

## When God Uses Evil To Judge Evil

### Revelation 9:1-21

**Introduction:** 1) The great reformer Martin Luther is credited with saying, “the devil is still God’s devil.” His point? Clearly Satan is both evil and powerful, but he is still the sovereign Lord’s devil. There is only one Sovereign God, and the devil is not that God. The important truth is this: ultimately nothing happens apart from the sovereign determination of God. Nothing! And, when it comes to evil and the wicked, destructive devises of Satan, demons, and even human persons, God is not the author of evil even as He, for His good purposes, allows evil (James 1:13). And, in Revelation 9, we see our great God turning evil on itself. We see God using evil to judge evil and He is rightly glorified in doing so.

2) 8:13 serves as a transition into Chapter 9. The flying eagle should be understood symbolically and may have a connection with the eagle-like living creature of Revelation 4:7-8. Before the last 3 angels sound their trumpet, a 3-fold woe is pronounced upon the earth and “in a loud voice.” The 1<sup>st</sup> woe is to be identified with the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet. The 2<sup>nd</sup> woe is to be identified with the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet. The 3<sup>rd</sup> woe is to be identified with the 7<sup>th</sup>

trumpet which constitutes the final series of judgments: the 7 bowls of chapter 16.

The phrase “those who live on the earth” is used throughout Revelation to designate those who live in rebellion and unbelief before the true and living God. It occurs 12 times in this book. These are persons who live not only on the earth, but for the earth. The things of God count for nothing. The issues of heaven matter nothing. What a tragic way to live. What a terrible way to die.

3) Chapter 9 naturally divides into 3 parts: 1) the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet comprises verses 1-12 as demons are released from the bottomless pit or the abyss; 2) the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet is sounded in verses 13-19 recording the death of 1/3 of humanity through demonic destruction; 3) the refusal of humanity to repent of its idolatries and immoralities is recorded in verses 20-21, summarizing man’s response to the trumpet judgments of 8:7-9:19. In all that unfolds the absolute and awesome sovereignty of God is on full display. Even Satan and demons ultimately do His bidding. How incredible that in the face of all of this, humanity still shakes its fist in God’s face and refuses to repent of all the evils of its heart and hands. John only needed 6 verses to set forth the first 4 trumpets in chapter 8. Now he devotes an entire chapter of 21 verses

to the blowing of trumpets 5 and 6, again what the Bible calls the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> woes (9:12).

## **I. Spiritual Warfare Is Real and Intense 9:1-12**

Chapter 9 addresses real war in a real world (spiritual) that eventually invades our world (spiritual and physical). The imagery is frightening and terrifying as the spiritual world invades the physical world and demons are unleashed to bring devastation, destruction and death. 8:13 warned us that the last 3 trumpets (5-7) would bring 3 woes to the earth. That day is here and what takes place is hard to put in human words. Chuck Swindoll is so helpful when he says, “As we study John’s vision and observe the armies of darkness battling in the future, we can better understand how similar spirits of wickedness try to torment us today.” (133).

### 1) God is sovereign in what He allows 9:1-5

The very most important thing for us to understand is that all that takes place is under the control of our God. He tells the angels to blow their trumpets and they blow (v.1). He gives Satan “the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit” (v.2). He tells the demons what they can do (v.4). He puts a limit on the torment they can inflict (v. 5).

The 5<sup>th</sup> angel blew and John saw a star that had fallen from heaven to the earth. “Had fallen” is a perfect tense participle emphasizing an event in past time with continuing results. This star, unlike the star of 8:10, is a person (note the personal pronouns applied throughout). The statement is reminiscent of Luke 10:18 where Jesus said, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” Though dogmatism again is unwarranted, I believe the best interpretation is to see this as a reference to Satan (see MacArthur, 254-257). It is neither a good angel, nor a chief demon who is under the devil’s direction. It is Satan, the devil himself, who is in view. “He had fallen.” It had already occurred prior to the blowing of the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet. The exact time is not specified. Lucifer, the star of the morning, son of the dawn (Isaiah 14:12), the anointed cherub (Ezekiel 28:14), was cast out of God’s presence and heaven’s glory when sin was found in his heart. Now as we move toward history’s climax, he is allowed a diabolical freedom on the earth that he was previously denied. The key (authority) “to the shaft or the abyss” (mentioned 9 times in the New Testament), a prison house for demons (cf. Luke 8:31; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6) and the abode of the dead (Romans 10:7) is given [by God; a divine passive] to him. Immediately he opens it (verse 2) and smoke,

dark and hot, fills the air and darkens the sun. The beast, the Antichrist, also will arise from the Abyss (11:7). Satan will be imprisoned there for 1000 years following the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus (20:1-3). Satan's fall is great indeed.

When the shaft to the abyss is opened, demons in the form of locusts flood the earth. Power (authority) is given them like scorpions. This is reminiscent of the 8<sup>th</sup> plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:1-20) and the locust vision of Joel 1-2 (Duvall, 131). These are not literal locusts, however, who can travel in columns 4 miles wide and 100 feet deep (Mounce, 186). These are demons, released to torment mankind spiritually, physically and in every other way as well.

Verses 4 – 6 make clear their mission: to torment all persons “who do not have God's seal (Denotes possession and protection) on their foreheads” (cf. 7:2ff). Believers will not be touched by these ambassadors from the abyss. And, there is a limitation to what they can do: torment – yes, kill – no. Verse 5 places a further limitation in terms of time: 5 months. The normal life span of a locust was approximately from May – September, 5 months. This verse would also seem to indicate the torment they inflict is primarily physical: stinging and striking like that of a scorpion. However, we should not

place limitations on exactly how they will torment mankind.

Remember this is apocalyptic language. What is certain is what they do to humanity is horrible, and what they do is only what God allows.

2) Humans may suffer and even seek death 9:5-6

\*These demonic locust-like creatures torment human persons in a painful and severe manner. I am certain they take delight in their activity. They would like nothing better than to kill off the human race. God, however, in grace, limits what they can do. They can sting and strike mankind but they are not permitted to slay him; not at this point in the judgments (cf. 9:15).

Verse 6 is amazing as well as heartbreaking and tragic. While death will be the lot of Christian martyrs at the hands of evil men (6:9), these evil people will seek death, look for the same fate they inflict on others, but they will not find it. They will long or yearn for death, but it will run from them and they will be unable to catch it. For thousands of years men have run from the grim reaper only to find him too swift to evade. Now, men chase him but find they are too slow of foot. What irony. What tragedy.

\*John MacArthur captures well the magnitude of what is unfolding before us. His words are painful to contemplate:

“So intense will be the torment inflicted on unbelievers that in those days (the five months of v.5) men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death flees from them. All hope is gone; there will be no tomorrow. The earth people have loved and worshiped will have been utterly devastated, the land ravaged by earthquakes, fires, and volcanoes, the sea filled with the putrefying bodies of billions of dead creatures, much of the fresh water supply turned into bitter poison, the atmosphere polluted with gases and showers of heavenly debris. Then, worst of all, will come foul smoke from the pit of hell as the demons are released to spiritually and physically torment wicked people. The dream of a worldwide utopia under the leadership of Antichrist (the beast of 13:1ff.) will have died. Driven mad by the filth and vileness of the demon infestation, people will see relief in death—only to find that death has

taken a holiday. There will be no escape from the agony inflicted by the demons, no escape from divine judgment. All attempts at suicide, whether by gunshot, poison, drowning or leaping from buildings will fail.” (261-62)

3) Demons are powerful and love to harm us 9:7-12

These verses provide a detailed description of these demons who have been confined, perhaps, since Satan’s fall. John is probably more concerned with the overall impression made by this vision than he is with the details (Duvall, 132; Mounce, 188-89). Still, without pressing the particulars beyond reason, we learn something about these maniacal monsters from the pit. The composite picture is that of unnatural and uninhibited evil and wickedness.

“Horses equipped for battle” inform us they are an army prepared to wage war against God and His people (v.7). Further, they are of considerable size and terrifying in appearance. “Crowns of gold” point to authority and power. “Faces like the faces of men” speaks of intelligence. They are cunning and cruel, wise and wicked. There is a method to their madness. They have a leader and they follow a well-orchestrated game plan. “Hair of a woman” (v.8) is perhaps an



indication of the long antennae of locust or to the seductiveness of their strategies. That they are alluring and enticing could be the idea. “Teeth like lions” denotes fierceness and deathlike power in their attack. “Chest like iron breastplates” (v.9) tells us they are virtually invulnerable. They are strong and well protected. It would take a supernatural power greater than their own to defeat them. “The sound of their wings . . . sound of chariots with many horses rushing into battle” means they are intimidating in their coming. The sound of their attack and approach would strike fear in the heart of any opponent who attempted to face them. “Tails with stingers like scorpions” (v.10) communicates they possess a painful sting that causes great agony and great suffering. “Harm people for 5 months” repeats verse 5 and adds emphasis and intensity to their mission of misery.

All of this takes place ultimately under God’s authority. But directly and immediately it takes place under the direction of “their king, the angel of the abyss” (v.11). And, this King has a name. “In Hebrew [it] is Abaddon and in Greek he has the name Apollyon.” Both, I believe, are again references to Satan.

The Hebrew word *Abaddon* appears six times in the Old Testament and is derived from a verb that can mean “to become lost,” “to perish,” or “to destroy, kill.” *Abaddon* has a similar meaning to Hades as used in Revelation 1:18, 6:8. A similar usage is found in Psalm 88:11 where it is paralleled with the grave. Job 31:12 used the word to imply an unquenchable appetite. *Abaddon* is not only a place, but also a person. *Abaddon* is an appropriate name for the angel of the underworld and the king of the locusts in Revelation 9:11. Though *Abaddon* is under God’s sovereign power, it (and he) has an insatiable appetite and represents not only a destruction that takes life but a destruction that reaches beyond the grave to the afterlife. *Abaddon* would have conjured images of doom and despair for John’s readers and would have made them even more fearful of the torture coming at the hand of the angel of the underworld and his army of destroyers.

*Apollyon*, the Greek counterpart to *Abaddon*, is used as a proper name only here in the Bible. The word also carries the idea of “one who destroys.” Something more subtle, however, may have been in John’s use of *Apollyon* to translate *Abaddon*. John may have intended an indirect attack on the Greek/Roman god Apollo, and thus on the

reigning emperor, Domitian, who thought of himself as Apollo incarnate. Apollyon and Apollo (Apollon in Greek) look and sound alike. Furthermore, worshipers of Apollo had as one of their symbols for him the locust. In John's apocalypse the Greek reader could not have missed the echo of the name Apollo, the god, and Apollyon, the destroyer. The well-known pagan god, a favorite of the emperor whose persecution of Christians lies behind the Revelation, is identified with hell and destruction (Beale, 502-504; Mounce, 191).

The horror of this judgment, that God allows, is unspeakable and yet, something worse is yet to come. Verse 12 simply and straightforwardly says, "The first woe (5<sup>th</sup> trumpet) is past; "behold" (*ESV*; take notice, look here!), two woes (6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> trumpets) are still coming after these things." The 1<sup>st</sup> disaster has passed, but I see 2 more on the way, just around the corner.

## **II. When God's restraining grace is removed, hell comes to earth**

### **9:13-19**

"The gospel is not a tranquilizer for worried weaklings to help them sleep at night. It is not a mass of dead dogmas, deep frozen in some ancient cathedral to be carried as a burden through life and thawed out five minutes

before death. The gospel is not a list of religious rules and regulations to be strung around the soul like a lucky charm in case of accidents. No, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is a message—and what a message! It is a living message from the living God for living people, just like us, for people with sins just like us, for people with sorrows and heartaches just like us. It is the only message on the face of the earth with concrete promises and absolute assurances of an eternal inheritance that will withstand the impact of death and the collapse of the universe.” (J. Boyd Nicholson, *Uplook*, Nov. 1997, 11).

Such a gospel is especially “good news” as we consider the 7 angels with 7 trumpets of Revelation. That is especially true when hell comes to earth at the sovereign direction and determination of God.

1) God again directs what evil does      9:13-16

The 6<sup>th</sup> angel sounds and an unspecified voice speaks from the golden altar which is before God (v.13). Possibly this is the angel-priest of 8:3-5. He speaks to the 6<sup>th</sup> angel with a clear and precise word. He is told to “release the 4 angels bound at the great river Euphrates.”

These angels, I believe, are demons. Good angels are never said to be bound. The Euphrates marked to the east the boundary separating

Rome from her primary enemies. Historically this was the Parthians (Keener, 270).

Verse 15 reveals that they had been prepared for the 1) hour, 2) day, 3) month, and 4) year. This is a precise time. There is also a precise purpose: to kill a third of mankind. Combined with Revelation 6:8, we discover that ½ of the earth's population will die as a result of the seal and trumpet judgments. The carnage is unfathomable. Verse 16 tells us there is a specific army bringing about this carnage: 200 million. John says, "I heard their number."

The 200 million army: is it demons or humans? An either/or decision may not be necessary or even best. Some connect the army with the kings of the east in 16:12 and identify them with a human army. Interestingly *Time* magazine noted over 50 years ago that China claimed an army of 200 million (May 21, 1965). It is certainly possible, even reasonable, to believe demons will work through human instrumentality in this day. Still, the primary description before us is that of a massive number of demons. God directs this mind-boggling demonic activity.

2) God again determines what evil does 9:16-19

Verse 15 informs us the demons bring about the death of “a third of the human race” (cf. again 6:8; where “over a fourth of the earth” is killed). Verse 16 informs us of that “the number of mounted troops was 200 million.” Verses 17-19 provide a picturesque description of the demonic army that will arrive in the last days.

Only here in Revelation does John directly indicate the visionary nature of what he experienced (Mounce, 196). Again the overall impression of the horses and their riders is more important than the details. John saw in the vision the following:

Riders with breastplates of fire and hyacinth (dark blue) and sulfur yellow. “The red, blue and yellow of the protective breastplates matches the fire, smoke and brimstone that comes out of the mouth of the horses” in verse 18 (Ibid). The heads of the horses are like the heads of lions, speaking of ferocity, cruelty and destructive strength and power.

The destructive forces of fire, smoke and brimstone proceed from the mouths of these demons and by these 3 plagues,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of mankind is killed. Verse 19 provides an additional descriptive word: there is also power in the horses’ tails, for they “resemble snakes, have heads, and

they inflict injury with them.” With their mouths they kill and with their tails they harm. From either direction or both ends, they have the capacity to damage and destroy. Such a description supports the view that these are demonic hordes which are causing havoc on the earth. Fire breathing monsters were common in ancient mythology. Fire breathing demons will be a reality during the Great Tribulation. One cannot help but think back to Genesis 19 when fire and burning sulfur rained on Sodom and Gomorrah. Then it affected 2 cities. In the future much of the world will suffer (Ibid., 197).

### **III. God’s judgment reveals the utter depravity of the human heart**

#### **9:20-21**

W. A. Criswell, the famous and faithful pastor of the FBC Dallas for over 50 years wisely noted, “One of the strangest things about human nature is that man has not changed because of punishment...He may desist from evil because he is afraid, but his heart is still evil. He would do evil if he could get by with it. A man is really changed only by the Gospel of the grace of the Son of God.” (Vol. 3, p.192). Criswell was right and Revelation 9:20-21 makes this tragically clear.

- 1) Humans love their idols 9:20

John Calvin said “the mind begets an idol; the hand gives it birth” (*Institutes* 1.11.8). His words ring true to Scripture. In both verse 20 and 21 we are informed that humanity does not repent in the face of God’s judgment. Verse 20 drives home the truth that idolatry is at the core of an unrepentant heart. “The rest of mankind” refers to unrepentant, unbelievers who did not die from the seal (Ch. 6) and trumpet judgments. They refuse to worship the God who created and made them, but they gladly worshipped the gods “of their hands” (Rom. 1:18ff). And take note: idol worship and demon worship are close companions. Worshipping “idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk”, is in concert with “worshipping demons.” To worship stuff is akin to worshipping Satan. Dead sinners worshipping dead gods of their own making. No wonder Romans 1:22 says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (ESV). Idolatry robs God of his glory and rightful place in your life as demons take His place. Do not think such idolatry is reserved for faraway places around the world. It is down the street. It is next door. It is in your own home.

2) Humans love their immorality 9:21



Four particular sins are additionally noted in v. 21. These sins, like those in v. 20, have afflicted humanity throughout history. It is possible they will be especially prevalent in the last days. “Murder” is the wanton taking of innocent human life. “Sorceries” is witchcraft, magic arts, occultic activity. It is the Greek Word *pharmakon* and could indicate the use of drugs in divination practices. “Sexual immorality” is the Greek word *porneia* and refers to all forms of sexual sin that occurs outside the marriage relationship between a man and woman. “Thefts” is simple another word for stealing, taking what is not yours.

The sins of verses 20-21 involve a basic violation of the 10 Commandments (Ex. 20: Deut. 5). Idolatry violates commandments 1 and 2. Murder violated the 6<sup>th</sup>; immorality the 7<sup>th</sup>; and theft the 8<sup>th</sup>. As it was in the days of the Judges, it will be a time of unbridled and unrepentant evil with, “every man doing that which is right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Mounce makes a remarkable observation, “Once the heart is set in its hostility toward God not even the scourge of death will lead people to repentance” (198). Amazingly, it appears it will only spur sinful humanity to sin even more. What an indictment of the depraved human heart.

**Conclusion:** Satan, demons and evil are real. They are often powerfully real. But, and this is so critically important for us to understand, they are all on a divine leash! There are heavenly imposed limits on what they are allowed to do. Pastor-theologian Helmut Thielicke puts it very well in his book *Man in God's World*:

“But however great may be the leeway that the satanic power possesses in history (and who is not conscious of this today!), however strong may be the rebellion and the opposition, the fact still remains that in the ultimate reckoning even this opposition is included in God’s plan for the world and is being guided by God to a goal which the demons themselves never sought. Luther summed up this experience in the rather startling phrase that even the devil is still “God’s devil” and must be subservient to his higher goals because God is *his* Lord, too. When the apocalyptic horsemen storm across the earth and the earth and the world shakes beneath their hoof beats...and terror lay waste mankind, then we must remember that it is God who allows even those powers of destruction to ride [and the trumpets blow], that it is he who waves them on and he who can check them with a flick of his sovereign hand.

This is the hidden structure of providence and God's government of the world, and it is there even when God has abandoned men to their own self-destruction and seems to be doing nothing but "letting things happen." This is the ultimate comfort of the Christian faith in providence when God is silent and history grows murky and dark." (p. 149).

Our God is there and He is working. The question for all of us is, are we listening? Will we repent? Will we worship the God who made us or will we worship the gods we make?