

## “Still They Did Not Repent”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 15*

*Texts: Revelation 9:1-21; Joel 2:1-11*

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In John's gospel, Jesus speaks of Satan as a thief who comes to rob, kill and destroy (John 10:10). In Revelation 9, John describes the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, in which Satan manifests every one of these qualities, exploiting and punishing the very people who serve him and who worship demons. And yet, despite the treachery of Satan and the display of God's glory and power, manifest in these trumpet judgments, men and women still will not repent of their sins.

We are making our way through the seven trumpet judgments of Revelation 8-11, and we come to John's vision of the fifth and sixth of the trumpet judgments in Revelation 9. This is, I dare say, one of the toughest passages in all the Bible. What on earth is John talking about when he describes swarms of locusts, stinging scorpions and armies of 200 million soldiers? As many of you know, this section of Revelation is one of those places where Bible prophecy experts have had a field day coming up with bizarre and irresponsible interpretations.

But the nature of the judgments found in this text make much sense if we carefully lay some groundwork before we proceed to look at the passage in some detail. When we look at the historical background of the symbols used by John, and then compare Scripture with Scripture, these things are not as bizarre as they may appear at first glance, or as prophecy experts make them out to be.

As I have said on many occasions, context is everything with the Book of Revelation. Not only is this apocalyptic literature in which John uses vivid word pictures to explain the meaning of the events we see unfold in human history, John does not intend us to understand these visions literally. In fact, as we have seen, the key to understanding Revelation is not CNN or contemporary events, but the Old Testament. To interpret John's symbolic language correctly, it is also necessary to look at the trumpet judgments in relationship to the seal judgments which we have already covered in chapters 6-8.

Both sets of judgments are cyclical and cover the entire period of time between Christ's first coming and his second advent. Both sets of judgments intensify as we move closer to the second coming of Jesus Christ. There are seven judgments in each cycle—which means that when the judgment depicted in each cycle has run its course, God's wrath will be complete, which is why each cycle ends with the return of Jesus Christ.

Both the seal and trumpet judgments include a brief interlude between the sixth and seventh judgment so as to remind God's people that they are protected from his wrath, even if they must face the wrath of men and the Satanically empowered beast during the time of tribulation, described elsewhere in Revelation as the last days, the thousand years and the three and a half years. Although they view the present period of time from different perspectives, the judgments brought upon the earth by four horsemen of the seals sound very much like the destruction brought upon the earth by the first four trumpets. While the seal judgments describe events from the perspective of the heavenly throne and come about after John's lament that no one is worthy to open the scroll, the trumpet judgments come about when the prayers of God's saints rise before the heavenly altar. They are more intense, affecting one third of the earth instead of one fourth of the earth as in the seals.

Recall that the blast of trumpet is an important redemptive historical image throughout both testaments. Trumpet blasts accompany the giving of the law at Sinai. A trumpet blast announces the jubilee year as well as the coronation of a new king. A trumpet blast announces the Day of the Lord and accompanies the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. But another critical moment in redemptive history when we find seven blasts of a trumpet is in Joshua 6 when the city of Jericho fell to the army of Israel. The fortified city of Jericho blocked God's people from entering the promised land during the Exodus, just as in the Book of Revelation the city of man—Babylon the Great—prevents the establishment of the New Jerusalem on the earth. It is not until the seven trumpet judgments are completed that the great city falls—just as Jericho did when Israel's priests sounded the seven trumpets. Only then will God's people enter the true promised land, that city whose architect and builder is the Lord God himself. Like the seven seals, when the seven trumpet judgments have run their course, the city of man will be destroyed and the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. And all of this results—John tells us—because God hears the prayers of his suffering saints. When the prayers of his people ascend to his throne, God acts.

It is also important to put ourselves back in the first century for a moment so as to understand the images John uses in the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments. John speaks of locusts and scorpions—two of the most feared and destructive pests known in the first century world. If we don't consider this very important point, we may make one of the worst and most common of interpretive mistakes and attempt to understand John to be describing contemporary technological advances in warfare found in our own time, completely unknown to John in his own day. It is Hal Lindsey who tells us 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.<sup>1</sup>

Wrong! This is exactly the kind of ridiculous speculation that has made the Book of Revelation so utterly mysterious and practically useless to God's people. If you lived in John's day, one of the first things you did before you went to bed or before you put on your sandals in the morning was to make sure there were no scorpions hiding in them. These pests were everywhere and inflicted a very painful sting upon anyone who was careless.

Recall for a moment the opening scene in the movie Patton where the bedouin children swat the scorpions away from the dead Americans so that they can loot the bodies. According to the testimony of our Marines in Afghanistan, the scorpions there have given them more trouble than the Taliban! In an age of Raid and DDT, we forget how destructive locusts can be. But in 1866—not that long ago—a locust plague in Algiers caused so much destruction and crop loss that over 200,000 people are thought to have died as a result. There are many ancient documents describing the horrors of swarming locusts. When the locusts swarmed, the skies turned dark and the destruction of the crops and agriculture was nearly total. Famine and death always resulted. Therefore, both of these creatures—the locust and the scorpion—were feared and dreaded. They are perfect and obvious symbols of pain and destruction to a first century reader. John's original audience knew this without having to be told. We must understand this as well.

Then, there is the biblical background. Two texts come to mind in regards to locusts. In Exodus 10:15,

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Lindsey, There's a New World Coming, 136-142.

we read of locusts which God sent upon Egypt, *“They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail—everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt.”* Like the four previous trumpet judgments, the fifth trumpet judgment is directly connected to one of the plagues on Egypt—only unlike the eighth plague upon Egypt when the locusts ate everything, the locusts of the fifth trumpet do not harm the trees and grass. Instead, they harm only unbelievers. This is an important clue as to their identity.

There is also the text found in Joel 2:1-11, our Old Testament lesson this morning which gives us this description of invading locusts: *“Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale.”*

While commentators disagree as to whether or not Joel is speaking of actual locusts or locusts as symbolic of an invading army, the result of this invasion is indisputable—a severe famine. In the fifth trumpet, the result of the swarm of locusts is also a great famine, only it does not result from the destruction of crops, which these locusts are prevented from attacking. These locusts are symbolic of the demonic forces of Satan. They cause a spiritual famine, inflicting torments of various kinds on their unprotected victims.<sup>2</sup>

As for scorpions, in Luke 10:17-19, Jesus himself speaks of the demonic in terms of scorpions and snakes, an image which also appears here in Revelation. We read in Luke’s gospel that *“the seventy-two returned with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’ He replied, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.’”* Therefore, it is Jesus who compares demons to serpents and scorpions, whose bite is painful, if not deadly. Like lowly serpents and snakes, they torment the unsuspecting, those not sealed with the name of Christ.

The key to interpreting these things correctly is the Old Testament and the Roman world in which John lived. When seen in this light it is clear what John is telling us—Satan is a thief, a destroyer and a murderer just as Jesus said he is. He seduces people into serving him and then torments them when they do so. Satan hates life, even the life of those who worship the Beast and his image. All those who reject Christ are not sealed with his name, they are left unprotected and they will experience the horrible things depicted in these judgments. It is clear, therefore, that John is speaking of those demonic forces unleashed upon those upon the earth to torment those who worship and serve the Beast. This then is the context in which we must read the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments.

**W**hen we turn to the fifth trumpet judgment in Revelation 9:1-11, we learn of the fate of those upon the earth not protected by God. They are tormented mercilessly by demonic forces—a fate which should warn them of their impending doom while there is still time to repent—but which instead, only hardens their hearts and further entrenches them in unbelief.

It is important to take note of the fact that the fifth trumpet judgment parallels the fifth seal judgment,

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<sup>2</sup> Beale, Revelation, 500.

though viewing things from a completely different perspective. Recall that in the fifth seal judgment of Revelation 6:9-11, when the Lamb opened the seal, we saw the martyrs before the throne, clothed in white and awaiting Christ's return to earth to avenge their blood. We also need to keep in mind the scene in Revelation 7:1-8, during the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal judgment. John sees the 144,000 upon the earth—the church militant. These are Christ's people who have been redeemed by his blood and who are sealed with the name of Christ, protecting them from the wrath of God.

In Revelation 7:9-17, John sees a huge multitude so vast that they cannot be counted. This is the church in heaven before the throne. In the fifth seal and in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal, John sees the church both on the earth and in heaven. Its members are sealed and protected from the wrath of God. When they die, they enter the presence of the Lord, safe and awaiting the great resurrection at the end of the age.

But in the fifth trumpet, John sees the same period of time, only this time not from the perspective of the redeemed on earth and in heaven, but from the perspective of those who reject the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ—in other words from the perspective of unbelievers upon the earth during the tribulation. And their fate is horrible.

This will become clear as we turn to the opening words of our text, Revelation 9:1-2, *“The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.”*

For one thing, we should notice that the star is symbolic of an angelic being, since the star holds in its hands a key to the abyss. This same scene is described by Jesus in Luke 10:18: *“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”* Either John is describing Satan or a fallen angel being cast from heaven as result of the judgment of God. Once cast out, this angelic being now inflicts a host of torments upon the earth's inhabitants by unlocking the shaft of the abyss, which is the realm of the demonic. When this fallen angel opens the abyss, dense smoke, symbolic of judgment, rises and darkens the sky.<sup>3</sup>

A number of things need to be said here. For one thing, John's vision demonstrates that the sovereignty of God extends even to Satan's realm.<sup>4</sup> Jesus holds in his hand the keys of death and Hades, not Satan. The angelic being cannot harm anyone until Christ gives him the key and casts him to earth. This means that the demonic wrath this fallen being unleashes upon unbelievers is a direct result of the fifth trumpet judgment upon the earth. Satan is a defeated foe and can act only as God permits. This is why we find language of Satan being bound during the present millennial age in Revelation 20. Since this fallen angel cannot attack those who are sealed by Christ with any of these torments, instead, he turns on his own.

Beginning in verse 3, we now read of the demonic forces unleashed from the abyss, depicted in terms of locusts and scorpions. *“And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth.”* Unlike the locusts who decimated the crops of Egypt during the eighth plague, these demonic creatures *“were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.”* Limited to ravaging those

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<sup>3</sup> Beale, Revelation, 491-493.

<sup>4</sup> Beale, Revelation, 493.

who are not sealed, these creatures “*were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man.*” The torment they inflict will be so great that “*during those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.*”

Unleashed from the abyss by the fallen angel to torment unbelievers, these demonic creatures cause destruction like that of locusts and yet have the powerful sting of the scorpion. They are to harm only unbelievers—making them long for death since the demonic horde cannot kill anyone—and their power to torment is limited to five months, which was the life span of a locust.

The point is simply this—demonic forces, once freed from the abyss are now free to assault the very people whom Satan has enticed to worship the beast and his image or who have been seduced by the harlot.<sup>5</sup> They will create spiritual famine. They will bring hardship, pain and suffering upon all those who are not sealed with the name of Christ. They will destroy all hope and make people wish they were dead, although death itself flees from them. This demonic army will leave these people as empty and desolate as the locusts left the grainfields of Egypt.

Echoing the earlier vision of Joel 2, in verse 6, John describes them as follows: “*the locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months.*”

Clearly it is wrong-headed to interpret this literally. Like the prophet Joel before him, John is describing the ability of this demonic legion to carry out their mission. Like a mighty army dressed for battle, these demonic beings swarm out of the abyss when the fifth trumpet sounds. They are a frightening and devastating foe—yet, because we are sealed with the name of God and of Christ, these creatures cannot and will not touch us. We are Christ’s.

That these are demonic beings becomes even clearer in verse 11. “*They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.*” This name literally means “destruction,” or the one who destroys. This angel—if it is not Satan himself—is king over the abyss and the horrible creatures previously confined there. And what does Satan do to those who serve him? He comes as a thief to rob, kill and destroy his own. His treachery and evil knows no bounds.

**B**ut these frightening trumpet judgments are not yet over. Indeed, says John in verse 12, “*The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.*” And so we now turn to Revelation 9:13-21, and the sixth trumpet judgment.

According to John, “*the sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God.*” Recall that the altar is the very place where the prayers of the saints had been offered to God. The voice now commands “*the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of*

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 149.

*the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.”* In Revelation 7:1-3, John told us that four angels hold back the four winds, symbolic of the restraint of God’s wrath so that the people of God might be sealed with the name of Christ. But when the sixth trumpet sounds, God’s restraint is lifted and his judgment now falls upon one third of the earth’s population.

John’s mention of the Euphrates River has led some to speculate that John is speaking here of a literal 200 million man army from the east invading Israel, thereby setting the stage for the final battle of Armageddon. China, of course, is the only nation which even remotely fits the bill, hence Hal Lindsey’s speculation that this is John’s reference to the Communist Republic. But this is what happens when we don’t look to the Old Testament and the historical context to interpret John’s symbolic language.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Euphrates River is a kind of symbolic boundary beyond which lay exile and danger for the people of God. The dreaded cities of Nineveh and Babylon both were beyond the Euphrates, as was the dreaded Medo-Persian empire which later conquered Babylon. It was also the home of the hostile nations listed in Ezekiel 38-39, led by the mysterious Gog and Magog. Most importantly, it was beyond the Euphrates that Israel had been taken during the years of her exile and captivity in Babylon.

In the Roman world, the Euphrates River was the eastern edge of the empire beyond which dwelt the savage Parthians, who repeatedly attacked Roman outposts guarding the frontier. Therefore, the Euphrates River is a symbolic boundary between peace and safety and war and uncertainty. That this is symbolic language becomes clear in verse 17, when it is not the armies of the east, but their horses which bring dread upon the earth. *“The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.”*

Unlike the demonic horde of the fifth trumpet who could only torment those who are not sealed, but could not take their lives, the sixth trumpet blast will lead to the death of one third of the world’s inhabitants. The image is therefore one of the demonic empowerment of the armies of the world to wage war upon each other in service to the beast, in effect, doing the Devil’s bidding.<sup>6</sup> John is describing soldiers all right—but not those of a modern nation. John sees those demonic forces which repeatedly bring war to the earth, and which leave death, devastation and suffering in their wake.

Think of what has happened throughout history when men worship the beast and his image. There have been countless wars since John wrote the Book of Revelation. In the past century alone we saw the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich and the subsequent slaughter of some six million Jews, Christians and others. We saw Emperor Hirohito—a self-proclaimed deity—and the horror that the empire of Japan brought upon the nations of Southeast Asia under the guise of creating a “co-prosperity sphere.” Then there is Stalin and the estimated 20 million people killed by the Soviet state to advance the cause of communism—a prime example of the Beast which wages war on the saints.

We have all witnessed the militant Islamic states wage war upon Israel and persecute all Christians found within their borders. This is what John has in mind when he speaks of a demonic army of 200 million

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<sup>6</sup> Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 124.

wreaking havoc upon the earth and bringing death to a third of the world's population. And all of it is brought about by the Satanic empowerment of the Beast, which is any government which seeks to oppress the people of God, and force them to worship someone other than Jesus Christ.

But after the sixth trumpet sounds and devastation comes upon a third of the earth, what do we find? Do we find a world ready to embrace Jesus Christ through faith? Do we find a world ravaged by these demonic hordes now ready to repent of its sin? Do we find a world which finally understands the treachery of Satan and is ready renounce him? No.

Says John in verse 20, *“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”*

After all of these warnings, the world still will not repent. People will not stop worshiping demons. They reject the gospel and the warnings of a final judgment, says Jesus, because a sinful world loves darkness rather than light (John 3:19). Therefore, one more woe will come upon the earth. A seventh trumpet will sound. It will announce that day non-Christians dread most—that day when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things news. The trumpet is the harbinger of the dreadful day of judgment

But for those who are Christ's—whether before the throne crying our “how long?” or sealed with the name of Christ while suffering upon the earth—the seventh trumpet will bring about an end to all the horrors depicted in the fifth and six trumpet judgments. This is the day when God rewards the prophets and those who revere his name. This is the day when God's glorious salvation comes to earth, and when God's will is done on earth as it is heaven.

Amen!