

# The Silver Trumpets

Numbers 10:1–10

When our family moved to Lansing 36 years ago, we had to get used to the monthly testing of the citywide alarm system. It always goes off the first Saturday of the month, promptly at 1 PM. It is loud, jarring and painful to the ears! In the event of an actual emergency, such as the sighting of a tornado—which did happen about twenty years ago—the alarms are activated. They are designed so they are impossible to ignore: *This is a dire emergency! Immediately drop what you're doing and flee to safety!*

The silver trumpets described in today's text, like the alarms in our neighborhood—were intended to get people's attention. They were made of fine silver and designed to emit a shrill, penetrating sound that could be heard at a distance. They were different from the ram's horn (שֹׁפָר), also translated as trumpet. The ram's horn had a mournful call, while the silver trumpet produced a bright, penetrating sound. The trumpet described in our text today was made of hammered silver formed into a long, slender tube with a bell on the far end to release the sound. These trumpets were for the exclusive use of the priests.

In verse 1 it is the LORD himself who is speaking. He speaks to Moses and tells him to make the trumpets. Since this is a specialized work, I think it is safe to assume that the actual crafting of the the silver trumpets was performed by a qualified metal-worker under Moses' supervision, such as had been the case with Bezalel and Aholiab (Ex. 31), who oversaw the construction of the tabernacle. In any case, God's assigning this task personally to Moses indicated its importance. This was no incidental or trivial detail but a God-given responsibility that needed to be carried out exactly as ordered. The magnitude of this task is underscored in verse 8 and 10, where the LORD says that the crafting of the two silver trumpets “shall be to you as an *ordinance* forever throughout your generations,” and the blowing of the trumpets “shall be a memorial for you before your God.” The word “ordinance” is derived from a verb meaning *cut in*, or *inscribe*. This was a solemn duty that Moses could not omit but for which he would ultimately give account.

Let's put this in its historical context. As we have noted before, this fourth book of Moses takes place “in the Wilderness of Sinai” (Num. 1:1). “In the Wilderness” is actually the title of the book in the Hebrew Bible. It is part of a continued story. Way back in Genesis 12, God had chosen Abram and his “seed.” I'm going to quote the King James Version here, as it the most literal and shows the biblical pattern more clearly. The LORD said to Abram (Abraham), “Unto thy *seed* will I give this land” (Gen. 12:7). God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's “*seed*.” Abraham's “seed” was to inherit the land of Canaan. The question is, Who are Abraham's “seed?” Fortunately, there is no mistaking what is meant, since the Bible tells us explicitly. We must let the Bible interpret itself. Scripture interprets

Scripture. God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his “seed” (Gen. 12:7). Galatians 3 makes clear that the “seed” is *singular*—Christ.<sup>1</sup> Later Scripture interprets the Old Testament use of the term explicitly: “Now to Abraham and his *seed* were the promises made. He saith not, And to *seeds*, as of many; but as of one, And to thy *seed*, which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Paul identifies that “seed” not as Abraham’s numerous physical descendants but as a singular Seed—that is, Christ.

So many well-meaning Christians have been taught—wrongly!—that Genesis 15, where God repeats and expands upon his earlier words and says, “Unto thy *seed* have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates,” refers to the modern nation-state of Israel. Mike Huckabee, the U.S. ambassador to Israel who is also a Baptist minister, and attended seminary for one year before dropping out, says Israel is entitled to the entire Middle East. In answer to an interviewer’s statement, “You have said it three times that God gave this land to this people and so it is entirely fair for me . . . to ask what land are you talking about because I just read Genesis 15, as I have many times, and that land I think it says from the Nile to the Euphrates, which is once again basically the entire Middle East.” The interviewer continued: “So God gave that land to his people, the Jews, or he didn’t. You’re saying he did. What does that mean? Does Israel have the right to that land? Because you’re appealing to Genesis. You’re saying that’s the original deed?” Huckabee paused before replying: “It would be fine if they took it all.”<sup>2</sup>

Here is the U.S. ambassador to Israel, representing the United States of America, giving, as it were, the official position of the United States, stating that the modern nation-state of Israel, which didn’t even exist 4,000 years ago, when God spoke to Abraham, can *take*—that is, wage war against, and defeat, and overrun, with U.S. help—all the Middle Eastern countries between the Nile and the Euphrates. That would include parts of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, as well as the Palestinian territories. In the U.S. ambassador to Israel’s opinion, “It would be *fine* if [the modern nation-state of Israel] took it *all*”—all that territory! This view is based on the erroneous understanding that Abraham’s *physical* descendants, who for the most part *reject* Christ, are the *true* beneficiaries of the promises of God. It would be to state that those who *reject* God’s Messiah are preferred over those who *acknowledge* him as Savior and Lord, who look to him as the Author and Finisher of our faith—that is, Christians. It would be to state that *Jews*, not Christians, are God’s true people! Obviously, this biblical interpretation ignores the true import of Galatians 3 (which states: “Know ye therefore that *they which are of faith*, the same are the children of Abraham,”

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrew: זֶרַע, *zera’*, Greek: σπέρμα *sperma* (LXX and NT)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/u-ambassador-mike-huckabee-says-001809344.html> accessed 8-22-26

and “they which be of *faith* are blessed with faithful Abraham,” and “if ye be *Christ*’s, then are ye Abraham’s *seed*, and heirs according to the promise”). Ignoring the explicit teaching of Galatians, and adopting Judaic interpretation of Holy Scripture, has far-reaching implications. It is in effect a renunciation of the *church*—those chosen in *Christ* before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)—as the true people of God.

The Bible clearly says that “the just shall live by *faith*” and that “without *faith* it is impossible to please him.”<sup>3</sup> Yet dispensationalist Christians, who are largely *outside* the organized church—who do not acknowledge “*the church*” (as in: “Christ loved *the church*, and gave himself for it”<sup>4</sup>), but only unaffiliated, totally independent, local “*churches*” (plural)—believe that God’s heart is *for* those who reject his Son in unbelief, and *against* those who love him and worship him through the mediation of the divine Son of God. This is absolutely mind-boggling and upends the church’s historic understanding of the Holy Bible.

Genesis 15, which we cited a few moments ago, records that God told Abram (KJV, which consistently uses the key word “seed”): “Know of a surety that *thy seed* shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. . . . But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” God foretells that Abraham’s “seed” would be slaves in Egypt for four hundred years, but God would ultimately bring them back to Canaan. If you know the biblical story, you know that Jacob’s family did in fact move to Egypt. It was part of God’s plan to save his people from starvation when the Middle East underwent an epic famine. Israel settled in the part of Egypt called Goshen, and prospered there until a new Pharaoh came into power who “knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8). But God raised up a deliverer, Moses, who led his people out of Egypt into the desert to worship God at Mount Sinai. Now, “in the wilderness,” God has given his law to his people, and at his command they have built the tabernacle. God has taken residence within it, represented by the glory-cloud, which we discussed last week. The glory-cloud is the visible representation of the presence of God among his people, and at this moment in salvation-history it looms over the tabernacle as a great pillar pointing heavenward. But it will soon move, and Israel will begin its 39-year journey through the wilderness to take possession of the land of Canaan. In this it foreshadows the church in every age, which has a heavenly inheritance but lives in the here-and-now as strangers and pilgrims while we await our Savior’s Second Coming, when the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God, and we shall be caught up to

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<sup>3</sup> Rom. 1:17, Heb. 11:6

<sup>4</sup> Eph. 5:25

meet the Lord in the air, accompanying him to this earth, where he will conduct the final judgment, the judgment seat of Christ, which judgment will determine the final destiny of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth.

Children of the congregation! This is why what we do every Sunday is so important, for every Lord's day, when we gather in the presence of Christ to hear his Word and bow before him, is a foretaste of the glory of heaven, our true inheritance. If you are bored, or detached, or aloof from the worship of God happening here—if your mind wanders when you hear the preaching of God's Word, if you don't sing the Psalms and hymns that the church offers up in praise to God, if you don't confess your sins with his people and receive the assurance of his pardon, if you don't wholeheartedly profess the creed and joyfully receive Christ's benediction—then how are you any different from the world which lives for pleasure and does not submit to Christ as Lord? Make no mistake: “The wicked shall be *turned into hell* [לִפְתֵּי], and all the nations that forget God” (Ps. 9:17). Let that sink in: the people with whom you associate—in the neighborhood, at school, at work, in the marketplace—unless they hear and receive the good news of Christ's salvation, will one day stand before Christ and hear his fateful words “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting punishment.” Oh, how we ought to be concerned for the lost! Oh, how we ought to beg them to come worship with us! They are like Noah's neighbors who ridiculed him as he was building the ark. They did not heed the preaching of Noah as he warned of the coming flood and invited them to come into the ark with him. And after Noah and his family were safely inside, and God had shut the door—and the rain began to fall, and the waters rose, and they climbed the highest mountain, and the waters continued to rise, drowning them, and they lifted up their eyes, being in torments—it was too late.

The silver trumpets were used to broadcast various signals to the Israelites, to alert them to the LORD's specific instructions for the moment they were about to march. Remember, the nation at this time numbered about 2½ million people. If you are a parent trying to get several children out the door on time, you know how important it is to coordinate their movements: who gets to use the bathroom first, second, etc., and for how long; which one clears the table and puts the dishes in the dishwasher; who puts the dog in its cage, who carries which items out to the car. Now try to imagine doing this for a whole nation! Remember, they were to march in a certain order (“they camped by their standards and so they broke camp, each one by his family, according to their fathers' houses”).<sup>5</sup>

So here's what happened. The priests observed the movement of the glory-cloud. If it stood still, then Israel was supposed to stay put. If it rose and began to move, then Israel was supposed to break camp and set out. The priests used the

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<sup>5</sup> Num. 2:34

silver trumpets to communicate God's will to the people at a specific moment. They were used "for calling the congregation and for directing the movement of the camps" (v. 2). The silver trumpets were straight metal tubes, flared at the end. They didn't have valves, like modern trumpets (although we know from experience that valves sometimes stick and need to be machined and adjusted so they work properly). The trumpets of Numbers 10 were not capable of playing a musical scale; rather, they played fourths and fifths. The priests could play different *tattoos* (melodic and rhythmic patterns signaling various instructions).

When the priests "sounded the *advance*" (a particular melodic and rhythmic pattern), the tribes that camped on the *east* side were to begin their journey. When they sounded the advance a second time, then the tribes that camped on the *south* side were to begin their journey; and so forth. When they blew both trumpets together (a duet), then the whole congregation was to gather before the priests at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. If they blew only one trumpet, then the *leaders* of each tribe were to come to a meeting.

There were other uses of the trumpets as well. When Israel had conquered and taken possession their inheritance, then the priests would sound an "alarm" (apparently a different musical tattoo from sounding the "advance"). This would have called Israel to battle. But at the same time God promised the people that they would be *remembered* before the LORD their God, and would be saved from their enemies. Here was a promise and guarantee of victory if the people were obedient. Clearly, this was all of *grace*, for the people's obedience was never perfect. This is why we need the gospel. We have failed to disobey. We have all sinned, and come short of the glory of God. We fail to merit heaven. But we have a mighty Savior who is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him! Though we fail, he succeeds! He gives us his perfect righteousness as a free gift, just as to Abraham, who "believed in the LORD, and it was counted to him as righteousness." If you, a guilty sinner, look in faith to Jesus Christ, he will save you! That is his promise. Your salvation does not depend on your own personal merit, but on the merit of Christ, your Savior and the lover of your soul. Your assurance is based on his infallible *promise*, not your fallible attempts at obedience.

Verse 10 of our text gives another use of the silver trumpets: "Also in the day of your gladness, in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be a *memorial* for you before your God: I am the LORD your God." The trumpets were not for the purpose of getting the LORD's attention, for his attention and care for his people never flags, never fails. Rather, the sounding of the trumpets reminded his people that their LORD was always attentive to their need and mighty to save. As we face the obstacles and struggles of this life, we do not do it alone, but through Christ, who strengthens us.

In sum, as Calvin observed, “The silver trumpets gave a gathering-signal, *so that the people should always be attentive to the voice and will of God.*” Here is the enduring lesson of the trumpets: We, God’s people, should always be *attentive to his voice*. We should come to church eager to hear his Word. In the words of our Shorter Catechism, “How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation? That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”<sup>6</sup> To be hearers of the Word requires effort. How easily we become distracted! To get the most out of worship, we should be praying for the proclamation of the Word throughout the week. We should meditate on the things we have learned in previous sermons. We should do what we can to make getting out the door on Sabbath morning go as smoothly as possible: get to bed on time and get a good night’s sleep, having bathed the cares of this world in prayer and having cast them upon the Lord; praying for grace to receive the preaching of the Word with faith and love, hiding it in our hearts, that we might not sin against our Savior’s love, meditating on the Word and endeavoring to put it into practice—*living* it, and not just hearing the words themselves.

It is significant that in Holy Scripture the preaching of God’s word is likened to a trumpet calling the elect to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is dealing with the misuse of spiritual gifts in the early church. Turn there with me, and let’s look at it for a moment: 1 Corinthians 14. Paul writes: “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may *prophecy*. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who *prophesies* speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who *prophesies* edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you *prophesied*; for he who *prophesies* is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.”

Notice what he is saying. The ability to speak a foreign language that one has never studied (that’s the meaning of speaking in tongues; it is *not* mindless babbling!) is a very great gift. The person in the early church who was given this gift was given it so that he could share the gospel with a person who spoke a foreign language which he did not know. Here was a faithful Christian with a sincere desire to share Christ. At the same time, here was a non-believer whose heart was suddenly drawn to hear about Christ, but he did not know the speaker’s native language. In the early days of the Christian church, before the written Scriptures were complete, God gave the sign-gifts—of which speaking in tongues

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<sup>6</sup> Q&A 90

was one—to bear witness to his truth. Just as the apostles were given ability to cast out demons, raise the dead and make a lame person walk, to validate their apostolic authority, so those who were given the sudden ability to speak a language they had never studied and did not know, were validated as having authority to speak God’s truth.

But as important as the gift of tongues was in the early church, before the completion of the canon, Paul argues that *preaching* the Word was more important. That is the meaning of *prophecy* in his argument. He writes: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who *prophesies* edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you *prophesied*; for he who *prophesies* is *greater* than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification” (1 Cor. 14:1–5).

But notice that he likens prophesying (preaching) to blowing a *trumpet*! Notice verse 8: “If the *trumpet* give an *uncertain sound*, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” Here is an allusion to the silver trumpets in Numbers 10! At the final day “the *trumpet* shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52).

Now, the tabernacle is finished, and the people were about to get on the move: to traverse the desert on their way to the Promised Land. The wandering people of God were about to begin a pilgrimage that would revolve around the twin themes of warfare and worship. That pilgrimage would continue even after they had entered the Land.

And so it is for us. We are bound for the Promised Land! By God’s grace we shall reach our destination. But in the meantime we should listen for his trumpet call. Amen.