

The Woes of the Trumpet Blasts

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in midheaven, saying 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!" (Rev 8:13)

The Bible portrays eschatology in very ominous terms as exemplified by the passage above; but, what does it really mean, "woe to those who dwell on the earth?" How is this term used in the Old Testament? How is it used by Jesus Christ? And what is the significance of the apostle John's reporting of woes in the book of Revelation?

The Hebrew term "hôy," from which the English translation is "woe," originally was phonetically derived to imitate an exclamation of pain or anger like "oh", "ah", or "alas!" The best method of understanding "woe" is to observe who is speaking and who is the subject of the woe.

1. When expressed by an individual or group who is the subject of the woe, "woe" is meant usually as an expression of grief or despair.

The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe (**hôy**) to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe (**hôy**) to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. (1 Sam 4:7-8)

In this instance, it is used as a noun with the same meaning:

Who has woe (**hôy**)? Who has sorrow?
Who has contentions? Who has complaining?
Who has wounds without cause?
Who has redness of eyes? (Prov 23:29)

2. When expressed by an individual observing the calamity of another without any moral judgment, "woe" is an expression of sympathetic sorrow for pain and suffering. The Greek translation for the Hebrew "hôy" is "ouai."

For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe (**hôy**) to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. (Ecc 4:10)

But woe (Greek: **ouai**) to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! (Matt 24:19; Mark 13:17; Luke 21:23)

3. When expressed by an individual observing the commission of evil, "woe" takes on a more complex and nuanced expression. There is a sense of sadness, almost like a sympathetic sorrow; but, there is an emphasis, a declaration of condemnation, with the sense of divine judgment of the evil.

The expression of their faces bears witness against them,
And they display their sin like Sodom;
They do not even conceal it.
Woe (**hôy**) to them!
For they have brought evil on themselves.
Say to the righteous that it will go well with them,
For they will eat the fruit of their actions.
Woe (**hôy**) to the wicked! It will go badly with him,
For what he deserves will be done to him. (Isa 3:9-11)

The Woes of the Trumpet Blasts (page 2)

Woe (**hōy**) to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the Lord. (Jer 23:1)

Thus says the Lord God, "Woe (**hōy**) to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing. (Ezek 13:3)

Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you, Chorazin! Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13)

But woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it." One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, "Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too." But He said, "Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and it was your fathers who killed them. So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build their tombs. For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.' Woe (Greek: **ouai**) to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering." (Luke 11:42-52; Matt 23:13-29)

With this understanding of woe, the woes of the three trumpet blasts convey a sense of sadness with an emphasis on condemnation, because the three woes herald judgment upon the disbelieving world.

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in midheaven, saying 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!" (Rev 8:13)

Up until to the fifth trumpet, God's wrath of judgment was not focused on causing physical injury upon human beings; now the last three trumpets will bring torment and death upon all of mankind on earth.

Woe	Judgment
"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!" (Rev 8:13)	The fifth trumpet sends an angel from heaven to earth to open the "bottomless pit" with the key he was given. From the abyss comes "the smoke of a great furnace" which darkens the sun, and the angel does three things (Rev 9:1-11): 1. Gives the locusts a power like a scorpion such as a tail that stings and hurts people for five months. 2. Restricts the locusts from hurting the grass, any vegetation, or any tree. 3. Restricts the locusts from stinging any of the 144,000 sealed bond servants and causing any death of those they afflict.

Woe	Judgment
<p>The first woe is past; behold, two woes are still coming after these things. (Rev 9:12)</p>	<p>The angel of the sixth trumpet releases the four bound angels at the Euphrates River who are limited to kill 1/3 of the population. In consideration of the fourth seal, in which 25% of the population was killed, the death of 1/3 of the surviving 75% leaves at most 50% of the original population before the tribulation began (Rev 9:13-19).</p> <p>The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands... and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts (Rev 9:20-21).</p>
<p>The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly. (Rev 11:14)</p>	<p>The seventh trumpet heralds the last of God's judgment portrayed by the appearance of the reapers: a) Jesus Christ, sitting on the cloud wearing a golden crown, wields a sharp sickle (Rev 14:1-16), and b) an angel, who came out of the heavenly temple, wields a sharp sickle (Rev 14:18-19). Angels reap by gathering the wicked whose sins are now ripe for judgment.</p> <p>The mention of the third woe (Rev 11:14) attempts to describe the enormity of the reaping by the angels. The reaping includes the dispensation of bowls (Rev 16:1-21) and ends at the conclusion of Armageddon when Jesus trends the wine press of God's great wrath (Rev 19:15) and produces the vast amount of blood (Rev 14:20).</p>

More than just an expression, the above woes of Revelation are notable for their function of announcing God's judgment. But even more striking are the woes mentioned at the end of Revelation, which use the expression "woe" in a manner not seen anywhere else in the Bible.

In contrast to an expression of grief or of concern for the pain and suffering of another, "woe" is used as a self-centered grief, an expression of self-pity, because one's source and means of wealth is being destroyed.

The woe of national leaders:

And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, 'Woe (**ouai**), woe (**ouai**), the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.' (Rev 18:9-10)

The woe of merchant distributors:

The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, saying, 'Woe (**ouai**), woe (**ouai**), the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls; for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!' (Rev 18:15-17)

The woe of the shipping industry:

And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea, stood at a distance, and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, 'What city is like the great city?' And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, 'Woe (**ouai**), woe (**ouai**), the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!' (Rev 18:17-19)

The Woes of the Trumpet Blasts (page 4)

The apostle John is recording the woes of non-Believers who do not realize that they are being judged for their disbelief in the reality of God and the forgiveness of sins through His Son. Seduced by the opulent lifestyle (i.e. “strong city, adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth”) and avaricious commerce, these surviving non-Believers valued gross materialism and worshiped money.

At the end of human history, the only thing that mattered was the loss of wealth.

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).