

The Seven Thunders

A New Church Day sermon

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, June 11, 2023

“And He cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars; and when He cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices.” Revelation 10:3

Not much is usually made of this incident in Revelation, when the seven thunders uttered their voices. It passes by quickly in the narrative. But it is one of the key turning points in the book. People usually just wonder what it is that the thunders said, and why John was not allowed to write it down. As it turns out, what they said was not nearly as interesting as why their words were sealed.

The incident comes near the halfway point in the book. Up to this point in John’s message to the Seven Churches he has described what he saw in heaven, as first seven seals on a scroll are opened and then seven trumpets are sounded. We are told that these scenes depict the way that the Last Judgment was to unfold, as seen by John in the spiritual world.

The opened seals portray the state of the church, and the seven trumpets portray the terrible harm that has been done because the love and faith that the church was to embody have been lost. For example, when the seals are opened horses of various colors with their riders appear, showing that there are many good people in the world who love and understand the Word, but many others who are not so good. When the trumpets blow, terrible scenes of destruction are revealed: fire and hail, seas turned to blood, locusts covering the earth, and people killed. These describe what happens when many fail to understand, love and obey the Word.

Our story takes place just as the seventh trumpet is about to sound. It is the first of a two-part interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, both parts illustrating the situation in the church as the Last Judgment takes place.

In our story John sees what is called just “another mighty angel” coming down from heaven. We are told that this is actually “the Lord in His divine majesty and power.” He is clothed with a cloud, has a rainbow over His head, and is holding a book. The cloud stands for His divinity as seen on the natural plane. The rainbow stands for this divinity on the spiritual plane, or the divine truth seen there. The little book in His hand is the Word as to a particular doctrine (*Apocalypse Revealed 466, 469*).



Throughout the book of Revelation the Lord appears repeatedly in many different forms. He is the One on the throne, He is the Lamb, He is the Angel on the cloud, He is the One on the White Horse. Here

He is the mighty Angel clothed in a cloud. What He does here is a response to the opening of the seven seals and the sounding of the trumpets.

When the seventh seal was opened there was silence in heaven for about half an hour (*Revelation 8:1*). We are told that this was the response of the angels to this news about the state of the world:

“The silence in heaven means nothing else than an astonishment there over people who claim to have faith and yet are in such a state.” Apocalypse Revealed 389

In this prelude to the sounding of the seventh trumpet the Lord has a similar response, except that instead of being silent we read that He roared like a lion. This describes “a grievous lamentation that the church was taken from Him.”

“A lamentation over this is what the angel's roaring like a lion symbolizes; for a lion roars when it sees its enemies and is attacked by them, and when it

sees its young or its prey carried off. The same is comparatively the case with the Lord when He sees His church carried off by devils.” *Apocalypse Revealed* 471

So the Lord’s response to this news, which of course was not news to Him at all, is much more aggressive than that of the angels. A lion’s roar means trouble for its enemies, and the seven thunders spell out exactly what form that trouble would take.

The thunders are actually the solution to the lament. The seven seals and the seven trumpets describe the problem, the Lord roars in grief, and immediately has the answer to that problem in the seven thunders. The answer is in His hand.

As we read in our lesson, the seven thunders mean that “the Lord has disclosed throughout the whole of heaven what is in the little book.” It then explains that the little book is the work “*The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Lord*” which was published in 1763, just a few years before *Apocalypse Revealed* was written. In the text the entire table of contents of that book is then given, almost exactly as it appears in the book.

John is naturally glad to hear this – understanding that the words of the thunders are the longed-for resolution to the terrible scenes that he has been witnessing.

Why is John told to seal up these words?

But instead of proceeding to deploy what the thunders have said, and the power of what is in the book, a voice from heaven tells John to seal it up. Why is this?

The explanation in our lesson is that the words were sealed because “*present within were such things as would not yet be accepted.*” That is, the book would not be accepted at this point, and so it could not do its work. It goes on to say:

“If that doctrine were to be received by others than people possessing charity and its accompanying faith...it would be rejected not only by them, but through them by everyone else as well. And if not rejected, still it would be falsified, even profaned.”

The issue here is about the timing and the process of the Last Judgment and the beginning of the New Church. The book and the teachings it contains are not a magic wand that will suddenly resolve the issues revealed as the seals were opened and the trumpets sounded.

Something similar is said in *Spiritual Experiences* 4422, written about twenty years earlier, when Swedenborg was informed that only four copies of the first volume of the *Arcana Coelestia* had been sold in the previous two months.

“When this was made known to the angels, they were indeed surprised, but they said that it must be left to the Providence of the Lord, and that it is such that it compels no one - which could have been done, but that it is not fitting that any

others should read it first than those who have faith, and that this is also known from the Lord's coming into the world, who also could have compelled them to receive His words, and Himself, but compelled no one, as was also the case afterwards by means of the apostles. But still those were found who received, being those who had faith, to whom the apostles were also sent.” *Spiritual Experiences* 4422

John does not write down what the thunders said, and the point is further showed by what happens next. The angel makes a loud declaration that “*there shall be no more time*” and that when the seventh trumpet sounds “*the mystery of God would be concluded.*” That is, time is running out for Christianity. We are told that this means “*that there will be no church or any state of the church unless people acknowledge one God, and that the Lord is that God*” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 476). The case is urgent.

Why is the little book bitter?

John is then told to take the book that it is in the angel’s hand and eat it. When he does this he finds that it is sweet as honey in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach. The message is that while many things about the doctrine of the Lord are attractive, other aspects are not so easily accepted. Specifically:

“This means that accepting the doctrine from an



acknowledgment that the Lord is the Savior and Redeemer is pleasing and agreeable, but acknowledging that He alone is God of heaven and earth, and that His humanity is Divine, is displeasing and vexatious, owing to their falsifications.” Apocalypse Revealed 481

That is, it is one thing to believe that there is a God who loves us and will save us, but it is another thing to accept that the Lord Jesus Christ is that God and that we must obey what He says in His Word. We read:

“So it came to pass, and thus it was shown, how this doctrine would be received before those people meant by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet were removed.” Apocalypse Revealed 482

Despite this bitterness, John was directed to continue to prophesy *“about peoples, nations, tongues, and many kings.”* What follows is a second story, a second interlude before the seventh trumpet sounds, which makes the message even clearer.

The Two Witnesses and the Seventh Trumpet

This next story, in Revelation 11, is about the Two Witnesses, which are these same doctrines about the Lord. They preach, and although they have great power their message is not only not received, but they are killed. Again, the message would not be received *“before those people meant by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet were removed.”*

The parallel with the Lord’s crucifixion is clear, an act representing a final rejection of the Lord and exposing the true nature of those who did it. It is the culmination of everything that has happened in the book up to this point, the seven seals and the six trumpets, and now this, showing the nature and the source of the problems afflicting Christianity.

But of course, the Lord cannot be killed, and neither can these Two Witnesses. They are resurrected, called up into heaven, there is a tremendous earthquake – and then the seventh trumpet sounds.

The trumpet sounds because the case has now been made. The response in heaven is as if the battle has now been won.

“And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” Revelation 11:15

All of this sets the stage for the rest of the book.

The doctrine of the Lord is the answer to humanity’s problems, but that doctrine is not easily accepted. The doctrine leads to a life of love and charity, but it cannot be accepted except by those in a life of love and charity. It is a circular problem which can only be solved over a period of time.

When this doctrine is first heard from the Seven Thunders it is immediately sealed because it would not be accepted and would invite controversy and disbelief. When John ingests this doctrine in the little book it makes him feel sick. When the Two Witnesses preach it, they are killed, but rise again. The same line of thought continues in chapter 12 as the Woman Clothed with the Sun appears and this same doctrine – and in fact the entire doctrine of the New Church (*see Apocalypse Revealed 543*) – is brought into the world as the Male Child that she gives birth to. The doctrine and those who espouse it face immediate attack, but this time their defenders come out in force. Michael and his angels, and eventually the Lord Himself on a white horse, defeat the dragon and his allies, paving the way for the New Jerusalem to descend and the New World begin.

The story of the Seven Thunders and why their message was sealed is a message to us about gradual change and about the gradual acceptance of the truth. The vicious circle of disbelief and bad behavior is not easy to break, but happens a little at a time. We celebrate it at this time of year, in the incremental progress marked by graduations and things such as our June 19th festivities next week.

We often wonder where we are in this long process, but it is important to understand that this same progression happens to each person individually as well as to groups collectively. We can’t hear the truth unless there is love in our heart, and we can’t have love in our heart unless we are willing to hear the truth. It seems like a conundrum, but there is always a way forward as the Lord creates the New Jerusalem in each person a little at a time.

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying.” Isaiah 65:17-19

AMEN

Readings from the Word

Revelation 10

I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire. ² He had in his hand a little book open, and he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³ and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars; and when he cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices. ⁴ Now when the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "*Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them.*" ⁵ Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his hand to heaven ⁶ and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things that are in it, the earth and the things that are in it, and the sea and the things that are in it, that there should be no more time, ⁷ but in the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, the mystery of God would be concluded, as He declared to His servants the prophets.

⁸ Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, "*Go, take the little book that is open in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the earth.*" ⁹ So I went to the angel and said to him, "*Give me the little book.*" And he said to me, "*Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter; but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.*" ¹⁰ Then I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter. ¹¹ And he said to me, "*You must prophesy again about peoples, nations, tongues, and many kings.*"



Apocalypse Revealed 472, 473

And when he cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices. This symbolically means that the Lord has disclosed throughout the whole of heaven what is in the little book. This is the symbolic meaning, because we read next that John wished to write what the seven thunders said, but that he was told from heaven to seal those things up and not to write them, and later that he ate the little book, which in his mouth was as sweet as honey, but made his stomach bitter. The symbolic meaning is that present within were such things as would not yet be accepted. The reason may be seen in the next number. But now I will reveal what the little book had in it. The little book had in it the same contents as found from beginning to end in The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Lord.

473. "*Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them.*" This means that these things must indeed be disclosed, but they are not accepted until after those people meant by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet have been cast out of the world of spirits, because it would be dangerous before then. The voices uttered by the seven thunders are declarations expressing...the essential doctrine of the New Church. In the natural sense, to write means to commit to paper and thus to record for posterity; but in the spiritual sense, to write means, symbolically, to commit to the heart for its acceptance. Sealing something up, therefore, and not writing it means not to commit it to the heart or accept it until after the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet have been cast out of the world of spirits, because it would be dangerous before then...Consequently, as regards the doctrine...symbolized by the little book's being open - if, before the dragon was cast out, that doctrine were to be received by others than people possessing charity and its accompanying faith...it would be rejected not only by them, but through them by everyone else as well. And if not rejected, still it would be falsified, even profaned.

[2] The reality of this is clearly apparent from the following chapters in Revelation when viewed in their sequence, in which we are told that they killed the Lord's two witnesses (*chapter 11*); that the dragon stood before the woman ready to give birth, to devour her child, and that after it fought with Michael, it pursued the woman (*chapter 12*); that the two beasts, one rising up from the sea and one from the earth, made common cause with him (*chapter 13*); that they gathered their followers together to do battle at a place called Armageddon (*chapter 16*); and finally that they gathered the nations Gog and Magog to do battle (*chapter 20*); but that the dragon, beast and false prophet were cast into the lake of fire and brimstone; and that after this took place, the New Church, which was to be the Lamb's bride, came down out of heaven (*chapters 21, 22*).



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