

SOOKE BAPTIST CHURCH, SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021
9AM, FACEBOOK LIVE STREAM AND YOUTUBE

A SEVERE MERCY

REVELATION 8:13-9:21

Coffee/Question:
How can mercy be severe?
Explain.

REVELATION
8:13-9:21

Today's passage is challenging to understand.

Not everything will be clear to us – there will be aspects of what John saw that we will have to humbly acknowledge – “we don't yet know what that means.”

But there will also be aspects that are clear – and we must be prepared to live with the resulting tension between “this we do know” and “this we don't know.”

Because the trumpet visions begin with a scene of worship in heaven and the sixth trumpet plague ends with a scene of worship on the earth, we know the trumpet visions address the crucial matter of worship.

Humans instinctively worship.

We were created to worship God.

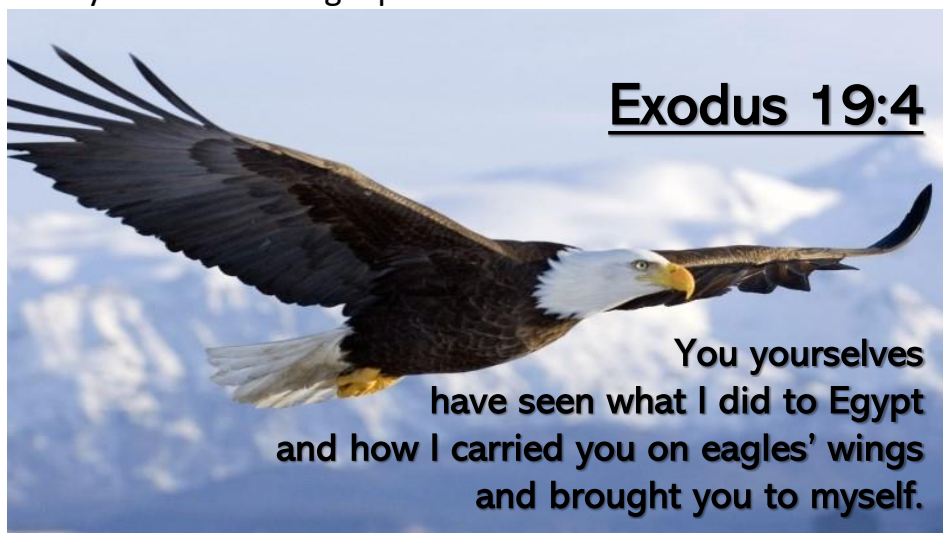
But when our first parents turned from God, we still worshiped – just not him.

What I believe God reveals in the trumpet visions is the utter foolishness of worshipping anything other than him.

Particularly with the fifth and sixth trumpet plagues the gods of mankind are unmasked and their true nature revealed.

8:13 – What we see in our passage for today reminds us of an important Bible study principle which Tom Wright identifies in his commentary: “read symbols as symbols.” p.86

The symbol of the eagle points the reader back to...



God had been like a strong eagle for the nation of Israel in how he rescued them from the power of Egypt.

But here in the Revelation instead of the eagle symbolizing deliverance there is an ironic reversal – this eagle flying in midair announces disasters.

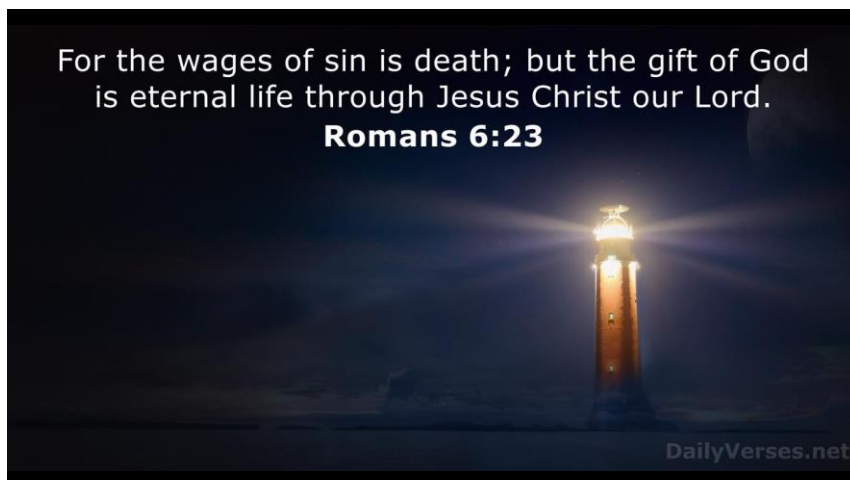
There is another OT passage which the symbol of the eagle points back.



Through Moses God warned the nation of Israel regarding woes, which God said would swoop down on them like an eagle... if they were to turn their back on the LORD.

The eagle which John heard in 8:13 announces that what God once did with a single nation, he now does in the last days... with the entire world.

The plagues of the fifth and sixth trumpet demonstrate the truth statement made in Romans 6:23...



Sin always pays the same wage... regardless.

In the trumpet plagues we see the accumulating effect of death upon the world and all who live in it.

Similar to the first four trumpet plagues, we read in Revelation 9 of global calamities that humanity cannot control or stop.

It is here we must intentionally anchor our heart and mind upon the person of the triune God... who sustains all things – read Hebrews 1:3.



In our passage for today the Scripture clearly reveals...there is no question...the fallen angels are under the control of God.

He sets the parameters of what they can and cannot do.

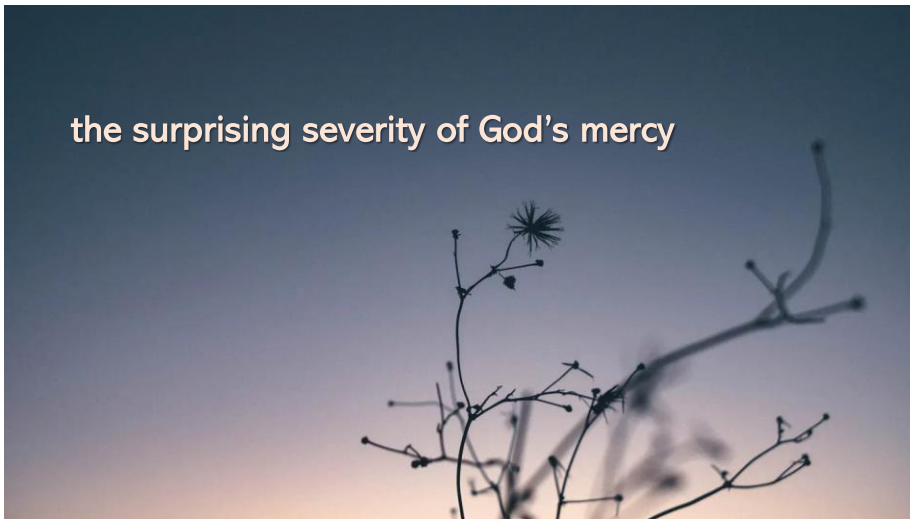
Let me remind you of what we just read.

- **God specifies that the fifth plague can only touch those who do not have the seal of God on them and further specifies that the locust creatures cannot kill**
- **God specifies how long the fifth plague lasts – five months**
- **the creatures of the sixth plague are restrained by God until he says they can be released**
- **God further determines the extent of the harm they can inflict on humanity – only up to one third.**

What the Bible communicates is that the wisdom and power of God is so great, that every scheme, every attempt by the fallen angels, is turned by God and used to further advance his good purposes.

What is said at the end of the sixth trumpet plague reminds the reader that the intent of the fifth and sixth trumpet plagues is the same as that of the first four - to persuade the inhabitants of the earth to repent.

the surprising severity of God's mercy



We see in the trumpet plagues the severity of God's mercy. If this surprises you, you are not alone... it surprises many, if not all of us.

Through the trumpet plagues, God proclaims the truth about the human condition... and the dark spirit beings that create havoc on the earth.

Look at what Paul wrote to Timothy - 2 Timothy 2:25-26

2 Timothy 2:25-26

Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

There is a fallen angel, whom this passage identifies as... the devil.

We know from the Bible that in the beginning the devil deceived and enslaved humanity.

Though unseen, his presence and activity are evidenced throughout the world.

This passage tells us that he, and those with him, cruelly trap and enslave people to do what?

To carry out his will.

But as the church announces the good news of Jesus... gently instructing... as Paul told Timothy... it does so with this hope – that God in his goodness, grants repentance... that leads a person to the knowledge of the truth.

What is it that repentance facilitates?
Look again at the passage.



Repentance facilitates a clear mind, or as Paul told Timothy, a moment when a person comes to their senses; a moment when the love and beauty of God is seen, and they are convinced by the gospel to run to Jesus... who, as Colossians 1:13 says... rescues them from the dominion of darkness and brings them into the kingdom of God.

The Fifth Plague

There are several things regarding the fifth plague we need to consider.

- What John saw and heard with the sounding of the fifth trumpet points the reader back to the plague of locusts that happened in Egypt and the plague of locusts that happened in the days of the prophet Joel – see Joel 2.

Exodus 10:12-15

And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over Egypt so that locusts swarm over the land and devour everything growing in the fields, everything left by the hail.” ¹³ So Moses stretched out his staff over Egypt, and the LORD made an east wind blow across the land all that day and all that night. By morning the wind had brought the locusts; ¹⁴ they invaded all Egypt and settled down in every area of the country in great numbers.

Exodus 10:12-15

Never before had there been such a plague of locusts, nor will there ever be again.

¹⁵ They covered all the ground until it was black.

They devoured all that was left after the hail— everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt.

Just as the locusts of long ago devoured everything green in Egypt, and left devastation in their path, so the trumpet plague locusts gnaw upon the souls of the inhabitants of the earth, devastating and ruining lives.

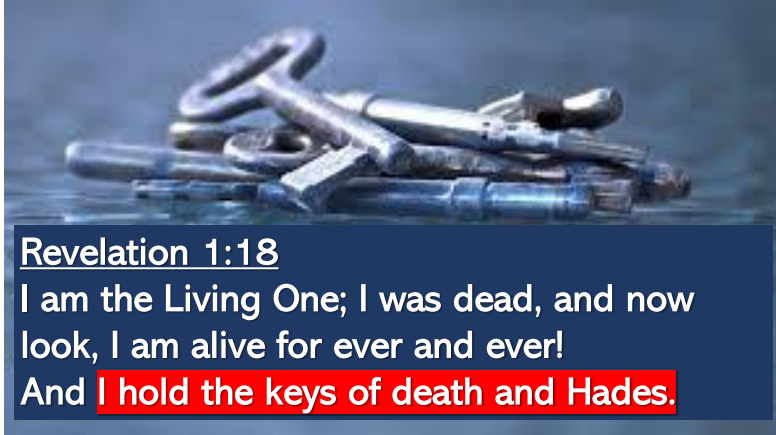
Why does God permit them to do this?

He does because of his severe mercy.

He removes his restraining hand – and these creatures reveal their true nature in what they do to humankind.

The fifth plague exposes the lie of the devil – “sin is fulfilling and life-giving.”

- The star (9:1) which fell from the sky to the earth, was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss.



Revelation 1:18

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!

And **I hold the keys of death and Hades.**

Jesus holds the key to the Abyss (see Revelation 1:18) because he died and now lives forever.

We must not miss that it is Jesus... who gives the key... to the star which fell from the sky... in order that the Abyss may be opened.

The fact that the Abyss is locked with a key held by Jesus tells the reader that the devil and those with him cannot unleash hell on earth... unless... they are permitted to do so.

We are back again to this stunning truth - God is in control of the entire universe, seen and unseen, including the Abyss.

This truth is meant to embolden the faith walk of Jesus' followers... because the One, who is always with us...is greater!

- What is the Abyss?

Based on Luke 8:31...

Luke 8:31

[The demons] begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into **the Abyss.**

...it would seem the Abyss is like a prison for fallen angels.

- John was moved by the Holy Spirit to record great detail about the creatures released from the Abyss, who I remind you are fallen angels.

v.3 – they were given power **like** that of scorpions
 v.7 – they looked **like** horses prepared for battle
 v.7 – on their heads they wore something **like** crowns of gold
 v.7 – their faces **resembled** human faces
 v.8 – their hair was **like** women’s hair
 v.8 – their teeth was **like** lions’ teeth
 v.9 – they had breastplates **like** breastplates of iron
 v.9 – the sounding of their wings was **like** the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle
 v.10 – they had tails with stingers **like** scorpions

The fact that John used the word “like” eight times and the word “resemble” once, tells us that he was reaching for language to accurately describe these spirit beings.

What we want to figure out is why the Spirit moved him to provide such detail? But before we do, let consider the sixth plague.

The Sixth Plague

- As the trumpet sounds, a voice speaks.

The voice speaks from where?

Look again at 9:13 – from the horns of the golden altar that is before God.

What is that altar?

Look back at 8:3?

The altar is the place where the prayers of God’s people, mixed with incense, rise up into the presence of God.

The reader is being reminded of the power of prayer – it rises to God and returns to earth with great power and impact.

The trumpet plagues are God’s answer to the prayers of his people for justice and for rescue!

- Verse 15 reminds the reader there is always a fullness of time, a right moment when God acts in history.

This is because it is God who is directing history to the outcome he has determined – the outcome announced by the seventh trumpet – look at 11:15.

- The **“I heard, I saw”** principle is again used.

v.16 - John heard the number... 200 million.

v.17 – John saw the horses and the riders.

- While the fifth and sixth trumpets use military language and images to describe the spirit beings released by God, there is no reference to an actual battle happening in either plague.
- Similar to the fifth plague, John was directed by the Holy Spirit to describe the creatures of the sixth plague in greater detail:

v.17 - the colors of their breastplates
 v.17 - the heads of their horses
 v.18 - what came out of the horses mouths
 v.19 - where the power of these creatures resided
 v.19 - what their tails were like

Why do you think the Spirit directed John to describe these creatures with such detail?

As I said when we began, I think the closing comments of chapter nine help us figure this out.

In spite of the two plagues which bring great trouble upon the earth, v.20 says, “the rest of mankind,” still did not repent of the work of their hands; nor stop worshiping demons and idols, nor turn away from their sinful practices.

We definitely see in this response... the stubbornness of the human heart which confirms what the prophet Jeremiah said– it is beyond cure. 17:9.

But there is something else in our passage which I believe links with Romans 1...

Romans 1:21-23

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

I believe, as I earlier said, the trumpet plagues address the crucial issue of humanity' misplaced worship and what has happened as a result to mankind's thinking and behavior.



Let me say it again...

Preceding the sounding of the trumpets and the plagues which come from heaven to the earth.... we are shown a scene of worship in heaven that involves Jesus' followers on earth – Revelation 8:3-5.

At the end of the sixth trumpet plague the reader is shown a scene of worship – but this time it is the worship of unrepentant mankind – who will not turn from their worship of demons and the evil practices that flow from their worship.

Romans 1:21-23

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Behind mankind's idols... which are made to resemble as Romans 1 identifies... mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things... stand the hideous and cruel creatures described in Revelation 9 ... who inflict torment and death in the last days.

It is a beloved mantra of our current culture that everyone can hold to their own truth... that all can do what is right in their own estimation and if and when this happens, people will find themselves in a beautiful place.

But the Bible reveals this thinking stems from the great lie.

Jesus said, "I am the way... and the truth... and the life."

There is but one way to God – through Jesus Christ.

There is but one truth – what God has spoken and revealed.

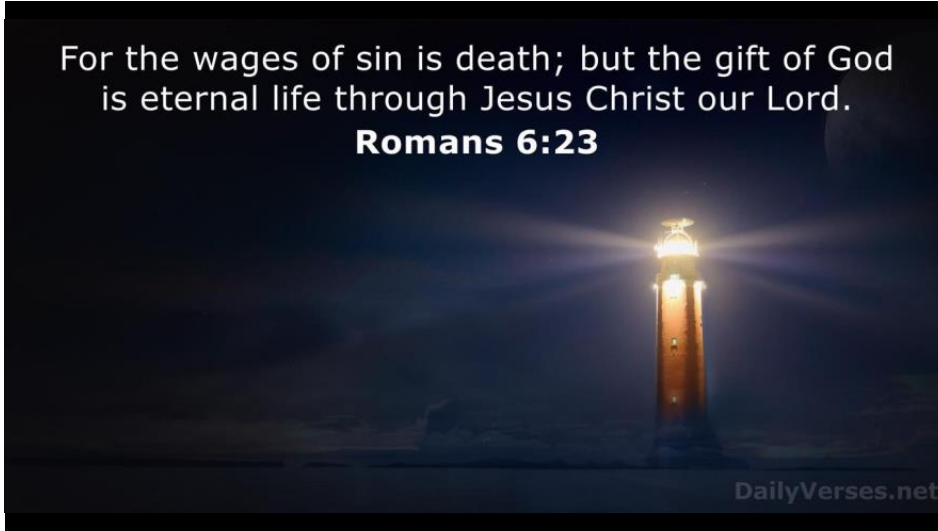
There is but one life – living in relationship with the triune God.

God sends the trumpet plagues in order to show to humanity the absurdity, the foolishness, the grave danger they are in because of their misplaced worship.

He does so because of his mercy. Krodel, p.207.

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God
is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 6:23



God spoke the truth in Romans 6:23 - the wages of sin will be paid.
But even now, even yet, the gift of God continues to be offered to all who repent
and believe the truth.

Parents, I know you know this.
But will you let me remind you.

The years when your children live at home are years where you invest time and
effort into them, teaching them skills, helping them learn to make good decisions,
helping them to set right priorities... and everything else that they will need in
order to live as adults.

But their greatest need and your great responsibility and challenge is to lead them
to orient their lives in God and to cultivate in them an all-consuming love for
God... so that they live...first and foremost.... as worshipers of God.

Nothing else is more important.

Parents you can't do this task alone.

You need a community of faith to which you and your children belong... a church
that shares your passion for God...whose people love God with all of their heart,
soul, mind and strength and who worships him fervently; a church whose people
love each other as Christ loves them; a church whose people understand they
have been recreated in the image of God... and not only embrace, but live out of
their new identity as servants of God who bless others in the name of Jesus.

This is the kind of church God would have us be...the kind of church we want to be.

Dear church... we all know this.. I simply remind us this morning... the Christian faith is not a calling to be a lone ranger – it is a calling to live in community... in such a way, that as the Wisdom teacher said – iron sharpens iron, and as the writer of Hebrews says, “we spur one another on to love and good deeds.”

As we live in these last days, in a culture where increasingly the futility of life without God is seen in starker and starker ways, we, the people of God... are called upon to display the life of heaven, the free gift of God which is given to all who trust in Jesus... and to announce the good news there is amnesty for all who turn their lives to God.

You could say Revelation 9 tells the bad news of the gospel... it gives a taste of life without God... and it is horrifying.

But no one needs to be devastated, tormented by the fallen angels of the Abyss. There is refuge in Jesus.

I can't explain why one of the thieves who hung beside Jesus rejected him. I can't explain why at the end of Revelation 9 so many still refuse to repent. But I do know this.

The other thief who hung beside Jesus asked to be remembered and was given this assurance – “today you will be with me in paradise.”

I do know this – if one confesses their sin to God, he is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse all who do so from the guilt of their sin.

This is why I can, why we can say this with all confidence.... As we go about our day to day lives, interacting with people in our circle of influence...

Come, experience the joy of Jesus' presence.

Come, taste the goodness of his salvation.

Come, let your heart find rest and peace in him.

Soon and very soon, these days of opportunity will end.
Today, if you hear his voice, run to him.
Jesus is coming soon!