate explanation. Silence before God can be the appropriate response when He rises to act.

There is also something pastorally important here. Silence does not mean absence. God has not left the throne. The Lamb has not disappeared. Nothing has gone wrong with heaven. The silence itself occurs because the Lamb has opened the seventh seal.

The One who was worthy to take the scroll in Chapter 5 is still the One directing the action in Chapter 8.

## **2. The Prayers of the Saints — Revelation 8:2–5**

John sees seven angels standing before God, and seven trumpets are given to them. Before any trumpet sounds, however, another angel approaches the altar carrying a golden censer. He is given much incense to offer with “the prayers of all the saints” on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense rises before God together with those prayers.

The imagery comes directly from Israel's worship. Incense was offered before the LORD in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. Its fragrance filled the holy place, and Scripture eventually used incense as an image for prayer. David prayed, "May my prayer be counted as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering" (Psalm 141:2). John's readers are seeing familiar biblical imagery carried into the heavenly scene.

This is particularly significant because Revelation has already shown us the prayers of suffering believers. Under the altar in Chapter 6, the martyrs cried, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood?" (6:10). At the time they were told to rest a little longer. Now we discover that their prayers have not evaporated into the air. They have risen before God. He has heard them. And when God hears, God will answer.

There is an important Tanakh connection here. In Numbers 16, Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebelled against Moses and Aaron. Their complaint sounded almost spiritual: "All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Numbers 16:3). But beneath the language was rebellion against the leadership God had established. The result was a frightening judgment. The ground opened beneath the rebels, fire consumed the 250 men who had offered incense, and the congregation fled in fear.

You might imagine that would have ended the complaining. It didn't. The very next day the congregation grumbled against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for what had happened. Judgment came again, this time as a plague among the people.

What Moses did next is remarkable. He did not stand back and say, "They deserve it." He told Aaron to take his censer, put fire from the altar in it, add incense and hurry into the congregation to make atonement for them. Aaron obeyed. Torah tells us that he "took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked" (Numbers 16:48).

What a picture. Aaron is standing between death and life with incense rising before God. The people who had rebelled were the very people for whom Moses and Aaron now interceded. Judgment was deserved, but intercession was offered. The censer therefore carries considerably more biblical freight than simply providing a pleasant fragrance for worship.

That helps us understand the tension in Revelation 8. God is just, and evil cannot continue forever without judgment. Yet immediately before the trumpet judgments, John shows us

prayer. Judgment and intercession stand beside one another. The prayers of the saints are not an interruption to the action; they are part of the action.

Then the scene changes dramatically. The angel takes the same censer, fills it with fire from the altar, and throws it to the earth. There are “peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5). The altar from which the prayers rose now becomes the source from which fire falls.

Those sounds should be familiar to readers of the Tanakh. At Sinai there was thunder and lightning as the LORD descended upon the mountain (Exodus 19:16–19). Ezekiel also describes the overwhelming brightness, fire and sound surrounding the appearance of the glory of God (Ezekiel 1). John is using the language of divine presence. The God who revealed Himself to Israel is not absent from this scene. The thunder, lightning and earthquake announce His majesty and power.

Prayer, then, is not decorative scenery in Revelation. The cries of God’s people matter. Heaven hears what earth may ignore. Governments may ignore the persecuted. Neighbors may ignore them. Sometimes even other believers may not know what they are enduring. But their prayers arrive before the throne.

That ought to affect the way we pray. We sometimes wonder whether our prayers accomplish anything, particularly when circumstances remain unchanged. We pray for someone to be healed and the illness continues. We pray for persecution to end and another believer is imprisoned. We pray for someone we love to turn to God, and nothing seems to happen. Silence can easily feel like absence.

But Revelation 8 will not allow us to equate those two things. The chapter actually begins with silence in heaven, yet during that silence the prayers of the saints are brought before God. Silence from heaven should never be confused with indifference in heaven.

And there is something else worth noticing. Aaron stood between the living and the dead. That remains part of the calling of God’s people. We know judgment is real, but our response should not be delight that judgment is coming. We pray. We intercede. We tell people about the mercy of God. We stand, as it were, between the living and the dead and point people toward the One who can save.

### 3. The First Four Trumpets — Revelation 8:6–12

The seven angels now prepare to sound their trumpets. Trumpets throughout the Tanakh summon people, announce the arrival of a king, call an army to battle, or warn that judgment is approaching. At Sinai the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder as God descended upon the mountain (Exodus 19:16–19).

The prophets also used the trumpet as an alarm: “Blow a trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm on My holy mountain!” (Joel 2:1). In Joel, the alarm warns of an invading force pictured as a devastating army of locusts, carrying out the judgment of the LORD. That connection is worth remembering, because locust imagery will appear again when the fifth trumpet sounds in Revelation 9. These trumpets are not background music. Something is happening, and the world is being told to pay attention.

The first trumpet brings hail and fire mixed with blood. A third of the earth and a third of the trees are burned, along with all the green grass. The second trumpet brings something “like a great mountain burning with fire” into the sea. A third of the sea becomes blood, a third of its creatures die, and a third of the ships are destroyed. With the third trumpet, a great burning star falls from heaven onto the rivers and springs. Its name is Wormwood, and the waters become bitter. Then the fourth trumpet strikes a third of the sun, moon and stars, so that a third of their light is darkened.

It is tempting for modern readers to ask immediately, “What could cause this?” A meteor? A nuclear explosion? A massive volcanic eruption? Climate catastrophe? John does not ask that question. Neither should it be our first question. Before asking how these things might happen in our world, we ought to ask where John and his first readers had encountered these images before. The obvious answer is Egypt.

Egypt, of course. The first trumpet recalls the seventh plague, when “the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth” (Exodus 9:23). The second trumpet turns the sea to blood, recalling the Nile becoming blood in the first plague (Exodus 7:17–21). The darkness of the fourth trumpet recalls the ninth plague, when darkness covered Egypt for three days (Exodus 10:21–23).

These are not accidental similarities. John is using the language of the Exodus, one of the foundational stories of Israel. Pharaoh appeared to hold all the power. Israel was enslaved and apparently helpless. Yet God saw, God heard, God remembered His covenant, and God acted. The plagues demonstrated that Pharaoh was not sovereign and neither were the gods of Egypt. The LORD was.

That is a powerful message to believers living and suffering under Rome. Caesar may look like Pharaoh. Rome may appear immovable. The empire may demand allegiance and punish those who refuse it. But John reminds his readers of a story they already know. Empires are not eternal. God is.

The Exodus connection also keeps us from reading these judgments merely as natural disasters. In Exodus, the plagues had a moral and theological meaning. They confronted oppression and idolatry and demonstrated the sovereignty of the God of Israel. So too in Revelation. Creation itself becomes involved in the judgment of a world that has rejected its Creator.

### **Wormwood and Bitter Water**

The third trumpet deserves particular attention. John sees “a great star” burning like a torch fall from heaven. It falls on a third of the rivers and springs, and its name is Wormwood. The waters become bitter, and many people die from drinking them.

Wormwood was known for its bitterness, and the Tanakh already uses it as a picture of judgment. Jeremiah is especially important. Because Judah had forsaken the LORD, God declared, “Behold, I will feed them, this people, with wormwood and give them poisoned water to drink” (Jeremiah 9:15). Later Jeremiah speaks similarly concerning the false prophets: “Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood and make them drink poisonous water” (23:15).

So when John writes about Wormwood, he does not need a twentieth- or twenty-first-century event to explain his imagery. Jeremiah has already given him the vocabulary. Bitter water is an image of the bitter consequences of rebellion against God.

There is an interesting warning here for those who interpret Revelation. There was a 1908 Tunguska event in Siberia, when an object from space exploded in the atmosphere and flattened an enormous area of forest. An event like that naturally makes us think about John's burning star falling from heaven.

Then there was Chernobyl, the catastrophic nuclear accident in Ukraine in 1986. Radioactive material spread across a vast region, people were evacuated, and an exclusion zone was established around the reactor.

Chernobyl became particularly attractive to some interpreters of Revelation because of its name. The Ukrainian word refers to mugwort, a bitter herb closely related to wormwood, although it does not literally mean the particular plant normally translated “wormwood.”

After the 1986 disaster, that botanical connection was enough for some people to identify Chernobyl with the Wormwood of Revelation 8. Suddenly, for them, John's prophecy appeared to have been fulfilled before our eyes.

But that illustrates the danger. Once we decide that Revelation is a coded description of events in our own lifetime, almost anything can be made to fit. A meteor becomes John's falling star. A nuclear accident becomes Wormwood. A war becomes one of the trumpets. Another generation will find another event that seems equally convincing. Through some rather creative mathematical ingenuity, some fundamentalists even identified U.S. President Woodrow Wilson as the Antichrist during World War I.

There was an older interpreter who managed to identify Wormwood with whiskey. His reasoning was that the Greek word *absinthos* was connected with *absinthe*, and from there he concluded that John was prophesying the invention of distilled liquor and the misery it would bring into the world. It is an excellent example of how ingenious we can become once we detach Revelation from its biblical setting. We can make the Bible say almost anything if we work hard enough.

The better question is not, "What modern catastrophe does this predict?" but "What would John's readers have heard?" They knew Jeremiah. They knew the Exodus. They knew that bitter water was associated with judgment. They did not need Chernobyl to understand Wormwood.

That does not mean modern catastrophes have nothing to teach us. They remind us how fragile human life can be and how quickly something we assume is secure can collapse. But they are illustrations, not the interpretive key to Revelation.

## Why Only a Third?

One expression keeps returning through these verses: "a third."

A third of the earth is burned. A third of the trees. A third of the sea becomes blood. A third of the sea creatures die. A third of the ships are destroyed. A third of the rivers and springs are affected. Then a third of the sun, moon and stars are darkened. We should notice what John is doing. The destruction is enormous, but it is not complete.

If we have never experienced persecution or catastrophe, it may sound strange to call "a third" good news. A third sounds terrible. And it is. Revelation does not minimize suffering. But imagine hearing this as someone suffering for faith in Yeshua under the power of Rome. A third means there is a boundary. A third means evil has not been given unlimited

authority. A third means judgment itself operates within limits established by God. It means this will not last forever.

That distinction matters. Revelation does not portray God desperately trying to regain control of a universe that has slipped from His hands. Even in judgment there are boundaries. Creation is shaken, but God remains on His throne.

We encountered something similar with the seals. The riders were permitted to act. Authority was given. Limits were imposed. Again John is reminding us that appearances can deceive us. From earth, everything may look chaotic. From heaven, nothing has escaped God's sovereignty.

And that brings us back to our first question: What is God doing? He is judging evil. Revelation does not apologize for that. A God who never judges evil would ultimately be indifferent to its victims. The prayers of the martyrs in Chapter 6—"How long?"—are prayers for God to do something about injustice. Chapter 8 shows us that He will.

But what is God not doing? He is not yet bringing everything to its final conclusion. These judgments affect a third, not the whole. There is still a warning being sounded. There is still opportunity to hear the trumpet.

And what are we supposed to do? Not construct charts. Not scour tomorrow's news looking for the next trumpet. Not live frightened by every earthquake, war, epidemic or object that falls from the sky. A trumpet is meant to wake people up.

That was true for Israel then, and it remains true here. The proper response to the warning of judgment is repentance, faithfulness and renewed confidence in God. If the world is not as secure as it appears, then we ought not place our confidence in it. If evil will finally be judged, then we should not make peace with it. And if God hears the prayers of His people, then we should keep praying.

The trumpets tell suffering believers something else as well: Rome does not get the last word. Neither does any other empire, ideology or power that sets itself against God. Pharaoh did not. Babylon did not. Rome would not. Yeshua does.

## **4. The Eagle's Warning — Revelation 8:13**

After the first four trumpets, John sees and hears an eagle flying in midheaven. It cries with 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!"

The pause is important. Four trumpets have sounded, but John does not rush immediately into the fifth. Instead, something flies across the heavens and announces that the judgments we have just witnessed are not the end. Three trumpets remain, and each will bring a woe.

Some manuscripts have “angel” here rather than “eagle,” but “eagle” has the stronger textual support. It is certainly the more striking picture. An eagle flies high enough to be seen, and its voice carries the warning across the earth. We have already met the eagle among the four living creatures around the throne in Chapter 4, and we will encounter eagle imagery again. Here the important point is not identifying the bird but hearing its message.

“Woe, woe, woe.” In the prophets, “woe” is not simply an expression meaning, “Things are going badly.” It is the language of lament and approaching judgment. Isaiah repeatedly pronounces woe upon those who rebel against God. Jeremiah does the same. Yeshua Himself used the language: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” (Matthew 11:21). A woe is a warning that something is seriously wrong and that judgment follows if nothing changes.

The three woes correspond to the three trumpets still to come. The fifth trumpet will bring the first woe in Chapter 9. The sixth trumpet brings the second. Eventually, after a considerable interruption in John's vision, we are told, “The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly” (11:14), immediately before the seventh trumpet sounds.

John therefore ends Chapter 8 by making us wait.

That is important because Revelation repeatedly uses waiting as part of its message. The martyrs wait. The saints endure. Judgment unfolds but does not arrive all at once. God has His timetable, and His people are called to faithfulness within it. Sometimes, this seems unbearable, but the reality remains. I’m reminded of Psalm 37, “Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.” (37:7) We are going to wait. The issue is whether we will be patient while waiting or whether we will be anxious and bothered. Patience in waiting is a function of our trust in the One for Whom we are waiting.

## Those Who Dwell on the Earth

The eagle directs its warning to “those who dwell on the earth.” We should not hurry past that expression. John uses it repeatedly in Revelation, and it means more than simply “everyone who happens to live on planet Earth.”

These are people who have settled their allegiance here. They belong to the present order that stands in opposition to God. Later in Revelation, those who dwell on the earth worship the beast, rejoice over the death of God's witnesses, and are deceived by false signs. The phrase develops almost into a description of identity.

It reminds me of the expression in Ecclesiastes, “under the sun.” Ecclesiastes looks at life as it appears within the boundaries of the natural world—life as we experience it here. John’s “those who dwell on the earth” is not exactly the same expression, but there is a useful similarity. Where is your horizon? Is this world all there is, or do you understand earthly life in light of the throne of God?

That question becomes particularly important for John's original readers. Rome was very visible. Caesar was visible. Temples, armies, markets and imperial power were visible. The throne John has been describing since Chapter 4 was not. Which one, then, was more real? Revelation tells believers not to determine reality merely by what they can see. The earthly empire that looked permanent would pass away. The throne they could not see was eternal.

That remains one of Revelation's great challenges to us. We are constantly tempted to define reality by what is immediately in front of us—money, governments, wars, health, success, failure, approval, opposition. Revelation keeps pulling back the curtain and saying, “There is more going on than you can see.”

## Warning Is Also Mercy

There is another feature of verse 13 that we should not miss. The eagle announces the woes before they arrive. That means the warning itself is an act of mercy.

The prophets frequently warned Israel before judgment came. Amos asks, “If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble?” and then says, “Surely the Lord GOD does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:6–7). Ezekiel uses the picture of a watchman who sees danger approaching and blows the trumpet so that the people can respond (Ezekiel 33:1–6).

You do not sound an alarm for people who have no opportunity to respond. You sound an alarm because there is still time to wake up.

That helps us understand something about all four trumpets in this chapter. They are judgments, certainly, but they are also warnings. The repeated “third” tells us that judgment has not yet reached its final extent. And now the eagle announces what is coming before the remaining trumpets sound.

God is judging, but He is still calling.

That becomes even clearer in Chapter 9, where after terrible judgments we are told that those who survived still did not repent (9:20–21). That little word “repent” helps us understand the purpose of the warnings. The tragedy is not simply that judgment comes. The tragedy is that people experience warning after warning and still refuse to turn.

## **What Are We Supposed to Do?**

We began this chapter with three questions: What is God doing? What is He not doing? And what are we supposed to do as a result? We can now answer them.

What is God doing? He is judging evil. That may make us uncomfortable, but it is part of the biblical revelation of His character. God is loving, merciful and patient, but His love does not require Him to ignore evil. In fact, if God cares about those who suffer because of evil, there must ultimately be an answer to it.

Think again of the martyrs beneath the altar in Chapter 6. Their question was not, “Does God love us?” It was “How long?” How long before You judge? How long before You put things right? How long before injustice is answered? Chapter 8 says that God has heard.

What is God not doing? He is not allowing evil unlimited freedom. Again and again we have seen “a third.” The judgment is terrible, but it has boundaries. God has not surrendered the universe to Satan. He has not stepped away from His throne. And He has not yet brought final judgment. There is still warning. There is still opportunity to repent.

That brings us to the third question. What are we supposed to do? I see four things.

First, we should repent. Revelation was not written so believers could point at everybody else and say, “Look what is going to happen to you.” Before we warn the world, we ought to hear the warning ourselves. Am I walking faithfully with God? Have I allowed compromise to become comfortable? The messages to the seven congregations in Chapters 2 and 3 have already made that personal.

Second, we should pray. Revelation 8 places the prayers of the saints at the center of heaven's activity. We do not pray because we have figured out how God must answer. We pray because He hears.

Third, we should bear witness. If judgment is real and mercy is available, then silence about Yeshua is hardly an appropriate response. We do not proclaim Him with delight at the prospect of somebody else's judgment. Aaron stood between the living and the dead with the censer. That is a much better picture of our calling. We intercede, and we point people toward the mercy of God.

And finally, we endure. John's first readers needed that word. Some were suffering. Some were frightened. Some were tempted to compromise with the surrounding culture. Rome looked strong and the congregations of Yeshua looked weak. John tells them that appearances are not the whole story.

The world can become very dark. That was true in John's century, and it has been true in every century since. Believers have lived through wars, plagues, persecution, famine, genocide and the collapse of civilizations. Christians suffering today in places hostile to their faith do not need someone to tell them that one day there might be a tribulation. They know tribulation.

Revelation's comfort is not that believers will never experience terrible things. Its comfort is that terrible things do not have the final word. Yeshua does. He is the Lamb who broke the seals. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the One around whom heaven worships. He is with His people, and He will bring God's purposes to completion.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen." That captures something of the response Revelation seeks from us. We cannot see everything John saw. We certainly cannot explain everything he saw. But what God has already shown us of His faithfulness gives us reason to trust Him for what we cannot yet see.

## Takeaways

Heaven may be silent, but heaven is not inactive. The prayers of God's people rise before the throne, and God hears them. What appeared unanswered in Chapter 6 has not been forgotten.

John expects us to read Revelation with the Tanakh open beside us. The altar, incense, censer, trumpets, hail, blood, darkness and bitter water belong to a biblical vocabulary

that John's first readers could recognize. We understand Revelation better when we look backward into Scripture before looking forward into tomorrow's headlines.

Judgment is real, but it is limited. The repeated “third” reminds us that God remains sovereign even when creation itself seems to be coming apart. For suffering believers, limits are good news. Evil does not have unlimited time or unlimited power.

Warnings are also expressions of mercy. Trumpets are sounded because they are meant to be heard. The eagle announces the woes because there is still time to respond.

And Revelation 8 calls us to confidence rather than speculation. We do not need to identify every burning mountain, falling star or catastrophe with the latest headline. We need to pray, repent, bear witness and remain faithful to Yeshua.

## Memory Verse

“May my prayer be counted as incense before You;

The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.”

— Psalm 141:2

## What's Next?

Chapter 8 ends with three ominous words: “Woe, woe, woe.”

The first four trumpets have affected the created world—the land, sea, waters and heavens. With the fifth and sixth trumpets in Chapter 9, the focus changes. The imagery becomes darker and stranger. A star falls from heaven, the abyss is opened, locust-like creatures emerge, and an enormous army appears.

But we will approach those strange images in the same way we have approached this chapter. Before asking what they might mean in our century, we will ask what John was showing his first readers and where his imagery comes from in the Scriptures they already knew. The trumpets are still sounding. The warnings are becoming more severe. And the call remains: listen, repent, and remain faithful.