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Apocalypse Now?

What does the book of Revelation have to say to us today?

WEEK THREE – 29 June 2025

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Breakdown of contents each week ...

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SESSION THREE – Trouble on earth (chapters 6 – 16)

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A brief outline of the Book of Revelation

1 – 3	PRESENT – Earth Things must be put right now
4 – 5	PRESENT – Heaven
6 – 18	FUTURE - Earth (with glimpses of heaven) The Bad News – things will get much worse before they get better
19	THE RETURN OF CHRIST
20 – 22	FUTURE – Heaven on Earth The Good News – things will get much better after they get worse

P 5 = blank

3 features seemingly dotted randomly through the book, ‘interrupting the flow’

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INSERTIONS (eg the pauses between the 6th & 7th Seals / Trumpets)

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REPETITIONS (eg the 7th Seal, 7th Trumpet & 7th Bowl; earthquakes)

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ANTICIPATIONS the End itself is glimpsed throughout, e.g. – 6:15-17)

‘A rollercoaster ride set within a gallery hung with impressionist art’

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6:15-17

P 10 = blank

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Chapters 6 – 16

Seals 1-6	(insertion 1)	Seal 7
Trumpets 1-6	(insertion 2)	Trumpet 7
	(insertion 3)	

Bowls 1-7

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Table

The 7 Seals (chapter 6 & 8.1 - 5)

NB – who breaks the seals?

Turn to Revelation 5:1-10 ...

Jesus – the Lion of Judah / a lamb looking as if it were slain ...

Understanding the phrase ‘The Last Days’

Turn to Revelation 6

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6:1-2 The First Seal: A white horse – the spirit of imperialism

Roman Empire – white = colour of victory (The Triumph of Caesar ...)

Spirit of Imperialism (2 comments on British Empire / Imperialism generally – (1) we shouldn’t have been there in the first place (2) it’s not possible to ‘discover’ a land already inhabited ...)

First Readers would have thought immediately of Rome

But v. clever: weapon = bow (Parthian / already nibbling at edges of the Roman Empire) Horse warriors who charged their enemy, saving one final arrow to fire as they raced away from battle – known as the Parthian shot

(origin of our phrase, the parting shot ...)

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6:3-4 The Second Seal: A red horse – the spirit of revolution

Same horse in a different colour?

Irony is that Empire brings peace, of a sort (Soviet Union, Iraq...)

Pax Romana ...

This rider had power to make people kill each other

Gk word translated sword here = dagger, assassination

Revolution

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6:5-6 The Third Seal: A black horse – the spirit of economic injustice

famine?

John more sophisticated and clever

'a kilogram of wheat for a day's wages and 3 kilos of barley for a day's wages'

What was needed to feed an adult male / whole family

Not famine but chronic inflation (10 times the actual figures for the time)

'Don't damage the oil and the wine'

life's little comforts, luxuries ... smoked salmon and Chablis ...?

Materialism

Domitian AD92 decreed that oil groves and vineyards be ploughed for food ... rebellion ...

Today – chronic economic injustice. Why? Our selfishness for one ...

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6:7-8 The Fourth Seal: A pale horse – death on a massive scale

'pale' = 'chloros' = yellowy-green, ashen: on last legs

looks like death warmed up ...

followed by Hades ...

numbers are symbolic (but not unrealistic): 25% of the human population killed by war, famine, plague

Population of England in 1300 = 5m. 1400 = 2.5m. Plague ... & famine which followed
10% of world's population today is at immediate risk of starvation

What is the Significance of the 4 horsemen of the Apocalypse?

Still ride today – our world susceptible to sword, famine and plague ...

They ride today – are we therefore near the End?

A reminder of what signs Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 24:-

wars & rumours of wars (Luke adds 'revolutions' 21:9)

famines & earthquakes (Luke adds 'pestilences' 21:11) ('these are only the beginning of birth pains... the end will not come right away')

But they do mean that dreams of a Utopia of human devising are misplaced

And the Bad News for the secular world also applies to the People of God ...

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6:9-11 The Fifth Seal: the Souls of the Martyrs

Again, Jesus in Matthew 24:-

persecution & hatred will become the norm for the Christian community
unparalleled distress (the Great tribulation)

John sees this as a continuing & normative experience for God's people

Today – the tyranny of tolerance ...

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6:12-17 The Sixth Seal: Convulsions in the Cosmos / Earthquake

Again, Jesus in Matthew 24:-

darkness in the skies, turmoil among the stars & heavenly bodies
'at that time the Son of Man will appear in the heavens'

See also

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But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. 2 Peter 3:10

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All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig-tree. Isaiah 34:4

The result of this calamity is terror (see Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21)
The Paradox of the 'wrath of the Lamb'

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An **insertion** between the 6th & 7th Seals (Chapter 7)

Note the way the action moves from earth to heaven (image of the divine control room)

144,000 sealed

A Great Multitude from every nation

Who are they?

A symbolic representation of God's faithful people, believing Jew & believing Gentile, the Israel of God.

In sealing His people God declares

- they are mine
- they are genuine
- they are not to be touched (not a promise of physical safety – see Luke 12:5)

The point is that God knows His true people ('I know my sheep ...' John 10:14) Also see Ephesians 1:13; John 6:39

What a glorious destiny awaits the faithful people of God – 7:16-17

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¹⁶ "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them," nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; "he will lead them to springs of living water." "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.""
Revelation 7:16-17

Who better to be our Shepherd than one who knows what it is to be a sheep ...? (7:17)

So we hold both the pessimism of the world's condition & the optimism of heaven

Lest we fear there is no bridge between these two worlds, a final Seal is broken:

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8:1-5 The Seventh Seal: Silence in Heaven

I love this human touch – 'about half an hour' ...

Why is there silence?

How does it encourage us?

What should we change because of it?

The 'Problem' of the Silence in Heaven (8:1-5)

Concert – rock, jazz, opera ...

building to the crescendo. The Conductor raises his hands for the final bars – and then nothing happens.

Or again, imagine for a moment Big Ben on New Year's Eve ... the crowd around you hushes as the two hands meet on 12 and you wait for the first booming chime to signal midnight, new year, new century, new millennium – and nothing happens.

It's a bit like that in Revelation chapter 8.

In one sense, the silence is positive, because the prayers of the Saints were a way of bridging the pessimism of this world with the optimism of the world to come.

But, in terms of the structure of the book of Revelation and how we understand it, the silence is a real problem.

Let's recap for a moment – the 6 seals in chapter 6, you remember, brought us to the very climax of human history, the very threshold of the end.

The 6th seal was, itself, the cosmic convulsions which Jesus told his disciples, in Matthew 24, would signal the very end.

At that time, said Jesus, you will see the Son of Man.

So the 7th seal must be the end. But John, you remember, doesn't even go to the breaking of the 7th seal straightaway.

Instead, he shifts the camera focus in chapter 7 and we are taken up into Heaven and we see the sealed multitude and the multitude without number.

And then, even when the 7th seal is broken at the beginning of chapter 8, having had a whole chapter inserted between them, there is this strange anti-climax of the silence in Heaven.

The seal is broken, the stage is, seemingly, set; and yet – nothing.

To return to our image of a dramatic production, it's as though the leading man has forgotten his cue.

Instead of the final crashing bars of human history, there is silence.

Those of us who are well-versed in Paul's writings, and particularly in Thessalonians, are sitting back, waiting for the final trumpet.

And what does John do? He introduces 7 of the things, being blown by 7 angels.

What's more, they are not even sounded together, but one after the other.

It's like going back to the seven seals all over again.

And even when we get to the 6th trumpet, and everyone is on tenterhooks again at the end of chapter 9, the whole feeling of anti-climax is repeated: there is another interlude (chapters 10 and 11).

Then, when the 7th trumpet is finally sounded at the end of chapter 11, there is not a silence, but another insertion (chapters 12 to 14).

After this, we are introduced to yet another set of 7 angels – probably the same angels, I guess it was just a busy shift – and this time the 7 angels have 7 bowls full of plagues or wrath.

Yet even this doesn't signal the end because, after the 7th bowl is poured out, there is yet another insertion (chapters 17 and 18) before finally – no doubt with a good sense of relief, at least for John, if not for us – Jesus rides forth on the white horse.

And so The End has been glimpsed, and in some cases detailed, on several occasions, before we get there: 4 times before it is finally revealed in chapters 19 & 20 ... chapters 1, 6, 14 & 16 ...

Remember the image of being on a roller coaster ride through a gallery hung with impressionist art. At each twist and turn you get a different glimpse of the future – sometimes behind you, sometimes beside you, sometimes still way ahead.

POINT – almost as though the Spirit of Jesus, through John, is underlining again and again that it's not possible to set a date on these things. The world's wickedness is going to coil more and more tightly and convulsively upon itself, but each time we think this must be it, it will get worse ...

- Turn of the 1st Millennium
- Execution of Charles 1 ...

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A comparison of the 7 Seals (ch. 6), the 7 Trumpets (chs 8 & 9) and the 7 Bowls (chs 15 & 16)

The silence in Heaven is fundamental to the understanding of the book and its structure. We have already noted that the book is built around series of sevens: 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 bowls, 7 trumpets, 7 angels – and so on; and so I want to compare the seals, the trumpets and the bowls

SEALS (ch. 6)	TRUMPETS (ch. 8 – 9)	BOWLS (ch. 15-16)
A White Horse A Red Horse A Black Horse A Pale Horse	Earth Sea Rivers / Springs Sun, Moon and Stars	Earth Sea Rivers/Springs Sun
Souls of Martyrs	The Abyss (locusts)	The throne of the beast
Great Earthquake	Euphrates / mass death	Euphrates (Armageddon)
Silence in Heaven	Proclamation of God's Kingdom	Proclamation – “It is done”

Each series (Seals, Trumpets, Bowls) divides into 3 sections: -

- the first 4 go together (4 horsemen; 4 afflictions in the natural realm)

- the 5th & 6th are not so closely related but all move to heavenly realm and back to earth, concluding with the same 'world-shattering' event – e.g. an earthquake
- the 7th stands on its own – silence, proclamation

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Is there a pattern which will fit Seals, Trumpets & Bowls into the framework of chapters 6 – 18?

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A successive or linear pattern is commonly suggested today, particularly in the USA:-

Seals – 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(then) Trumpets – 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(then) Bowls – 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

But the central section of Revelation will not easily follow a precise chronological sequence. A more ancient Christian view, still prominent among many scholars today as well as down the ages, sees the various groups of 7 (Seals, Trumpets, Bowls) as simultaneous or 'cyclical' - each pictures in a different way either part or the whole of 'This Present Age' from Christ's First Coming to his Second Coming: -

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Seals	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Trumpets	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Bowls	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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or	Seals	1 2 3 4 5 6	7
	Trumpets	1 2 3 4 5 6	7
	Bowls	1 2 3 4 5 6	7

This view does not affect the certainty that there will be an increase in the severity of God's judgment in the very last days. Indeed, the Seals, Trumpets & Bowls suggest just such an escalation – compare

1. the 2nd Trumpet's effect on the sea 8:8-9 (a third of sea turns to blood, a third of living creatures in the sea dies)
2. with that of the 2nd Bowl 16:3 (the whole sea turns to blood, every living thing in it dies)

Today – death of the oceans ...

The value of this simultaneous or cyclical model is in providing a pattern which covers the whole of the middle section of Revelation (chapters 6 – 18).

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THE SEALS, TRUMPETS, BOWLS	THE INSERTIONS
6:1-17 Seals 1 to 6	
	7:1-8 144,000 sealed
	7:9-17 A great multitude
8:1-5 the 7th Seal	
8:6 – 9:21 Trumpets 1 to 6	
	10:1-11 the angel & the little scroll
	11:1-14 the Two Witnesses
11:15-19 the 7th Trumpet	
	12:1 – 13:1 the woman & the dragon
	13:2-18 the two beasts
	14:1-5 the Lamb & the 144,000
	14:6-13 the 3 angels
	14:14-20 the harvest of the earth
15:1-8 7 angels with 7 Bowls	
16:1-21 Bowls 1 to 7	
	17:1-18 the woman on the beast
	18:1-24 the fall of Babylon

In this pattern, 4 themes are interwoven: -

As a general rule

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the Seals, Trumpets & Bowls deal with

- God's activity (judgment & mercy)
- Satan's activity (wrath & deception)

the insertions deal with

- the fate of the earth (destruction)
- the fate of God's people (redemption)

In chs 6 – 18, John's visions swing between different viewpoints which show us the same events, characters & future from various angles.

We see God's people variously as seen by God, Satan & the inhabitants of earth.

We see the inhabitants of earth in images which reveal their political, religious & economic alliances with Satan.

We see Satan himself as he appears to the Church, to the inhabitants of earth and to God. These visions are not intended to fit a date & time sequence.

John is not concerned to reveal an exact chronology of “earth’s last days” (as a recent series of novels claims!) but rather to provide a pattern by which to understand our calling as God’s people set against the backdrop of the reality of evil in the here and now and the certainty of Christ’s future Return to earth.

John’s visions explain these realities in vivid form in order that we might show ‘patient endurance & faithfulness’ (13:10).

Once again, we see that the future is only unveiled in order to transform the present.

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The First Six Trumpets (chapters 8 & 9)

Earth (8:7)

Sea (8:8-9)

Rivers / Springs (8:10-11)

Sun, Moon and Stars (8:12)

The Abyss (locusts) (9:1-12)

Euphrates / four angels of death (9:13-21)

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The Second Insertion (chapters 10:1 11:14)

- The Angel & the little scroll (10:1-11)
- The Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

Hotly contested – not reincarnation!

Revelation 1.20 ... ‘lamp stands’ are a symbol of communities of believers.

the Church and believing Israel (the remnant that Paul talked about in Romans 11).

very strong hint here – and we will come back to this – that during the very last days, organised Christianity will be crushed.

Again, expressions of Christian Witness – multiple concertina effect?

Persecution and martyrdom

Specific end time – Messianic Jews / Gentile Christians? Jerusalem will have a prominent role ...

Linked to Proclamation (Jesus in Matthew 24)

The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

- Proclamation of God’s Kingdom
- (earthquake) (11:15-19)

The Third Insertion (chapters 12 – 14)

(1) The Woman, her child & the Dragon (12.1 - 6)

The 3 main characters in this section are introduced as a kind of 'Unholy Trinity' – a Dragon & 2 Beasts. The first member we meet is a red Dragon (who is identified as Satan, the Devil, 'that ancient serpent' - 12.9) (All three appear together in 16:13).

The dragon is introduced in opposition to a woman & her child. Who are they? Many ideas!

Woman	Child	Comment
Mary	Jesus	no (Mary makes no appearance in NT after Acts 1)
Israel	Jesus	no ('snatched to heaven' – what of cross & resurrection?)
Church	Israel	no (doesn't do justice to Paul's 'one new man' - Eph. 5)

A great deal is made of the child 'ruling the nations with an iron sceptre' (12.5) – does this identify him as Christ (see Psalm 2.9)? But see 2:27 (also 1 Corinthians 6:2). I think the woman is a symbol of God's People (Church & individual believers). (Whatever our view, 12:6, 13 -17 suggests the disappearance of God's people in any organised form towards the End).

(2) War in Heaven – Satan hurled to earth (12.7 - 17)

John sees Satan 'in heaven' (see Job 1.6 - 7). Paul is also aware that the real battle is fought in heavenly realms (Eph. 6.12). The question is - how many times can he be hurled out?

Surely only once, as a result of Christ's victory on the Cross.

- Isaiah foresaw Satan's defeat in his lament over the king of Babylon (Isa 14.12).
- Jesus 'saw' Satan fall from heaven as the ministry he entrusted to his disciples began to make inroads into Satan's kingdom (Luke 10.18).
- Is John's vision a retrospective view of that fall? (Also possibly referred to in 9.1?)
- Satan's response is to attack God's people (see 1 Pet 5.8), but 'his time is short' (Matt. 24.22)
- Note that Satan's defeat is the work of the saints, who 'overcome' (see John 16.33)

(3) The Beast from the Sea (13:1-10) (also see 17.8 - 14)

Why from the sea? (symbol of fear & chaos - compare Genesis 1:1 & Revelation 21:1)

Quite clearly John's vision of the Beast has to do with godless politics (horns, crowns, authority – but note, everything 'was given' to the Beast (13:5-7)

Revelation 13 (politics as Satan corrupts it) / Romans 13 (politics as God intends it)

This Beast is the 'antichrist' (1 John 2:18) & 'the man of lawlessness' (2 Thessalonians 2:3)

Who or what is he? A Linear model (see sermon 7) pushes us towards speculation (Napoleon, Hitler, even the Pope!). Our Cyclical model allows a more reasoned response.

John's Beast is based on the 4 beasts of Daniel 7 (a composite?).

The Beast has 3 major characteristics:-

- invincibility (13:3)
- popularity (13:3,4)

- totalitarianism (13:8)

It is the Beast's insistence on worship (13:4, 8) which identifies who or what he is.

(4) The Beast out of the Earth (13:11-18)

Also known as 'the false prophet' (16:13, 19:20).

A symbol of the false religious structures which bolster the rule of antichrist.

His techniques are: -

- deceptive public image (i.e. good PR or 'spin') (13:11)
- propaganda (13:13)
- the cult of personality (13:14) (the 'abomination' of Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15?)
- old-fashioned terror where necessary (13:15, 16)
- domination of the global economy (13:17)

Where do we see the Beast at work today?

The Christian's response to the Beast (13:10)

'Jesus is Lord' is a political statement – it exposes the Beast as an illegitimate usurper.

What does 666 mean? Come on, you know you want to know ...

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¹⁶ It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, ¹⁷ so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

¹⁸ This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

It also means there is no such thing as 'private religion'.

All Christian worship is a public declaration of God's sovereignty.

Our response is not to take up arms but to take up the cross.

Martyrdom is the Christian's weapon.

(4) a lamb, 144,000 (14:1-5)

(5) 3 angels (14:6-13)

(6) the harvest of the earth (14:14-20)

REVELATION 14:

John relieves the horror of chs 12 & 13 by showing us those who do not follow the Beast (the name or mark they bear contrasts sharply with the mark of the Beast).

144,000 a symbolic number = only the 'firstfruits' (implies martyrdom).
The remainder of the chapter is taken up with a procession of angels: -
calls for fear and worship of God (the gospel is still being proclaimed).
anticipates the fall of Babylon (detailed in chs 17 & 18).

speaks of the terrible consequences of submitting to the rule of the Beast (this means sharing his fate, 20:10 – compare the Christian's hope 'in Christ').

instructs 'One like a Son of Man' (Daniel 7:13) to harvest the earth. He does.

simply appears with a sickle in his hand. (see Matthew 13:40-43)

directs the sickle to grapes which are trodden in God's winepress of wrath.

The link between wrath, blood & wine throws a poignant light upon Gethsemane ...

Gethsemane is made up of two words: *shemen*, which means oil; and *gath*, which means to press or crush.

Right at the heart of God's judgment of our world lies the key to its salvation. Even in the middle of the Book of Revelation, stands the Cross.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen us to resist any temptation to turn away from God's calling on our lives, and to keep pressing on to take hold of the kingdom which cannot be shaken.

8. The Seven Plagues / Bowls (chapters 15 – 16)

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In heaven – 7 angels with 7 last plagues (15:1)

Those who have triumphed over the beast (15:2-4)

The temple opened to release the 7 angels (15:5-6)

The 7 angels given 7 bowls of wrath (15:7)

Temple closed until the 7 plagues are complete (15:8)

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1. Earth (16:2)

2. Sea (16:3)

3. Rivers / Springs (16:4-7)

*"Yes, Lord God Almighty,
true and just are your judgments." (7)*

4. Sun (16:8-9)

5. The throne of the beast (16:10-11)

¹⁰ The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

6. Euphrates (Armageddon) (16:12-16)
7. Air

Proclamation – ‘It is done’
Earthquake

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, “It is done!” ¹⁸ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since mankind has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. ¹⁹ The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. ²¹ From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds,^[a] fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

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A comparison of the trumpets and the bowls ...

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Next week ...