

## Revelation 8:13 – The Three Woes

This is now my 23<sup>rd</sup> sermon in this whole series on the book of Revelation we started last January. But as our church has grown during that time, and many of you were not here for the first set of sermons, I realized it might be helpful to give a little bit more explanation as to why and how I interpret Revelation the way I do. Revelation 8:13 is a natural break in between the first four trumpets and the last 3, so it's good spot to get our bearings before we continue. Another thing I've tried to do in this sermon is to engage some alternative ideas about Revelation and show a little bit where I can agree with them, and why I have to disagree on other points. My aim in this is not to prove my opinion, but to encourage us to pay close attention to every word of the Bible; to love God's Word because we love God. I want to help you love God's *every* word.

### An eagle screeching

[**read** v13] John sees and then hears an eagle screeching overhead. What does it mean? Is it literal or symbolic? It's interesting that perhaps the most popular Futurist scholar today, Dr. John MacArthur, does not see this as a literal eagle. It is a symbol he explains as "referring to the rapid approach of God's final vengeance" citing Deut 28:49, Hos 8:1, and Hab 1:8.

"The imagery is that of a strong bird of prey rushing to consume its victim, in this case referring to the rapid approach of God's final vengeance (cf. Deut. 28:49; Hos. 8:1; Hab. 1:8). Depicted in the vision as flying in midheaven, the bird would be at the height of the midday sun, thus visible to all. His loud voice assures that all will be able to hear his pronouncements. The eagle's dire warning is that the last three trumpet judgments will be even more devastating than the first four."<sup>i</sup>

On at least this point, I agree with MacArthur. Because that's the conclusion the text drives us to accept:<sup>ii</sup> the word "eagle" in this case means a bird of prey, also like a vulture.<sup>iii</sup> And it's flying high in the sky above. When our kids were small we took them to where the salmon were spawning in Squamish, not to see the salmon, but to see the thousands of eagles attracted by the dying salmon. Some scholars think the seals, trumpets, and bowls cover the same ground with parallel prophecies. I see this as linear history, leading up to Rev 19:17 where an angel calls "all the birds that fly directly overhead" to gather and feast on the great slaughter that will be about to happen. But here there is only one eagle. Meaning the symbol is of a very early warning that the coming judgements are going to get worse and worse, the number of those who would die because of these plagues from God had only just begun.

Once again, the generation living to see the fall of Rome under the fourth trumpet blast, are prepared by this solitary eagle to get ready. I said "again" because it reminds me of Rev 1:1, that God gave John this Revelation of Jesus Christ "to show [Christians] what must soon take place". There are people who think Revelation is only about events that happened in the first century (called "preterists"). But if we take the first verse of the book literally, and hold that John wrote this in about 95AD, we can't agree with them. On the other hand, perhaps most people today think Revelation 4-19 is only about events that will happen just before the end of the world—skipping over 2000 years so far of Christian history (called "futurists"). But that first verse, if we take it literally, doesn't seem to fit with the futurist view. Most Protestant teachers (even before the Reformation) up to the middle of the 1800s, believed Revelation tells us what God wanted us to know about things that would start happening just after John saw this vision, continuing with major events from then until Jesus comes back (called "historicists").<sup>iv</sup> (Perhaps the most beloved commentary on the Bible ever written is the one by Matthew Henry. Jonathan Edwards was arguably the greatest American theologian. Charles Spurgeon is one of the greatest preachers ever. They were all historicists, as were most Protestant teachers up until the mid-1800s.)<sup>v</sup> That's the view I take, not because it is classic, or popular, but because I take the first verse literally, and interpret the rest from that starting point, following the God-given guidance of the

interpretations in Daniel's dream-visions, where Daniel is told that beasts = empires, etc. (Dan 7:23; Dan 8:20f, etc.). The imagery in Daniel's visions is explained by God's messenger angels as symbolizing great events in mundane history. The fact that Revelation belongs to the same genre of literature as Daniel compels me to interpret the visions in Revelation as we are told to interpret them in Daniel.

### The eagle's dire warning

[read 8:13] So if we take Revelation 1:1 literally, the screeching eagle in 8:13 should be a symbol, right? When was the last time you met a talking eagle? Rev 1:1 says John saw "signs". The eagle is *literally* then a sign, a picture. And MacArthur is right when he explains it as a sign of "the rapid approach of God's vengeance". More than that, since it turns out that a lot more eagles join the feast of slaughter in chapter 19, this eagle is a very early warning. But a warning of what? That a slaughter is coming and there's nothing you can do about it? No. It's a warning to repent. The eagle's message is a warning to pay very close attention to the judgements of the next three trumpets. Now pay close attention here: To whom is the eagle talking? "those who dwell on the earth". My friends, if we take this warning literally, we then learn that there would be people living on earth at a point in time shortly after the first four trumpets were fulfilled, when they would either read or hear the book of Revelation, and in it, perceive a warning to pay extra close attention to the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpet predictions. There are judgements prophesied in the Bible upon individuals and nations who would never read or hear about those judgements. But when warnings are given in the Bible, those warnings aren't intended for people who would never hear the warnings, but for people who do. Prophetic warnings are meant for people who either read or hear the prophecy but are in danger of ignoring it. The eagle is warning people living in "the land". Verse 13 is for them.

The wording in this warning is very important: "woe, woe, woe!". It is an ominous warning. So how should this ominous warning affect us? I don't just mean "how should it make us feel?" but, "What difference should this make in how we live our lives?" It seems to me there are two ways we could read the rest of Revelation, and the way we do it has a lot to do with how we will be affected by this ominous warning in verse 13. If we assume none of these things are even going to happen until the end of the world, then this ominous warning might never affect us, just as in that case, it had little relevance for Christians living during each of the 20 centuries since John wrote this book. The use of the symbol of the eagle is a portent of coming slaughter; the eagle's message is an explicit warning to people who would otherwise be unprepared for that slaughter; and the wording, "woe" three times, clues us in to the reason those who hear the eagle's warning are in terrible danger.

"Woe" is a shout of alarm in verse 13, but later after the fifth trumpet, Rev 9:12 says, "the first woe has passed" using the word as a noun. When used as a cry, "woe" is a call for retribution, but as a noun it means a calamity or disaster.<sup>vi</sup> So in 8:13 it's a cry for retribution, but 9:12 and 11:14 announce 2 of these calamities have been fulfilled: "the first/second woe is passed". Those who were warned after the fourth trumpet, but didn't heed that warning, died in their sins. They became examples of what happens to the disobedient. Examples for people after them. Likewise with people killed in the calamity of the sixth trumpet. How foolish must we be if seeing what happened to those who ignored their chance to repent, not once, but twice, we make the same fatal error? The third woe is still not passed! So heed this. After the eagle's repeated "woe!" in 8:13, disaster struck; after the reminder in 9:12, disaster struck again; after the final reminder in 11:14, the ultimate disaster is fast approaching and there might be no more warning, no more chance to repent, no mercy for people who hear but choose to ignore the Word of God. The cry of "woe" and the eagle's warning show that this is patterned after warnings in the Old Testament for people who knew God to turn back to Him. There are promises that obedience to God's covenant brings covenant blessings; disobedience to God's covenant brings covenant curses. A couple of examples: Ezekiel 7:24-26 announces "woe upon woe" to people who knew God's Word but had turned

away from it [read]. Another example is in Leviticus 26 where the first part (vv1-13) promises many blessings if God's people will listen to Him, but the second part (v14f) promises curses that keep getting worse with every generation that does not listen to God, does not obey Him, and rejects His covenant (it predicted the Jews would be driven from their homeland for many centuries, as they were until 1948). One more example comes from Exodus 15, right after God saves Israel from the Egyptian army (it's a fitting example because the trumpet judgements use language from the 10 plagues God used to free Israel from the Egyptians). When they were now free, they made camp near water that was bitter and undrinkable. And Moses prayed to God, and God miraculously cleansed the water so they could drink it. And then, to emphasize how important it was to keep on depending on God, to keep on praying to God, it says, [read Ex 15:25b-27].

My friends, the warning in Revelation 8:13 to pay attention to the coming curses was not intended to cause despair, but to lead hearers to repentance, to know God as Healer, as Saviour. The promise is so much better than the curses! The promise was just clarified in the beginning of chapter 8, that Jesus, our great High Priest, has opened the way for us to come to God, to pray to God, because Jesus Himself was One who paid for our sin with His own blood, who was raised to life, and who now promises that every person who depends on Him, will be included in all of God's covenant blessings forever. But if you refuse to listen, and to learn from the first woe under the fifth trumpet, or from the second woe under the sixth trumpet (or even from how God disciplined Israel for 1900 years!), then you will suffer the everlasting curse of eternal punishment under the third woe, when Judgement Day comes.

### The Message to those who hear

Notice one more time exactly whom the eagle was warning: [read 8:13]. Taking this literally leads us to conclude the warning is for those who hear it. And who is the book of Revelation written for? Who are the audience who are supposed to hear or read this book of prophecy? [read Rev 1:1-3] God gave this vision to show Jesus' followers what would begin to happen shortly after it was written; it carried a promise of everlasting blessing to those who read aloud, and who hear what it says, "for the time [was] near" (1:3). That's why I can't agree with John MacArthur when he tries to argue that "soon" in Rev 1:1 does not mean "soon" but more like sudden.<sup>vii</sup> It's actually a phrase in Greek that means "without delay, at once, speedily".<sup>viii</sup> Revelation 1:1 is saying that the future events predicted in this vision would start happening "without delay". There are even 3 reminders in the first 4 chapters to emphasize that at John's time, they were about to start happening (Rev 1:3, "the time is near"; 1:19, "will take place after this"; 4:1, "what must take place after this"). And they did begin happening: As I've shown in these 23 sermons, the first seal right after John wrote the book; the second seal after that, and so the third, and fourth, and so on; then the first four trumpets, bringing us to Revelation 8:13 which I'm arguing comes just after the historic Fall of the Roman Empire in 476AD.

So should you listen to me or Dr. MacArthur? What a question! I am looking forward to learning how to become a better preacher from Dr. MacArthur's seminary—I've applied; I pray that they accept me! But he's not always right. And neither am I. The Word is inerrant; teachers are fallible. Pay close attention to God's Word, to the promises and to the warnings. The Word shows us the way to life and salvation in Jesus. That's why Rev 1:1 introduces the whole book as a revelation to "show Jesus' servants what must soon take place": in order that in every generation of Christianity, those who read this book would be able to discern how much of the prophecy has come true already, and heed that which is still future. It does not tell us what year Jesus will return, but it does, over and over again, warn us, encourage us, and teach us to trust our sovereign Lord and Saviour. It does give specific encouragement from every century of Christian history. And with each prophecy that passes into history, the warnings of covenant curses become more urgent yes, but as the world grows darker, the promises of covenant blessings stand out more brightly as by faith we see that Day drawing closer—as we realize *He is* coming soon.

---

<sup>i</sup> MacArthur, John. Revelation 1-22 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Two Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 4906-4910). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. John MacArthur is without a doubt one of the greatest preachers alive today. He doesn't see these trumpet judgements as symbolic descriptions of historical events, but rather as face-value descriptions of future events: "They do not symbolize political, social, or economic judgment; those types of judgment come later in Revelation. Nor do they describe any judgment that has ever happened in history in some locale or region. The trumpet judgments are actual, literal, physical events that will affect the whole earth." [MacArthur, John. Revelation 1-22 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Two Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 4777-4779). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.] I say "face-value" and not "literal" because to interpret a book "literally" actually means to interpret it according to what the author meant to say, by the type of literature written—if poetry, to interpret it as poetry, if narrative, as narrative, and if symbolic prophecy, as symbolic prophecy. As I show from Rev 1:1, taking John's book "literally" requires starting by reading it as "signs" (symbolically) and as about to start happening (e.g., along an historicist understanding).

<sup>iii</sup> Friberg's Lexicon, #539

<sup>iv</sup> It's worth noting that the vast majority of commentaries from all of those approaches understand Revelation in a more-or-less linear, continualist structure. [c.f. Oral Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus*, 489] One commentary helpfully describes the way the seals, trumpets, and bowls work by picturing a click of your computer's mouse: you get to the end of the seven seals and double click on the seventh, and the seven trumpets appear; likewise when you double-click the seventh trumpet, seven bowls are revealed. [Thomas, John Christopher. *Revelation* (The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary) (p. 3). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition. ] From carefully reading Revelation, I conclude that by attaching the woes to the three trumpets in this verse, and then by including the seven bowls of God's wrath in the seventh trumpet (c.f. 11:15; 15:1), God's Word forces me to see the structure of Revelation as sets of seven that are linear and continual rather than side-by-side and recapitulating. The four common groupings of interpretations are preterism, futurism, historicism, and idealism. "The preterist, or contemporary-historical (zeitgeschichtlich), interpretation understands the Apocalypse from the standpoint of its first-century historical setting." [Mounce, Robert H.. *The Book of Revelation* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (pp. 26-27). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.] The futurist is the other extreme, and sees chapters 4 through 22 as entirely in the future (still) to be fulfilled in the years just prior to the visible return of Christ. Various kinds of dispensationalists see these chapters as in between the rapture and the millennial return, while so-called "historical" futurists like Ladd see them as prior to the second coming. The idealist, or "timeless symbolic" [Mounce, p. 28] approach does not expect any specific fulfillments, but only general, spiritual principles about the way "God acts throughout history". [Mounce, *ibid.*] Finally, the historicist approach sees it as an unfolding prophecy beginning in the first century and continuing up until the future second coming of Christ. This is how I approach Revelation: the historicist method. Some well-known historicists include the "father of premillennialism", Joseph Mede, and Sir Isaac Newton (in addition to those mentioned above). Mounce doesn't like historicism because it is, as he wrote, "of little significance to [Revelation's] initial readers", and, "no essential agreement can be found between the major proponents of the system." [Mounce, p. 27] This is an odd thing to say. When I compare the commentaries by Joseph Mede, John Gill, Matthew Henry, Albert Barnes, Henry Guinness, TR Birks, and E.B. Elliott (to name a few of the well-known "proponents", not to mention Isaac Newton), and the books by A.J. Gordon and A.B. Simpson, I am pretty impressed, in spite of lots of differences in the details, by the substantial agreement on the meaning of the seals and trumpets in particular. Again not to mention Jonathan Edwards, who, like all the rest, saw in the seven seals a prediction of the time up to Constantine; in the first four trumpets, the barbarian invasion and fall of Rome; in the fifth and sixth trumpets the rise of Islam and then the Ottoman Empire; in the beast and the prostitute of chapters 13 and 17, the popes of Rome and the Catholic Church [Jonathan Edwards, *History of Redemption in The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing. Seventh Printing). Pp590-597.]

<sup>v</sup> See footnote v for more discussion of well-known proponents of historicism. And for an excellent, up-to-date recent commentary, see Oral E. Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus* [<https://www.amazon.com/Final-Prophecy-Jesus-Oral-Collins/dp/1498249922>].

<sup>vi</sup> Friberg, #20023

<sup>vii</sup> MacArthur, *ibid.* (Kindle Location 475). MacArthur ignores the Greek word that means "to show by signs", even though he goes to great lengths to try and show that "soon" means something else. But while discussing the range of meanings of *τάχος* ("soon") he doesn't address that it is not just one word, but, *ἐν τάχει*, or literally, "in speed", an adverbial phrase describing not how quickly these things will

---

happen once they begin (that's the sense of "imminent" that MacArthur argues for), but how quickly they will begin to happen ("speedily" according to Friberg's Lexicon).

<sup>viii</sup> Friberg, #26356