

Revelation 9:1-21

Two weeks ago we finished chapter 8 of Revelation. We were introduced to the seven trumpets, the second set of judgments described in the book. Interestingly, these judgments are in response to the prayers of the saints who longed for their blood to be avenged. The first 4 trumpets appear to be the result of natural disasters.

1. Trumpet one we discover that hail and fire lead to the destruction of a third of vegetation and tree life, and the entire destruction of grass.
2. Trumpet two states something like a mountain fell into the sea and caused a third of the sea creatures to be destroyed and a third of the ships.
3. Trumpet three leads to a symbolic star named wormwood falling into a third of the rivers and streams, which causes the water to be bitter and fatal when drunk.
4. Trumpet four talks about a third of the known light being diminished. The sun, the moon, and the stars no longer provide the full range of light they once did.

As catastrophic as these first four trumpets are; they are still best described as natural, yet impersonal disasters. Natural disasters can be horrible; yet they are impersonal in nature because they affect mankind in a secondary way. When the judgments become more personal they take a turn for the worse. Moreover, this explains prior to the last three trumpets why an angel proclaimed to the inhabitants of the world that they haven't seen anything yet. The reality that the angel pronounces three "woes" indicates the severity of the judgments for those who don't know Jesus.

Now as we read this chapter we will encounter some very strange imagery and some exotic looking creatures. It is important to understand that the language being incorporated is apocalyptic, which means it is symbolic. I will touch more on this in a little while. But let's read the text for now.

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth (this seems to mean an angel fell from heaven), and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. 2 He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.

There have been several explanations of what is meant by the star having fallen to the earth. Well it is hard to know for certain, but it seems the best fit is to identify this star with an angel who is instructed to set into motion the commencement of the personal attacks against the inhabitants of the earth. Recall that John previously had identified the seven stars in chapter one as the seven angels of the churches. So we have an established connection to the star / angel imagery already.

Secondly, the angel was given a key to the shaft of the bottomless pit, where he opens it and we find smoke rising and locusts coming out that have the power of scorpions. In other words, the star moves from an impersonal object to a personal one who has been given an assignment by God. Many commentators have identified this angel as Satan Himself, who is known throughout Christendom as a fallen angel. Though this may be a possibility, it seems more likely that an angel from heaven sets into motion God's will here. Satan seems to be a better fit for the king who will rule these demonic agents.

We are told that this bottomless pit produces smoke and a swarm of locusts who have the power of scorpions in their tail. The idea of locusts being one vehicle of God's judgment is firmly established throughout the Old Testament. Remember, John's readers did not have the luxury of having a Bible like we do today, which meant they were very well read when it came to the Old Testament. In fact, a lot of the imagery we will encounter in the Book of Revelation comes straight out of the Old Testament prophets. The most well known account of God using locusts to judge happens in Genesis where this punishment is the eighth plague experienced by Pharaoh and his country.

Exodus 10:12-15

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left." 13 So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. 14 The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. 15 They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

Likewise, in this passage, God uses locusts to inflict disaster. However, unlike the locusts of Genesis, these messengers of judgment had an unusual assignment.

4 They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

So instead of eating vegetation as was their custom, these agents of God's judgment were told not to partake of the greenery, but to torment the inhabitants of the earth.

The next question we must ask is who comprises the inhabitants of the earth? Since verse 4 makes a distinction between those that are attacked and those that are sealed by God; it is a safe assumption to conclude the inhabitants of the earth, mentioned at the end of chapter eight, is a description of those who do not acknowledge the Father and the Lamb, but choose to follow the practices of those opposed to Him. Now this does not mean these are folks who are overtly against God and his plan for redemption. In other words, these people do not just comprise of those who are adamantly against God and want things like the removal of God's name from the pledge of Allegiance. No, these inhabitants include anyone, even the nice elderly lady down the street who is kind, generous, altruistic, and who wouldn't hurt a fly—yet choose simply not to acknowledge God and His plan of redemption.

Well not only do these locusts have an unusual, an unnatural task, they look quite different than what we would expect.

7 In appearance the locusts were like horses preped for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; 9 they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

Now there is a tendency to literalize these creatures and imagine them fitting this very description. Here is a drawing of what these creatures seemingly looked like.



But here is the problem: The book of Revelation is apocalyptic in nature. In other words, it is full of symbolism. We must be careful of what we choose to accept as literal. I suspect this is one of the reasons why people struggle when it comes to reading the Bible. We have to understand that not all books are meant to be read in the same fashion. For example, the book of Matthew would belong to the genre of narrative literature because it tells a story about the ministry and life of Jesus. However, the book of Romans cannot be read in the same light because it is not meant to be a story. Instead it is a book that falls in the genre of discourse because it is a book that instructs us on the teachings of God. You read a discourse very differently than you would a story.

The Bible also has poetry which uses metaphors to convey a point. When you read a psalm of poetry describing God's hand (Psalm 8:6), you know the author doesn't mean God actually has physical hands; instead he is just conveying a point about the greatness of God. In the same way, we know that the beautiful lady Solomon describes in the Song of Songs doesn't really have a neck as long as the Tower of Lebanon, or breasts that are literally coconuts. Instead Solomon is describing his wife in a sensual, yet biblical way. Bottom line: You read each book according to its genre.

Revelation falls in the category of apocalyptic literature. The language is highly esoteric and symbolic. It is not meant to be taken literally. Think about the dreams of Pharaoh for example. He had one where he had seven fattened calves and seven lean ones. He could not figure out his dream literally because he knew there was a message in that symbolism. So when Joseph explained to him—through the interpretation of God—that those seven fattened calves represented seven years of abundance and the lean ones, seven years of famine, the Pharaoh was able to understand the symbolism. Likewise, there is symbolism when it comes to this vision John saw.

There are places like in Joel, where locusts are said to have teeth like lions and to be part of an unified army (Joel 1:6). But what is being described is the magnitude of their ability to reap destruction. In other words, the author wants to highlight the ferociousness of these agents of God's judgment.

Likewise, there seems to be symbolism involved in these descriptions of the Revelation locusts. They have crowns, seems to indicate they are conquerors. They have teeth like lions once again, seems to explain the ferociousness of these creatures. The hair like women seems to be a reference to the length of hair. There are numerous accounts in ancient literature where warriors had long hair. The breastplates seem to describe their invincibility. Finally, their tails appear to be a reflection of their power. Now it is possible these locusts are these really strange and gruesome creatures described, but it most likely refers to something like a physical army or something that brings torment into the lives of people on an incomprehensible scale.

As for God's people, we are told they are protected. Like the Egyptians who were protected against the ten plagues, so here they are protected against this fifth trumpet. But the worst is still to come. As far as the others, they are the victims of the locusts and their king, who is referred to as *Abaddon* in the Hebrew, which means place of destruction, or *Apollyon*, in the Greek, which means destroyer. This destroyer seems to best fit with the idea this destroyer is none other than Satan himself.

God Provides Boundaries for Satan

Here there is one more thing worth mentioning. This destroyer is able to inflict harm only because God permitted it. This is important. Satan is not some force that is on par with God when it comes to power. Even he must function according to God's plan. We learned this important lesson in the book of Job, where Satan was also permitted to torment Job. Interestingly, he could torment him all he wanted; but he was not allowed to kill him. Sounds familiar here, doesn't it? Ultimately, the judgment of God is administered by the agents He chooses, even Satan himself. Now we will move on the sixth woe.

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a

third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

Now an argument can be made that the two trumpets are describing the same agents of God's judgment. Once again, we have a reference to power coming out of their tails. However, it best to understand these as different agents of God's judgment since we are told this is the sixth judgment which would differentiate the two, and secondly, because these agents, unlike the previous ones, are permitted to kill.

Evidently there are four angels who have been bound. The idea of angels being bound is not foreign to Scripture; in fact Jude mentions that certain angels have been bound because of their rebellion against Jesus (Jude 6). However one understands it, these angels are no longer bound by the river Euphrates. The Euphrates River has always been symbolic of trouble from the Northeast. For the Israelites, trouble came from the Euphrates in the armies of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and other enemies described in the book of Ezekiel.

Avoiding Two Extremes of Interpretation

The army described is a staggering number if you do the math. John is describing an army of two hundred million soldiers whose mission was to kill a third of mankind. The author indicates this time had been already set in histories past and we get a glimpse of something that must take place in the future. Now again, we must remember the language is symbolic in describing this army. There is a danger here when you only think of this as exclusively literal because of the nature of the genre.

Secondly, some have interpreted this book as being so symbolic the original readers would not have understood. For example, in his best selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey surmised that the locusts of which John speaks is a first century description of the Bell Huey helicopter gunship and that the sting of the scorpion might be nerve gas sprayed from the helicopter's tail. When we read of the two hundred million soldiers coming from the east, says Lindsey, this is a reference to the Red Chinese army which will invade Israel during the great tribulation in preparation for the last battle at Armageddon.

We must remember the book is apocalyptic first, and secondly, that it must make sense to a first century reader who would be reading this for encouragement in his or her present circumstances.

20 The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

I want to close by saying that although the topic of God's judgment is not a popular one, it is essentially what the book of Revelation advocates. Yet in the midst of it—God does still allow rebellious mankind an opportunity to repent. Unfortunately, like the Pharaoh of the Exodus account, many will remain hard headed and unreceptive to God despite the atrocities they face. In the end, it is really symbolic of the world we live in. How many people have you encountered that have simply been beaten up in life? People who know the right way to live; but choose to live another way, which almost always leads to more pain. There are times one would think such people must turn to God at some point. You become hopeful their salvation is around the corner. Yet when push comes to shove there is no room for God and His Son. This chapter allows people to know what must take place in the end times. May this stir your heart to reach them for Jesus before it is too late. Eventually, there will come a time where there will be no more opportunities to repent and turn to Jesus. Let us be grateful that there is still time before the *locusts* come and the *armies* surround us.