

Week 3: The one who overturns rebellion (Revelation 8–11)

God has the throne (Rev. 4). The Lamb who was slain is raised and reigning (Rev. 5). He breaks the evils that locked up God's plans (Rev. 6). He's looking after the kingdom that began with Israel's tribes and became a multitude from every nation. His people serve the throne and celebrate the Lamb who saved them (Rev. 7).

Revelation 8–9: Who deals with oppression?

Each time the Lamb broke a seal, he revealed the evils that tied up God's scroll, the words God had written for his earthly realm. Six seals were broken in Chapter 6. Then there was a pause to take care of his people (Chapter 7). Now he breaks the final seal:

Revelation 8:1 (NIV)

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

That's different! No evil comes rushing out. No one is trying to conquer anyone, make war, starve people out, or gain control through death (6:1-8). No one is asserting their power by killing God's faithful witnesses (6:9-11). The rulers were trying to escape from his authority (6:12-17), while the multitudes who'd lived through the great suffering were celebrating the reign of the Lamb who rescued them (7:10). Heaven waits a moment, but this time no evil raises its ugly head against his reign (8:1).

But what about the injustices that have occurred all through history? What about the people who've suffered in wars, with children starving and people murdered under rulers like Hitler? All this has happened on God's watch. It's God's responsibility.

For so long God's people have been complaining about the injustice they've suffered. The martyrs cried out in a loud voice, "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*" (6:10) The prayers of the incensed saints have accumulated like smoking bowls of incense:

Revelation 8:2-6 (NIV)

² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³ Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. ⁴ The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.

⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. ⁶ Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

Before modern communication devices, trumpets were used to gain attention. The heavenly servants (angels) have seven announcements to make. They announce that the throne is dealing with the evils that occur on earth, at least in part:

Revelation 8:7-13 (NIV)

⁷ The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the **earth**. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

⁸ The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the **sea**. A third of the sea turned into blood, ⁹ a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰ The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the **rivers** and on the springs of water—¹¹ the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

¹² The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the **sun** was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

¹³ As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!”

This is frightening. One third of the land, the sea, the fresh waters, and the sky are struck down. Justice is a double-edged sword: both rescuing the oppressed and removing the oppressor. It's what God's people have long prayed for, e.g.:

Psalm 72:4: *May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor.*

Recompense and rescue are intertwined promises of the prophets:

- **Isaiah 35:4:** *Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with **vengeance**; with divine retribution he will come to **save** you.”*
- **Micah 5:15:** *“I will take **vengeance** in anger and wrath on the nations that have not obeyed me.”*
- **Jeremiah 51:6:** *Flee from Babylon! Run for your lives! Do not be destroyed because of her sins. It is time for the **LORD's vengeance**; he will repay her what she deserves.*

By our standards, God seems slow to deal with evil. 600 years after Babylon took God's people into exile, foreigners still ruled them. The prayers of God's people accumulated into large bowls before the heavenly throne, like *much incense* (verse 3).

God has been slow to act since the beginning. With the first murder, the family wanted vengeance, but God protected Cain (Genesis 4:15). Living away from the **LORD's** presence (4:16), Cain's family relied on vengeance for survival (4:23-24), while the family that relied on the life-giving God for survival *began to call on the name of the **LORD*** (4:25) since God would not let them take their own vengeance.³¹

³¹ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/23/how-far-does-the-kingdom-of-god-extend-genesis-416-26/>

But violence corrupts our humanity (Genesis 6:11),³² so God later permitted the community to take a killer's life (Genesis 9:6), even though that's not what he did with Cain.³³ The Sinai covenant limited retribution to *a life for a life* (Exodus 21:23), not *seventy-seven lives for a life* (Genesis 4:24). Yet, even the Torah asked God's people to call on him rather than take their own vengeance: "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay*" (Deuteronomy 32:35, quoted in Romans 12:19 and Hebrews 10:30).

The heavenly trumpeters announce that God is dealing with evil (verses 7-13). Did you notice the similarities to Moses announcing the plagues in Egypt? When Pharaoh refused to release God's people, the LORD exposed him as a fraud controlling nothing: the Nile, the creatures, the crops, the storms, the sun, and people's lives.

Greg Beale puts it like this:

The first five trumpets are patterned after five of the plagues of Exodus. The first trumpet (hail, fire, and blood) corresponds to the plague of hail and fire (Exod. 9:22–25); the second and third (poisoning of the sea and waters) to the plague on the Nile (Exod. 7:20–25); the fourth (darkness) to the plague of darkness (Exod. 10:21–23); and the fifth (locusts) to the plague of locusts (Exod. 10:12–15). As with the Egyptian plagues, the plagues punish hardness of heart, idolatry (since each plague had a judgment suited to a particular Egyptian god), and persecution of God's people.³⁴

That's Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 describes the next two trumpeters announcing God's justice. Then there's an interlude (10:1–11:18) before the seventh trumpet (just as happened with the seals).

Revelation 9:1-5 (NIV)

¹ The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. ² When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. ³ And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes.

Remember, these are apocalyptic visions, dealing with the question of how God confronts evil, in response to the prayers of his people. Rather than try to identify them with particular events on earth, hear them as promises that God is willing to overthrow evil. Scot McKnight explains:

The disciplinary nature of these gruesome, graphic acts permitted by God must be seen for what they are: answers to prayer for justice and acts of

³² <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/27/who-is-responsible-for-corrupting-gods-world-genesis-61-6/>

³³ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/06/what-about-capital-punishment-genesis-96/>

³⁴ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2015), 171.

God to persuade people to turn from their injustices and oppressions. That is, to come out of Babylon with its allegiances to the dragon and turn to God. An innumerable host will turn but not all. Sadly, Revelation 9:20–21 reveals that many resist the disciplines of God and refuse to repent of their idolatries, murders, “magic arts,” immoralities, and thefts. These resistances not only reveal that humans are agents with choice but that the acts are designed by God to open their eyes to injustices.³⁵

Scot was referring to these verses:

Revelation 9:20-21 (NIV)

²⁰ The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not **repent** of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ Nor did they **repent** of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

So, why has God been so slow to bring the peoples into submission to heaven's throne? While his suffering people cried out for justice, God's judgements have been limited and partial: *one third, five months*. Why? God wants the rebels to *repent*—to change their minds from rebelling against God's authority to recognizing the Lamb.

The extravagant forbearance and patience of God is purposeful: *God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance* (Romans 2:4). There's a reason God seems slow to fulfil his promise in bringing the world under his throne: *he's not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

But don't mistake God's patience for unwillingness to act:

Revelation 9:13-14 (NIV)

¹³ The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the four horns of the golden altar that is before God. ¹⁴ It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”

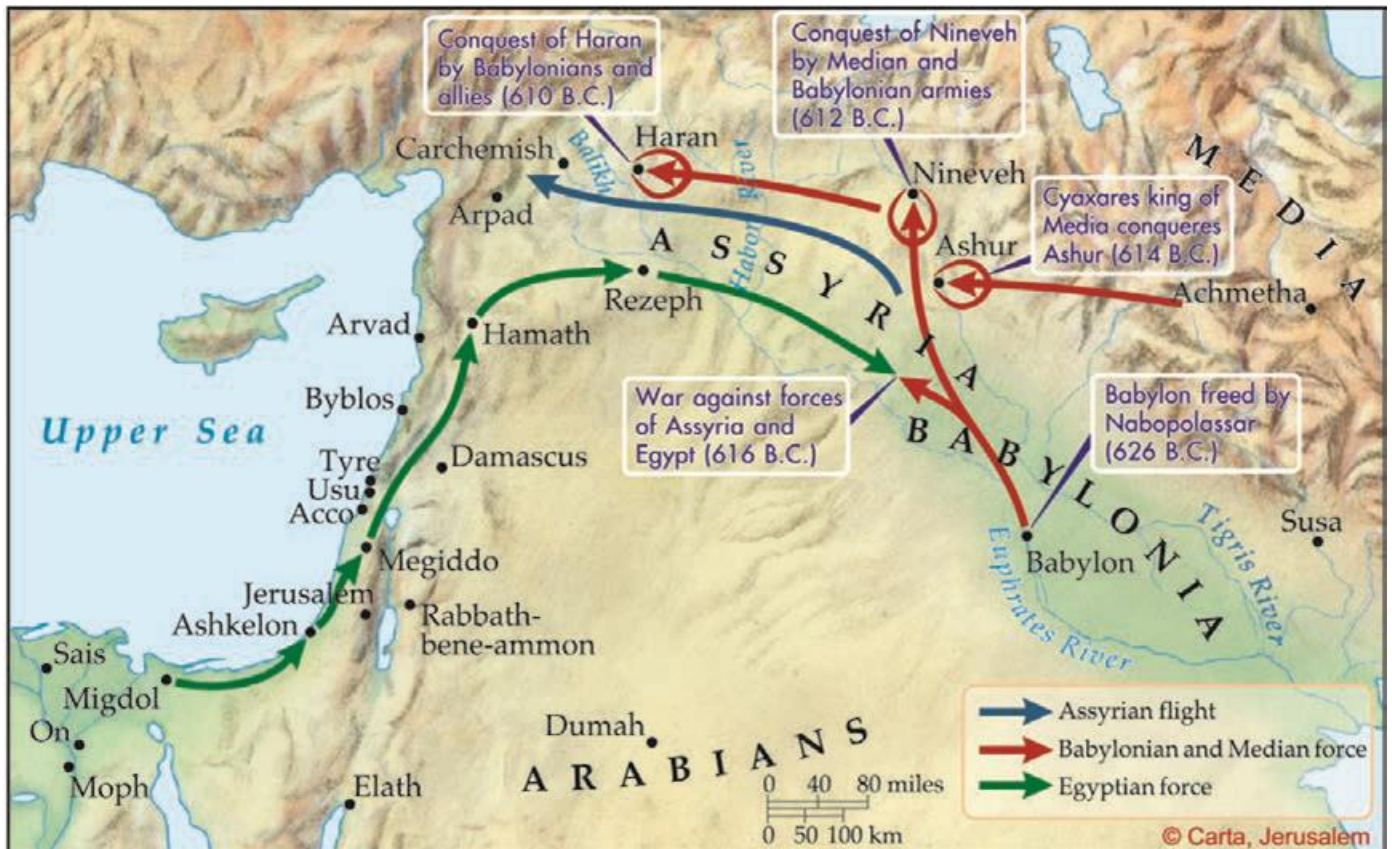
The Euphrates and the Tigris were the rivers of Babylon. Releasing the angels restrained at the Euphrates therefore opens the confrontation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the anti-God forces of his world (as in Revelation 16:12).

The Euphrates region plays a significant role in the story of Scripture:

- a) The Tigris and Euphrates began in God's garden, as his life-giving providence for creation (Genesis 2:14). In response to the rebellion, God stationed angels there *to guard the way to tree of life* (Genesis 3:24). God knows how to open the way to the life-giving river and the tree of life (Revelation 22:1).
- b) In that region, Assyria and Babylon established their kingdoms based on war and grasping God's power into human hands (Genesis 10:10-12; 11:1-4).
- c) God called Abraham to leave that region, for a land where God would establish a prototype nation that would restore his reign to the nations (Genesis 12:1-9).

³⁵ Scot McKnight, *Revelation: Witness and Worship in the World* (HarperChristian, 2024), 145.

- d) In David and Solomon's time, the Euphrates was the boundary between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world (Exodus 23:31; Deuteronomy 11:24; Joshua 1:4; 1 Samuel 8:3; 1 Kings 4:21-24; 2 Chronicles 9:26).
- e) When the kingdom fell, God's people were ruled from *beyond the Euphrates River* (Ezra 4:10, 11, 16, 17, 20; 5:3, 6; 6:6, 8, 13; 7:21, 25; 8:36; Nehemiah 2:7, 9; 3:7), as they waited for God to restore them as the kingdom of God.



Assyria and Babylon: beyond the Euphrates. Paul H. Wright, *Understanding Biblical Kingdoms & Empires* (Carta Jerusalem, 2010), 21.

God has been incredibly patient with the nations. They've worshipped gods of their own making. They've served the evil powers behind those gods (verse 20). They've *murdered* their opponents. They've used *sorcery* to control people. They've taken whatever they wanted: raping and pillaging each other (*immorality* and *thefts*). Instead of turning to God (*repenting*), they abused God's patience by doing more evil (v. 21).

Revelation 10: Whose word rules in heaven?

Revelation 10:1–4 (NIV)

¹ Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ² He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³ and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. ⁴ And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."

Heaven's authority over the earth is unequivocal. The mighty angel (verse 1) has his feet firmly planted on the earth and the sea (verse 2). Heaven has much more to say, but for the first time John is told not to report it (verse 4).

Instead, the angel says the delay is over (verse 6), and John is given a different scroll (verse 8). Jesus already commissioned John as a prophet (Revelation 1), but now John is recommissioned:

Revelation 10:9-11 (NIV)

⁹ So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but 'in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.'" ¹⁰ I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. ¹¹ Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings."

This is the same prophetic commissioning God gave Ezekiel. Ezekiel found God's words *as sweet as honey in my mouth* (Ezekiel 3:3). But Ezekiel *went in bitterness ... deeply distressed* as he realized the message was that Babylon would destroy Jerusalem because Israel was so unresponsive (Ezekiel 3:14-15). John had this sick feeling in his stomach as he realized what God was saying about the nations and kings that resisted heaven's decrees.

Verse 11 explains John's new commission. Where he has previously seen the drama of salvation from the perspective of heaven (throne, Lamb, seals, trumpets), his new commission addresses earth's perspective of earth: *about many peoples, nations, languages and kings*.

From earth's perspective, how heaven would resolve the evils on earth has been a mystery (verse 7). The delay is over. John is recommissioned to see how God deals with the oppressive rulers and releases his people. We'll hear the answer to the apocalyptic question in the next chapter when the final trumpet sounds (11:15).

Does that make sense of Chapter 10?

Revelation 11: Who proclaims his word on earth?

Before the seventh trumpet sounds (verse 15), there's some measuring to do:

Revelation 11:1-3 (NIV)

¹ I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshippers.

² But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months.

³ And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."

This vision echoes Ezekiel 40–42. Ezekiel saw the temple site being measure for a replacement after Babylon destroyed the first temple. For 70 years, there had been no morning and evening sacrifices and no annual festivals. Then in 515 BC they dedicated the second temple that lasted until Rome destroyed it in AD 70.

But the temple was closed for three years (168–164 BC) when their ruler (Antiochus Epiphanes IV) set up an idol there and sacrificed a pig. Judas Maccabeus led a revolt, and they rededicated the temple with a festival of lights (Hannukah, John 10:22).

The apocalyptic chapters of Daniel describe this interruption of worship as: *a time, times, and half a time* (i.e. 3.5 years, 7:25; 12:7); *half of a seven* (9:27); *2300 evenings and mornings* (i.e. 1150 days without evening and morning sacrifices) (8:14); *1290 days or 1335 days* (12:11-12). (Solar/lunar calendars and start/end events affect the count.)

Jesus reused Daniel's phrase about an *abomination* (idol) *desolating* the temple (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) to warn the Judeans to flee when they saw armies trampling Jerusalem (Matthew 25:15-20), probably referring to Rome's invasion in 66–73 AD.

John the seer used phrases from all these contexts to describe his vision in Rev 11:

- the destruction of the first temple by Babylon (Ezekiel's measuring),
- the destruction of the second temple by Rome (Jesus' use of Daniel's phrase),
- the temporary desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV (Daniel's 1260 days).

All three contexts are about the nations trampling on God's holy temple and city, trying to force the people who want to serve God to serve them instead. The point is that God does not prevent the invaders from trampling his holy people, but the invaders do not last. So even while the nations trample God's people, God has living witnesses to his authority.

The faithful witness (11:1-14)

John is told to measure *the temple of God and the altar with its worshippers* (verse 1). Of course, the worshippers **are** the temple where God lives now. And what they're offering to God at the altar is *their bodies as a living sacrifice* (Romans 12:1).

John is told not to include *the outer court* (verse 2), i.e. not to treat the Court of the Gentiles as holy space. The nations were permitted in this space, but they showed no respect for the boundaries God set when they invaded in AD 70.

So, God calls his suffering people to stand as living testimony to his authority in a world where they suffer at the hands of the nations:

Revelation 11:3-4 (NIV)

³ And I will appoint my two **witnesses**, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴ They are "the two olive trees" and the two lampstands, and "they stand before the Lord of the earth."

A *witness* gives evidence. Their witness is about God's authority, Christ's kingship. "Witness" is *martyros*, the word "martyr" in English. Living as evidence of Jesus' kingship in a world where other rulers claim to be in power can cost you your life. That's what happened to Jesus. That's what happens to these two in verse 7.

Remember John's first vision where the resurrected king stood in the midst of the *lampstands* (1:12-20)? Like their Lord, these two witnesses *stand before the Lord of all the earth*. That's their testimony, just as it was the testimony of the seven churches.

The lampstand represents God's presence in the world, and the Holy Spirit is the oil for the lamp. The two witnesses are like Elijah and Moses: Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies (2 Kings 1:1-14); Moses announced plagues on Pharaoh:

Revelation 11:5–6 (NIV)

⁵ If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die.

⁶ They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

Elijah and Moses were prophets, delivering the word of the LORD. Together they represent the Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Testament revelation of God. They both delivered messages about God's authority to powers that resisted God:

- Pharaoh tried to kill Moses as a baby and as an adult (Exodus 1–2), and Moses was terrified when God commissioned him to speak to Pharaoh (Exodus 3, 6).
- Elijah lived as a fugitive with the king and queen of Israel trying to kill him (1 Kings 17; 19:2).

In the same way, the community of the Spirit represent the authority of the Lord who was crucified in the very city that rejected his authority:

Revelation 11:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸ Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified.

What a tragedy! *The city of the Great King* (Psalm 48:2) crucified its Lord, as rebellious as Sodom, as oppressive as Egypt. They treat his servants the same way, without even a decent burial.

But the life-giving authority they represent raises them up, like their Lord:

Revelation 11:11 (NIV)

But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them.

Like our Lord, the church is not called to fight our enemies. We're called to give faithful witness to Christ's kingship in the face of rulers who kill to keep their power. Even in the face of death, the evidence of God's faithful people stands.

The seventh trumpet (11:15-19)

Finally, we get the seventh trumpet! We heard the first six in Chapters 8–9, with an interlude in Chapters 10 and 11 before the final one. That happened with the seals as well. Jesus broke the first six seals in chapters 6, and then Chapter 7 described how God was caring for his people, before the final seal was opened in Chapter 8.

This strategy—the delay before the final one—underscores the meaning of the book:

- With the cross, the power of evil is broken. Jesus is breaking the seals that have blocked God's purposes, but there's a delay before the evils are finally broken, a delay when the martyrs die and the rulers remain evil.
- Heaven is already announcing judgement on evil, and partial judgements are in place, but there's a delay—an opportunity for repentance—before the reign of terror in the kingdoms of the world is over.

The delay is purposeful but temporary, as God calls people to repent. But eventually the terror caused by the kingdom of the world's rebellion against God will be over:

Revelation 11:15 (NIV)

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

"The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever."

This was always the goal. Ever since Assyria/Babylon established their kingdom through war (Genesis 10:10) with their attempt to take God's power into human hands (Genesis 11:4), God has been working through his people to restore the reign of God to the earth (Genesis 12:1-3). Reestablishing God's reign through his anointed has been quite the rollercoaster ride (Psalm 2:2), as the kingdom of God through David rose and fell, and rose again in the Christ (the LORD'S Anointed).

Heaven has not been inactive. That's what the trumpets have said. There's been quite the delay as God called people to repentance, but all that God intended in the beginning is restored in the end—in Christ.

The 24 elders who participated in God's authority in Old and New Testament times now declare their gratitude for God finally accomplishing all that he promised:

Revelation 11:16-19 (NIV)

¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
the One who is and who was,
because you have taken your great power
and have begun to reign.

¹⁸ The nations were angry, and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants the prophets
and your people who revere your name, both great and small— and
for destroying those who destroy the earth."

¹⁹ Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.

All the echoes of the failed kingship (verse 18) and hopes and fears of the Sinai covenant (verse 19) are finally resolved as the heavenly dwelling place of God (temple) is opened to humanity, a cleansed earth, sharing in the life of God.

So what?

The final trumpet brings us to something similar to Revelation 21, where God's governance has returned to earth (21:2), *God's dwelling place is now among the people* (21:3), and the death's reign is over (21:4), because the faithful and true ruler who has always had the throne has remade everything (21:5).

We've reached the middle of Revelation. In Revelation 4:1, John was invited to see from heaven's perspective. He saw the eternal throne (Chapter 4). He saw the Lamb (Chapter 5) breaking the evils that bound up God's world (Chapter 6). He saw God caring for his people (Chapter 7). He saw heaven confronting the evils on earth (Chapters 8-9).

Then John was commissioned to tell this story again (Chapter 10) from our perspective, *about many peoples, nations, languages and kings* (10:11). This world is where the living witnesses suffer and even die at the hands of those who kill for control (Chapter 11), and yet *the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah* (11:15).

The second half of Revelation will therefore focus on what's happening here on earth. The camera angle changes (from bird's eye view to worm's eye view), but the story still reaches the same conclusion: a renewed world, under heaven's reign.

Watch for that change in perspective as you **read Revelation 12–15** for next week.