

Session #10: Revelation 9:1-21

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Last week we ended with 8:13 of the Book of Revelation, the warning cry of the eagle. Today we move into studying what happens when the fifth and sixth trumpet sound. We have reached what is probably the most bizarre and terrifying images held within the Book of Revelation. I remind you that what is about to unfold happens to the “Inhabitants of the Earth” meaning those who have chosen to reject God, those who choose not to be counted among God’s faithful children. As people of faith we have nothing to worry about, but the rest of humanity will be living through a real-life horror movie. *When the fifth and sixth angels blow their trumpets, vast armies of strange demonic creatures afflict the inhabitants of the earth. At first glance the weird tormentors of this chapter*

and the sufferings they inflict resemble nothing in this world. However, readers who reflect more deeply may discern a likeness to spiritual and psychological afflictions that are all too real and common among people that we know and love. Taken from [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation](#).

The Fifth Trumpet 9:1-12

One scripture scholar suggested to think of the blowing of the fifth trumpet as opening the gates of hell unleashing demonic forces to run freely on the earth. Note that there are four restriction God places on these elements of hell:

1. The vegetation is to be left unharmed (9:4)
2. Only the “inhabitants of the earth”, *only those people who **do not** have the seal of God on their foreheads* are to be harmed (9:4)
3. Those who can be harmed are not to be killed (9:5)
4. And the torment is to only last five months (9:5)

Scholars agree the fact that those afflicted are not to be killed and the fact that the torment is temporary, it is most likely that this plague is meant to have a corrective effect; meaning that the hope is with enough punishment some, if not most, will turn their hearts and lives toward God.

9:1 the fifth angel blew his trumpet: We will read in chapter twelve that battle that ensued in heaven between Satan and Michael. It is most likely that the **star that had fallen from the sky** is meant to represent the Devil, Satan himself. In the gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus say: “I

watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.” (Luke 10:18). This *star* whom we are going to identify as Satan is **given the key ... the abyss** or hell. Some bibles will read rather than the abyss, *was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit*. Again, remember that St. John is a well-educated Jewish Christian, God will be reaching into images and understandings that come from John’s Jewish roots. For the Hebrews of that century there was a belief in *Sheol* or *Hades*. This was a dark, gloomy underworld that those evil and ungodly people would descend after death to await their final judgement.

- *For you have power over life and death; you lead mortals down to the gates of Hades and back again.* Wisdom 16:13
- *The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.* Psalm 9:17

Not to worry. God holds ultimate power and authority over all realms and uses their power for the greater glory of God. In this image we are being reminded that Satan may have chosen to rule in hell rather than serve in heaven, but it is Christ who holds the keys to hell. Why God would allow this will not become clear until later in the chapter (9:20-21). As we have discussed before, to bring about the repentance of the unfaithful.

9:2 he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit: In opening the abyss smoke immediately begins to rise resembling what one might see **from a huge furnace**. This image of smoke coming from a furnace would have been one St. John would have been familiar with. We read in Genesis 19:28 in regard to the aftermath of judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah: *(Abraham) looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.*

9:3-4 Locust came out of the smoke: While *locusts* would have been a familiar pest in St. John’s era, there are two Old Testament passages that give background to this image. First we have the eighth plague of Egypt in Exodus chapter 10. The other is from the prophet Joel in an announcement of judgment against Judah. The difference is between Exodus & Joel and what is happening here in Revelation, is that in Revelation rather than eat and destroy all vegetation, these locusts are released to torment **only the people**. They were given the power to inflict pain with the **same power as scorpions of the earth**. Scorpions are in the same family as spiders and while their sting is venomous causing a severely painful wound, but the strength of the venom will not kill a healthy adult. They can range in size from 0.3 to 9 inches. Jesus himself refers to evil and demons as *snakes and scorpions* (Luke 10:19), so it is very likely that the images given by Jesus are intended here as well. And again, what people are they to distress? **Those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads**. Those that have the seal (baptism) on their forehead belong to God and are counted among the faithful.

9:5 They were not allowed: Even in the suffering of the world, God is in control. The locusts are **not allowed to** kill, but given free range to torture and cause pain on only the unfaithful/unbelievers but only **for five months**. We can ask why five months and there are two answers:

- Most probably is that five months is the life span of locust.

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- Most likely is that the “five” is not to be understood as time specific but to mean a relatively short period of time.

9:6 During that time: God may have limited the time that the locusts could cause anguish and suffering, but the vision goes on to say that the suffering is so great **these people will seek death, they will long to die.** I don't know about you but while I have never had to suffer to the extent described here, I have had to deal with excessive pain to the point that I believed that bringing about my own death would be the only way I could find relief. Imagine being at this point, seeking to die but **death will escape them.** This would be hell here on earth.

9:7-10 The appearance of the locusts: The scripture now turns to create a strong visual of this strange looking demon that the fallen angel has been able to release with the sounding of the fifth trumpet. Remember, St. John is not describing a specific animal/beast. He is putting together multiple images to create a horrifying picture. Much of the language/image is borrowed from the prophet Joel (2:4-7). So are the elements that make up these demons from hell:

- **Like that of horses ready for battle** – Historians have described Roman war horses as some of the fiercest. They were very large, massive beasts bred for battle. They were encouraged to be mean and to bite all but their owner/rider and handlers. Their hooves were sharpened until razor sharp so when they kicked or pawed at the enemy to inflict injury.
- **On their heads they wore what looked like crowns of gold** – crown of gold always means royalty, not that these animals were royal but they had an authority to rule with their vicious nature.
- **Their faces were like human faces/They had hair like women's hair** – What St. John is describing something that is human in appearance but not in reality.
- **Their teeth were like lion's teeth** – this description of their teeth means to communicate that these beasts were ferocious. Lions kill by biting into and ripping out with their teeth the neck of their prey.
- **They had chests like iron breastplates** – meaning that they were invincible, indestructible.
- **The sound of their wings – the sound of many horse drawn chariots racing into battle** – Sound can have a terrifying effect in and of itself. The sound of chariots wheels and horses hooves racing over cobble stones would have the same effect on 1st century people as the rumble of tank movement or bombs dropping to those during the 2nd World War or the screaming of jet fighters or helicopters to Vietnam Vets. The idea here is to understand the concept of terror if you were one who was not a believer.
- **Tails like scorpions, with stingers** – this we have already discussed. These diabolical beasts were as plentiful as the locust put painful.

9:11 They had as their king: We are told in this verse who the ruler of these beasts are, **the angel of the abyss.** The one who had fallen from God's grace and now rules the underworld.

St. John gives him two names. One in Hebrew, **Abaddon** which means “destruction”. And the other in Greek, **Apollyon** which means “the one who destroys.”

9:12 The first woe has passed: We end this section with a declarative statement that gives relief but only for a moment before it reminds us **there are two more to come.**

The Sixth Trumpet 9:13-19

We turn now to the sixth Trumpet and the response there after, and it is more of what we experienced with the fifth trumpet blast. The difference is that after the five months of torture with no death, the beasts that are unleashed are given directions to kill.

9:13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet: If five months of enduring scorpion stings was not enough, with the sixth trumpet now comes death. Once the trumpet has sounded St. John hears a **voice coming from the four horns of the golden altar of God.** This is the same altar we read about in chapter 8 (verse 3) where the angel offered incense for the prayers of the holy ones. Perhaps the voice coming from that altar is the same angel. It might be interesting to note that for centuries within the tabernacle of the Temple, there stood the altar of incense. The altar had four horns, one on each of the four corners. (Exodus 37:25-28)



9:14 telling the sixth angel: The angel at the altar of incense now gives direction to the sixth angel. **Release the four angels...** Just as the first falling star (9:1) was Satan, it is most probably that these four angels are lieutenants in the army of evil because they are chained or **bound** and as we will find later will kill one third of the population of the inhabitants of the earth. These four “angels” have been **bound at the banks of the great river Euphrates.** The Euphrates was the longest river in ancient Mesopotamia. Like most else in the book of Revelation, while there is historic significance what is more important is the symbolic nature. First let’s look at the historic significance to the Euphrates river. It was across its banks that both the ancient nations of Assyria and Babylonia had to cross to attack the Jews. In 722 BC the northern nation of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and it was the Babylonians that conquered the nation of Judah in 586 BC making them both the great archenemies of the Jews. In more recent times it was the Euphrates river that marked the eastern border for the Roman Empire across which the much feared Parthians lived. *Whether John’s audience was thinking about biblical history or the security of the empire, mention of any army crossing the Euphrates would have been disturbing* (Peter Williamson). Therefore the symbolic nature of these four angels “crossing” the Euphrates would have created an image that would have brought fear into the hearts of those first century Christians listening.

9:15 So the four angels were released: In God’s plan these four angels were released from their bounds and they **were prepared for this hour, day, month and year.** Once again we are hearing that God is allowing evil to perpetuate, not as an act of blindness but as a tool in hopes that it will change the hearts of the “inhabitants of the earth”. Again, those who refuse to

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honor God as their god. And because there is a precise moment – *this hour, this day, this month, this year...* scholars believe that the blowing of the sixth trumpet will sound at the end of time. The consequences of Trumpets one through four have been felt throughout all of history. But Trumpet five and six will sound as all time is coming to an end as one final effort to bring the evil hearts of humanity into line with God’s mercy. We know this also because when the seventh trumpet sounds there will be the announcement of the Kingdom of God having come.

*Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,
“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”*

Revelation 11:15

9:16 I heard their number: Another sign that this judgment is more fierce and deadly is by the identification of what is to come. The number of the enemy army is **two hundred million**. There is no real significance in the number other than the immensity of it. Even by today’s standards, to face two hundred million marching soldiers would put the fear of God into most people. These soldiers are the **cavalry**. Remember what was offered in the explanation of Roman horses bred for war in Revelation 9:7-10 above: They were very large, massive beasts bred for battle. They were encouraged to be mean and to bite all but their owner/rider and handlers. Their hooves were sharpened until razor sharp so when they kicked or pawed at the enemy to inflict injury.

9:17 Now in my vision I saw the horses and their riders: So imagine the fear in one’s heart at just the thought of the mere number of these animals bearing riders prepared to kill, bearing down on you. But if that is not enough we get a fearsome description:

- **Red, blue and yellow breastplates** – Remember the Parthian army that rests just east of the Euphrates? Guess what their colors are? You got it – red, blue and yellow and the army wore these colors on their breastplates. Scholars also suggest that these colors correspond to what will spew from their mouths.
- **The horse’s heads were like the heads of lions** – The lion was considered the most ferocious beast in the Mediterranean. It also helps that this beast resembles the mythological Greek monster, Chimera—a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail.
- **Out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur** – fire is red, smoke can be blue and sulfur is yellow. One more thing about sulfur: You may be familiar with “fire and brimstone” — brimstone being burning sulfur. ... When sulfur burns it produces sulfur dioxide which turns into sulfurous acid when it comes in contact with water. That means it can be deadly if you breathe it into your very moist lungs. In scripture smoke is often associated with the fires



of God's judgment. Speaking of "fire and brimstone", this would be an image that would be familiar to first century Jewish Christians having heard all their lives of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24) and the raining down of God's judgment.

As you can see from a better understanding of these images, once again these horrible beasts are meant to symbolize God's divine and righteous judgment on those who refuse to acknowledge God as their god. What we saw in verses 13-16 in this chapter constituted the first woe of Revelation 8:13. This army that now marches constitutes the second woe.

9:18 By these three plagues: The plagues that they are speaking of is fire, smoke and sulfur that comes out of these beasts mouth. Note, that it is the beasts/horses that kill **a third of the human race** and not the riders. Once again the number one-third is to be understood figuratively meaning a lot of people will die but the majority will live.

9:19 For the power of the horses: One commentator offered the suggestion that since these deadly elements are coming out of the beast's **mouths**, one way to look at this is to think in terms of language, false speech. One can think of "fumes" as the spray of words. Especially today with the internet, radio, television, podcasts... there is a whole lot of hate speak out there. The power of the horses is not only in their mouths but **in their tails**, tails that look like **snakes**, symbolic of demons. Just like the scorpions of the fifth trumpet, these horses can inflict death from both ends. But as believers we have nothing to fear. Jesus' authority continues to reign throughout. *I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you* (Luke 10:19).

Humanity's Response 9:20-21

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. These words of St. Paul from 1 Timothy 2:1-4 confirm that it is God's desire for all of humanity to be as one with Him. But, there will always be within humanity those who would rather rule in hell then serve in heaven, as we can see in these next two verses.

9:20 The rest of the human race: Certainly there were those caught in this and other judgments that repented and turned their hearts towards God. We have no reason to believe otherwise. We know that one-third of the population died at the hands of the beasts of the sixth trumpet. And, of those **who were not killed**, what they suffered was not sufficient enough to pursued their hard hearts and they **did not repent** of their evil and wicked ways. St. John let's us know what is the primary sin of these unrepentant – **idols, the work of their hands.**

FINAL THOUGHT: I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say that it seems like the world is more evil than ever before. I don't know if that is true or not because we live in an information age. Each evening we turn on the news we are hearing of the earthquakes and

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natural disasters in far off lands, or the mass shooting across the country, political and social unrest and everything in between. Because of our access to information we are more aware of dysfunctional family life, divorce, strife and stress in schools and work, economic ruin, compulsive behavior, depression, addiction, loneliness, anger and all the torments that plague our lives. Rather than think of the horrible creatures we have studied today, maybe these emotional, social and physiological challenges are the evil that means to consume us. Are we in the “end-times”? Only God knows. To quote Cardinal Karol Wojtyla before he became Pope John Paul II, *We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has ever gone through... We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, of the Gospel verses the anti-gospel. This confrontation lies within the plans of divine providence.*

My thought is this – regardless of where we are in the history of the world, our call as baptized confirmed Catholics is that we should be acting like and thinking like we have a responsibility to do something about the suffering of the world. Rather than standing self-righteously on the side lines of life basking in our pride that we are not like other people, we should be doing all we can to alleviate the suffering of the lives that cross our path. Maybe the reason that so many people remain unrepentant at the end of time is because no Christian offered them help and assistance.

Picture on Page One: from the Bamberg Apocalypse

Reflection Questions:

- The “locusts” are released in chapter nine to attack and torment. If we think of the “locusts” as symbolic, can you identify elements of our culture today that attack, torment and in some cases lead people to seek out Christ and faith in their lives?
- Why do you think that some people need these negative events and happenings to convert them from non-belief to belief?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Particular Judgment: 1021-1022

Heaven: 1023-1029

Purgatory: 1030-1032

Hell: 1033-1037

Last Judgment: 1038-1041

Hope of a New Heaven and the New Earth: 1042-1050

Bibliography:

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- [New Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation](#) by Catherine Cory
- [Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: 1st, 2nd, 3rd Letters of St. John and the Revelation to St. John](#) by Scott Hahn & Curtis Mitch
- [The Navarre Bible: Revelation](#)
- [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation](#), by Peter S. Williamson
- [Apocalypse Then and Now: A Companion to the Book of Revelation](#) by Roland J Faley
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