

Revelation Ch. 9: The Fifth and Sixth Trumpets

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Verses 1-2

Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit.

This star is different than that previously mentioned (8:10). John saw the previous star falling from heaven, whereas this one had already fallen some time in the past. For this reason, and the description given him later (9:11), this star is likely none other than Satan (cf. Lk. 10:18; Rev. 12:9; 2 Pet. 2:4). Another possibility is that this is simply an angel from heaven, directed to open the pit (cf. 20:1). Whatever the case, this individual was given permission to unleash the evil from the pit (cf. Job 1:12; 2:6; Matt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:6), in order that God's purpose may be fulfilled (17:17; cf. Isa. 10:5-7; Hab. 1:12-2:20).

The bottomless pit represents the source and abode of evil (11:7; 17:8; 20:1-3). Since the word means "abyss" (9:11; NASB), "the deep," or "the depths of the earth," and the same word was used to describe Hades (cf. Rom. 10:7), perhaps this refers to the part of Hades called Tartarus, where evil spirits are restrained until the final judgment (Lk. 8:31; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:1-3; cf. Isa. 14:15).

To open the bottomless pit is to unleash the evil therein, allowing it to influence men (cf. 20:7-8). Some of the first century instances of this included demon possession (Matt. 8:16; many others). Though that does not happen today, evil influences are still at work (cf. Jn. 13:2; Eph. 4:26, 27; 6:11, 12; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8).

The smoke darkening the sun and air symbolizes the visible works of evil that contaminate what is good (cf. Jn. 3:19; Eph. 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:9).

Verses 3-5

Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. And they were not given authority to kill them, but to torment them for five months. Their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man.

The locusts represent a devouring plague (Ex. 10:1-19), an army of evil sent to destroy (9:7-9). They had power like the sting of a scorpion, extremely painful and sometimes deadly, however, they were not permitted to kill.

The locust season is 5 months long (May – September), and so the 5 months symbolize the fact that, as with real locusts, these locusts would devour for a limited time. They would also have limited strength (i.e., they could not kill men). During a locust plague, these creatures would fly together in dense clouds that darkened the sky and land (Ex. 10:15).

These were clearly not literal locusts, since actual locusts eat the grass and herbs. These were to harm wicked men not counted worthy of escaping tribulation (7:14; cf. Lk. 21:36). They are likely the

sedition Jews that swarmed the countryside and devoured their own people (cf. Joel 1:1-12; Josephus, Wars 4.9.7). Though the seditious did in fact kill their own countrymen, they were not to be the ultimate end of the nation. The Roman army is fully unleashed later (9:16).

Verse 6

In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire death, and death will flee from them.

This idea has been brought forth earlier (6:16), and would be expected to happen during the most trying time in history (cf. Matt. 24:21; Josephus, Wars 4.6.3). Josephus records that “the aged men and the women were in such distress by their internal calamities, that they wished for the Romans, and earnestly hoped for an external war, in order to their delivery from their domestical miseries.” (Wars 5.1.5).

Death is only a relief to God's people (Phi. 1:21; Lk. 16:19-31).

Verse 7

The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were crowns of something like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men.

The shape was “like horses prepared for battle” (cf. Joel 2:4). This ties in well with the description of the seditious Jews by Josephus (Wars 2.19.7; 2.22; 4.9.3-12). Notice that the crowns they wore were “something like gold” as opposed to true gold (4:4). The Jewish leaders during this time appeared (to some) to be doing the right thing in opposing Rome, yet they were really just hurting themselves.

Verse 8

They had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth.

The teeth symbolize the actions of these men, devouring their own people (cf. Joel 1:6; Ps. 58:6; Pr. 30:14; 1 Pet. 5:8).

It is interesting that Josephus mentions this same devouring band of seditious Jews as indulging themselves in “feminine wantonness, without any disturbance till they were satiated therewith; while they decked their hair, and put on women's garments, and were besmeared with ointments...” (Wars 4.9.10). Since first century custom held that it was shameful for a man to have long hair (1 Cor. 11:14), perhaps the hair is just a symbol of the unnatural or shameful behavior of these men.

Verse 9

And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle.

The number of wicked men in Judea seemed innumerable and unstoppable (cf. Ezek. 1:24; Joel 2:1-11), yet this did not compare with the Roman army (9:16).

Verse 10

They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. Their power was to hurt men five months.

See 9:5.

Verse 11

And they had as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is

Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon.

The name Abaddon means “destruction” (Ps. 88:11), and Apollyon means “destroyer” (cf. Matt. 10:28). These names best identify with Satan, the “star” that had fallen (9:1), the angel of the bottomless pit (12:9; Matt. 25:41), the prince of this world (cf. Jn. 12:31; Eph. 2:2; 6:12).

If not Satan, this angel could still be the same mentioned in 9:1, or another being altogether (cf. Ex. 12:23; 2 Sam. 24:16). Regardless, we know that literal locusts have no king (Pr. 30:27).

Verse 12

One woe is past. Behold, still two more woes are coming after these things.

As bad as things are, this was just the beginning. The civil war in Jerusalem would escalate even more, as the Roman army laid siege to the city and ultimately destroyed it.

Verses 13-14

Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”

The four angels that had been restrained (7:1), the four horsemen symbolizing God's agents of destruction, the Roman army, are fully unleashed.

The Euphrates is often mentioned as the great river (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7; Jos. 1:4). It provided a natural border between kingdoms (2 Sam. 8:3), and was the eastern border of the Roman Empire (16:12). This ties in well with the “four corners” of the earth (7:1), and represents the Roman army waiting at the ends of the earth to sweep through and destroy Jerusalem.

The voice came from the four horns of the golden altar, where blood was sprinkled for sins of ignorance (Lev. 4:7). Though they were actually part of the altar, the four horns, like other references to horns, may also symbolize power and strength (5:6). The primary focus is that God was answering the prayers of the martyred saints (6:9-11; 8:3-5).

Verse 15

So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind.

Just as a third of things destroyed (Ch. 8) represented partial devastation, so also does the killing of a third of mankind here. Notice that these angels represented a different force than the locusts (who were not permitted to “kill”), which is why the locusts likely symbolize the seditious Jews devouring themselves, and these four angels the four horsemen that eventually wipe out Jerusalem.

Verse 16

Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them.

As with the majority of numbers in Revelation, this is not a literal figure but that of an enormous magnitude and power (perhaps 10,000 times 10,000 strengthened by 2; cf. 5:11; Dan. 7:10).

Verses 17-18

And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like heads of lions; and out of

their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed – by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths.

Like the locusts, the horses had breastplates as well, and not only had the teeth of lions, but the horses had heads like lions. The picture is similar, a devouring army.

The colors of the breastplates symbolized what came out of the mouths of the horses. The fire connection is obvious, while hyacinth was a purple or deep blue gem (21:20), and also a flower, that matches to the smoke here. Brimstone is an ancient term for sulfur.

Fire, smoke, and brimstone always symbolize the wrath and punishment of God (14:10, 11; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8 Gen. 19:24; 2 Sam. 22:9; Ps. 11:6; Ps. 18:8; Ezek. 38:22).

The fact that the punishment came from the mouths of the horses may also be indicative of Divine judgment (1:6; 2:16; 11:5). This was a fulfillment of prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27; 12:7; Matt. 23-24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21).

Verse 19

For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm.

Not only did fire, smoke, and brimstone come from their mouths, but their tails were like biting serpents. This may symbolize harm caused in both coming and going, or may refer to the battle tactics of the Romans, who would not resort to their weapons until necessary (Josephus, Wars 3.5.1).

Verses 20-21

But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Times of trouble are a call to repentance, though the evil men of this generation were beyond that (Josephus, Wars 5.10.5; 5.12.4; 5.13.6). The Jews during the first century did not have problems with idols per se, so it seems that these are mentioned here as a symbol of covetousness (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; cf. Wars 5.10.4).

Josephus tells how the seditious Jews “did not repent...for they were blinded by that fate which was already coming upon the city, and upon themselves also” (Wars 5.13.7), and also that the Romans drove the robbers out of the city “but missed the plunder, because the seditious had carried off all their effects...for they did not repent of the mischiefs they had done, but were insolent, as if they had done well; for as they saw the city on fire, they appeared cheerful...” (Wars 6.7.2; cf. 6.2.3).

The sins mentioned here are common to all ages, and are mentioned to emphasize how wicked this generation was.

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