

The Fifth and Sixth Trumpets: The First and Second Woes

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the significance of the fifth and sixth trumpets, revealing the demonic torment loosed upon the earth and the loosing of the four angels to slay the third part of men.

Scripture: Revelation 9:1-20

Topics: "End Times", "Divine Judgment"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the dramatic events unfolding in Revelation 9, where the fifth angel sounds the trumpet and a star falls from heaven, symbolizing Satan being given the key to the bottomless pit. This leads to the release of demonic forces that torment those who do not have the seal of God, causing intense suffering and a desire for death that eludes them. The sixth trumpet reveals the loosing of four angels bound at the Euphrates River, unleashing a massive army of 200 million horsemen to execute divine judgment, resulting in the death of a third of humanity. Despite these catastrophic events, the unrepentant hearts of men persist in idolatry, sorcery, murder, fornication, and theft, showcasing the depth of human depravity.

Transcript

9:1-2 And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.

The rising crescendo of judgments on the earth now introduces the first woe, a dramatic event described by John in the first twelve verses of this chapter. As the trumpet of the fifth angel is sounded, John records that he sees a star fallen from heaven having the key to the bottomless pit. Earlier in the book of Revelation, in connection with the sixth seal (6:12-17) and the fourth trumpet (8:12-13) record is made of unusual disturbances in the starry heavens. In chapter 6, the stars of heaven fall even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, and heaven itself departs as a scroll when it is rolled together. In chapter 8, a great star from heaven described as "burning as it were a lamp" falls upon rivers and fountains of waters. In these instances it is probable that reference is made to material stars or fragments of them, and their falling on the earth is a form of divine judgment upon a wicked world.

The star here mentioned, however, seems to refer to a person rather than a literal star or meteor. The star is described as "fallen" in more accurate translations rather than falling, as indicated in the Authorized Version. The word fall is in the perfect tense which signifies completed action. For the event itself, see Revelation 12. J. B. Smith notes two passages anticipating this: Isaiah 14:12-17; Luke 10:18.¹⁸⁴ The person referred to as the star is given the key of the bottomless pit, or the pit of the abyss, as it is better translated. No explanation is offered in the passage itself concerning the identity of this person, but the occasion may be the aftermath of warfare in heaven mentioned in Revelation 12:7-9, where the devil is cast out into the earth. This act of God, probably at the beginning of the great tribulation, terminates the ability of Satan to accuse the brethren in heaven as he has been doing through previous ages. The first verse of chapter 9 does not record the fall itself, but rather the star is seen as already fallen from heaven to the earth. It would seem likely, therefore, that the person referred to as the star is none other than Satan himself. J. B. Smith believes the star is an angel:

That a literal star is not meant is evident from the part that to him was given the key, that is, the authority (Matthew 16:19; Revelation 1:18), to open the bottomless pit. An intelligent being must be intended. It has been observed that a star is used as a symbol of the angel, 1:20. As early as the days of Job, there is a similar use of the word... (Job 38:7).¹⁸⁵

To this personage is given the key of the bottomless pit, or pit of abyss. This is the first instance of this expression in Scripture mentioned three times in this chapter and four additional times later in Revelation. The "bottomless pit" (Gr., abyssos) is the abode of demons according to Luke 8:31. The Greek word is found seven times in Revelation (9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3). Romans 10:7 implies hypothetically that Christ descended into the spirit world between His death and resurrection.¹⁸⁶ From these references, it may be concluded that the pit of the abyss is none other than the place of detention of wicked angels. It is here that Satan himself is confined for a thousand years during the reign of Christ on earth (20:1-3). The opening verse of this chapter, therefore, presents Satan as having the key to the pit of the abyss with power to release those who are confined there.

The second verse records the use of the key. The pit of the abyss is opened, and out of it comes a smoke as the smoke of a great furnace which darkens the sun and the air. It is evident that this event causes that which is contained in the pit of the abyss to erupt, polluting the air and darkening the light of day. It seems to portend the spiritual corruption which will be caused by these demons released from their confinement, and it identifies the character of the judgment involved in the fifth trumpet as that of demonic and satanic oppression.

The Fifth Trumpet: Demonic Torment Loosed upon the Earth (9:3-6)

9:3-6 And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads. And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months: and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man. And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.

As John continues to observe the unfolding of the fifth trumpet, he sees locusts coming out of the smoke which are likened to scorpions. As is borne out by the description given later, these are not natural locusts, but a visual representation of the hordes of demons loosed upon the earth. Peake observes:

Now these descriptions of heaven and hell were meant by the author to be very literally taken. They are not figures of speech; and if we are to be true to the writer's thought we can scarcely represent the scenes to our imagination with too much realism. And similarly the scorpion locusts are quite literally intended; they are not heretics, or Goths, or Mohammedans, or the mendicant orders, or the Jesuits, or Protestants, or Saracens or Turks, but they are uncanny denizens of the abyss, locusts of a hellish species, animated by devilish instincts and equipped with infernal powers.¹⁸⁷

Walter Scott expresses another viewpoint, "that the locust army is a symbolical representation of judgment of a superhuman kind."¹⁸⁸ Scott holds that "neither the smoke nor the locusts are literal."¹⁸⁹

The locusts are commanded, probably by God or perhaps by Satan himself, not to hurt the grass of the earth or any green thing, or any tree, but only men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. In the Old Testament, locusts were a greatly feared plague because they could strip the country of every green leaf and sprout, leaving man and beast alike to die for lack of food. Frequently in the Bible, locusts are used by the Lord as a divine judgment upon a wicked world. In the contest of Moses with Pharaoh in Egypt the plagues of locusts mentioned in Exodus 10:12-20 caused Pharaoh to be quickly humbled. According to Exodus 10:16-17, when the plagues of locusts had covered Egypt, Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin only this once, and entreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only." In response to this entreaty, Moses prayed to God and a strong west wind blew the locusts into the Red Sea. A similar plague of locusts is mentioned in Joel 1:4-7.

The locusts in Revelation 9, however, while given this title because their function is similar to that of a locust, represent a divine judgment upon a wicked world. They are described as having the capacity to sting as the scorpions of the earth and as not eating the grass or green vegetation as ordinary locusts would do. Instead, they torment men in a way comparable to the torment of a scorpion. Apparently the entire human race is open to their activity except those who are sealed by God in their foreheads. This obviously excludes the 144,000 of Revelation 7, and the protection may extend as far as this plague is concerned to all who know the Lord in that day. According to 2 Timothy 2:19, "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his." In a similar way, believers in the present age are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise according to Ephesians 1:13-14. It would seem improbable that any true believer in that day would be subject to the torment of the locusts; the torment is rather a judgment upon Christ-rejecting men.

The graphic description of the torment is compared to that when a scorpion strikes a man. Scorpions in all climates are fearful and painful scourges. In warm climates, they grow to such size as to make their sting not only painful but dangerous. Frequently small children die from the sting of a scorpion in tropical countries. Though the affliction here described is not actually a sting of a scorpion, it is compared to the pain and suffering caused by such a sting.

Further, the torment is said to extend for five months. Probably the best interpretation is to take this literally as a period of five months. As Alford and other commentators point out, "Five months is the ordinary time in the year during which locusts commit their ravages."¹⁹⁰ In contrast to the pain caused by a scorpion which would pass away in a course of hours, this continues for a long period so that in verse 6 John writes that men shall seek death and shall not find it.

Literal death is meant here. Elliott's point of view that the command not to kill in verse 5 refers to the security of the church is made impossible in view of the obvious character of death in verse 6 where men seek to die and cannot do so. As Alford notes in commenting on this,

For it surely cannot be allowed that the killing of men should be said of their annihilation as a political body in one verse and their desiring to die in the next should be said of something totally different, and applicable to their individual misery.¹⁹¹

This is a horrible picture of domination by demons to such an extent that men lose their ability of free choice and are in agony of body and soul. What the Scriptures here convey is that in addition to the natural plagues of the first four trumpets, now wicked men are afflicted by torment of demons.

The attempts of some commentators to spiritualize this trumpet and work out an elaborate prophetic system, based on the idea that each day in the five months is a year, is totally unjustified. There is no period in history which in any sense fulfills what is portrayed in this chapter, nor is there any evidence in Scripture that the term "month" or "year" is ever used in any other sense than a literal one. Though the word day frequently refers to a period of time longer than twenty-four hours, and the weeks or sevens of Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 9 are evidently prophetic years rather than twenty-four-hour days, in this instance there is no justification for taking the expression to mean anything other than a literal five months. This would fit in the chronology of the tribulation time as it is elsewhere taught in the Scriptures. The introduction of the time element is to show that the torment is not a passing experience of a few days but rather a plague that extends over a considerable period of time, making its affliction a fearful experience to contemplate.

Undergoing such a strange and painful experience, it is natural that men would seek to die. The prophecy indicates, however, that though they seek death, death shall flee from them. As is common in demonic affliction as recorded in the Gospels, those in the grip of demons are not free to exercise their own will and therefore are not free to take their own lives. Even the hope of death to deliver them from their present troubles is taken away from them in that dark hour. They are left to face their trial and affliction without any way of escape.

The Fifth Trumpet: The Locusts Described (9:7-11)

9:7-11 And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months. And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon.

The description of the locusts given in these verses makes it clear that they are not ordinary locusts and are so named only because of their function as a judgment and plague from the Lord. They apparently are much larger than ordinary locusts and are compared to horses prepared for battle. Inasmuch as demons do not have physical shape, what John is seeing must symbolize demonic possession. The locusts are described as having crowns of gold on their heads, ordinarily a token of victory, but here apparently a decoration or headdress. Their faces are described as similar to the faces of men. Their hair is described as the hair of women and their teeth as the teeth of lions. This awesome combination of the qualities of

beasts and men depicts the utterly fearful character of these instruments of divine judgment. This is in keeping with the general character of the book of Revelation as an unmasking of the true nature of Satan and evil.

In verse 9, the locusts are declared to have breastplates of iron, implying that they are immune to destruction. They are also equipped with wings which give forth the sound of many chariots going to battle, implying speed and the impossibility of evading their attack. Particular attention is given to their tails, which are compared to those of scorpions and by which they have power to hurt men for five months. It would be difficult to describe a more fearful spectacle than these instruments of divine justice, utterly wicked in themselves, and released from the pit of the abyss to accomplish this terrifying judgment. The fact that they have power to hurt men five months is repeated in verse 10, as if to call special attention to the length of their torment.

In addition to the previous description, in verse 11 the locusts are declared to have a king who is the angel of the pit of the abyss, described both in the Hebrew and the Greek. The Hebrew name "Abaddon" and the Greek name "Apollyon" both mean "destroyer." Such is the character of Satan and those who affiliate with him as wicked or fallen angels. Though in the modern world Satan often appears as an angel of light in the role of that which is good and religious, here the mask is stripped away and evil is seen in its true character. Satan and the demons are seen as the destroyers of the souls of men and as those who can only bring affliction. When divine restraint is released, as in this instance, the true character of the evil one is manifested immediately.

Announcement of Two More Woes (9:12)

9:12 One woe is past; and, behold, there come two woes more hereafter.

Fearful as is the torment inflicted by the locusts out of the pit of the abyss, it is only the first of three great judgments which conclude the trumpet period. In verse 12, we are informed that the woe described as following the fifth trumpet is now past, and two more woes are going to follow. The word woe refers in Scripture to some great calamity, usually a judgment from God such as Christ pronounced upon Chorazin and Bethsaida (Matt. 11:21). Desperate indeed will be the situation of those who know not Christ in these tragic hours preceding His return to judge the wicked world.

The tribulation period unmasks human wickedness and also demonstrates the true character of Satan. In our modern day while Satan is still restricted it is easy to forget the great conflict which is raging between the forces of God and the forces of Satan referred to in Ephesians 6:12. In the great tribulation, and especially in the time of the fifth trumpet, with the release of the confined demons the full character of Satan will be starkly manifested. For the first time in history all those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour will come under demonic possession and affliction. What is true in that hour is also true in some measure today, for there is no deliverance from the power of Satan nor from his affliction apart from salvation in Christ and the delivering power of God.

The Sixth Trumpet: The Loosing of the Four Angels (9:13-15)

9:13-15 And 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 which had the trumpet, Loose the four angels which are bound in the great river Euphrates. And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men.

With the sounding of the sixth trumpet, John hears a voice described as coming from the four horns of the golden altar before God. In 8:3, this altar is the scene of the offering of incense with the prayers of saints. Here in its final mention in the book of Revelation, it is related to the judgment of the sixth trumpet. The inference is that this judgment like those preceding is partially an answer to the prayers of the persecuted saints on earth and a token of divine response and preparation for their deliverance. The four horns seem to indicate that this altar is similar to the design of the altar of incense used in the Tabernacle and in the Temple. If the horns have significance, they refer to the sovereignty and judicial government of God.

The voice instructed the sixth angel to loose the four angels declared to be bound in the great river Euphrates. Walter Scott observes that the command to loose the four angels indicates that "these angelic ministers of judgment are under divine control; they cannot act without express command."¹⁹²

In attempting to understand the description of this unusual event, a number of questions can be raised about the four angels. Why should they be bound in or at the river Euphrates? The answer seems to be that the vision concerns an invasion from the Orient. As Alford says, "there is nothing in the text to prevent 'the great river Euphrates' from being meant literally."¹⁹³

These apparently are not the same four angels mentioned in 7:1, who are angels in authority over the winds of the earth. The four angels mentioned in chapter 7, holding the four winds of the earth, are instructed not to inflict their punishment until the 144,000 of Israel are sealed and protected. They seem to be holy angels or instruments of God's divine wrath upon the world. The four angels in chapter 9, however, are obviously of different character, for they are described as bound at the great river Euphrates. There is no instance in Scripture where holy angels are bound. Some of the wicked angels, however, are bound according to Jude 6. Likewise, later Satan is bound for one thousand years and cast into the pit of the abyss.

From these parallels, it may be concluded that the four angels bound in the Euphrates River are evil angels who are loosed on the occasion of the sounding of the sixth trumpet in order to execute this judgment. It is another instance of the loosing of wicked angels similar to the release of the demonic locusts earlier in the fifth trumpet. They all are prepared for their hour of activity much as the whale was prepared to swallow Jonah and effect divine discipline upon the prophet. These are wicked angels designated to execute the great judgment of the sixth trumpet but prevented from doing so until the proper moment. It is declared that the angels' function is to slay the third part of men and that they had been prepared to fulfill this purpose at the given hour.

The expression "an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year" designates not the duration of their activity but the fact that this judgment comes exactly at the hour of God's appointment. On the basis that the article is used only before the word hour in the Greek construction it should be translated "the hour, and day, and month, and year," to be interpreted as Alford does: "the appointed hour occurring in the appointed day, and that in the appointed month, and that in the appointed year."¹⁹⁴ Though the agency of men is used to accomplish the purpose of God, the time schedule is determined by God, not man, and even angels execute God's will in God's time.

The judgment here depicted, that of slaying the third part of men, is one of the most devastating mentioned anywhere in the book of Revelation prior to the second coming. Earlier in the fourth seal, a fourth of the earth's population is killed. Here an additional third is marked out for slaughter. These two judgments alone account for half of the world's population, and it is clear that in addition to these

judgments there is widespread destruction of human life in other divine judgments contained in the seals, trumpets, and vials. Never since Noah has such a substantial proportion of the earth's population come under God's righteous judgment. The fact that the third part of the population of the world is killed is repeated in verse 18.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The Sixth Trumpet: The Army of Two Hundred Million (9:16-19)

9:16-19 And the number of the army of the horsemen were two hundred thousand thousand: and I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth, and in their tails: for their tails were like unto serpents, and had heads, and with them they do hurt.

Having declared the purpose of the army, John now gives details. Most impressive is the astounding number of the army of horsemen, 200 million, or literally "twice ten thousand times ten thousand." Because the number "ten thousand times ten thousand" is often used of an innumerable company (cf. 5:11) some have held that this should not be understood as a literal number. Scott does not believe that the army of 200 million should be taken literally:

A literal army consisting of 200 million of cavalry need not be thought of. The main idea in the passage is a vast and overwhelming army, one beyond human computation, and exceeding by far any before witnessed.¹⁹⁵

H. B. Swete comments, "These vast numbers forbid us to seek a literal fulfillment, and the description which follows supports this conclusion."¹⁹⁶ If considered a literal enumeration of the army, it would represent the largest armed force ever known to man. Considering the millions of people in the Orient, the literal interpretation is not impossible, especially in view of the population explosion. The number of the horsemen here is comparable to the innumerable chariots of God mentioned in Psalm 68:17.

There is no direct statement as to the origin of this army, but the implication is, from the fact that the angels of verse 14 were bound "in" or at the Euphrates, that the army may come from the East. A similar and later development mentioned in Revelation 16:12 following the outpouring of the sixth vial also depicts an invasion from the East. Unless the vials and the trumpets coincide as some believe, these are two different events, possibly two different phases of the same operation. Chronologically the trumpets involved closely succeed one another and their judgments seem to fall like trip-hammer blows as the great tribulation comes to its close. Whether the army is held to be the literal number mentioned or not, it is clear that this is a massive force of tremendous military power as evidenced in its capacity to slay a third part of the human race. It may be that the army here described continues to fight until the time of the second coming of Christ, and the number slain is the total number involved in the conflict.

John also gives a graphic description of the horses as well as of the warriors who sit upon them. They are declared to have breastplates of fire and of jacinth and brimstone. Some have interpreted the description as John's understanding of a scene in which modern warfare is under way. Further, the heads of the horses are compared to heads of lions out of whose mouths fire, smoke, and brimstone issue. This again

is a description that might be comparable to modern mechanical warfare. In verse 19 additional details are given in that the power is declared to be in their mouths and in their tails. Their tails are compared to serpents, and even the tails have heads with which they can hurt men. Whether these are symbols or the best description John can give of modern warfare, this is an awesome picture of an almost irresistible military force destroying all that opposes it. The terms "horses," "lions," and "serpents" all speak of deadly warfare. The mention of lions can be compared to that in Revelation 10:3 where lions roar, and to the description of the locusts in 9:8 as having teeth of lions, and to the beast of Revelation 13:2, which has the mouth of a lion. As king of beasts the lion speaks of victorious conquest.

Further light is cast on the character of the warfare in verse 18, where it is repeated that the third part of men are killed by the invading force; special mention is made of the means, namely, "by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths." This again seems to be a picture of modern warfare rather than of ancient weapons. This indicates that though there may be a disarmament in the early phases of the time period between the rapture and the second coming, by this time, namely toward the close of the tribulation, modern means of war are once again being fully used. The world that longs for peace and seeks to attain it by the worship of the beast of Revelation 13 will learn the sad lesson that there can be no peace until the Prince of Peace rules.

The Sixth Trumpet: Man Still Unrepentant (9:20-21)

9:20-21 And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts.

In spite of the dramatic judgment inflicted by this invading military force, those who survive are declared to be unrepentant. Such is the hardness of the human heart even though faced by worldwide destruction and divine judgment from God and a clear testimony of God's power to deal summarily with every human soul. The character of their wickedness is unfolded in these verses. They do not repent of the evil works of their hands. They do not repent of their worship of devils, or demons, and the worship of idols which their hands have formed, which John dramatically describes in the words "which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk." Their worship of idols does not change their lives, and verse 21 indicates that they do not repent of their murders, their wicked sorceries, their fornication, nor their thefts. Though the power of satanic false religion is evident in the world, it does not have the transforming, purifying, redeeming quality found only in the power and grace of God. Though men can be made to fear God by demonstration of divine power, they are not brought to the place of repentance apart from faith in Christ and divine grace. Scott observes, "The two closing verses of the chapter reveal an astounding picture of human depravity."¹⁹⁷

184 A Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 142.

185 Ibid.. p. 141.

186 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 142.

187 A. S. Peake, *The Revelation of John*, p. 181.

188 *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 204.

189 *Ibid.*

190 Henry Alford, The Greek New Testament, IV, 641.

191 Ibid.

192 Scott, p. 210.

193 Ibid., TV, 645.

194 Alford, IV, 645.

195 Scott, p. 211.

196 The Apocalypse of St. John, p. 122. Swete, if living today, would no doubt be astounded to read in Time (May 21, 1965, p. 35) that Red China alone claims to have a man-and-woman militia of 200,000,000, exactly the figure of Revelation 9:16.

197 Scott, p. 214.

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