

## **“Torment” (Revelation 9)**

**May 23, 2021**

**Brian Watson**

What scares you the most? What are you most afraid of?

If you stop and think about it, that tells you what you value the most. Often, what scares us the most is losing what we treasure. We’re afraid of losing loved ones, because we love them so much. We’re afraid of losing money, because we value what it can purchase. We also feel secure knowing that if we have some money, we can weather life’s storms. We’re afraid of getting sick because we value life, and we value living without pain and limitations.

But what about God? Are we afraid of disobeying him, of getting on his bad side, of sinning? Or are we afraid that if we turn to God, our lives will become worse?

That’s something to think about as we continue to look at the book of Revelation this morning. Today, we’re going to look at chapter 9, which is very much a continuation of chapter 8, which we looked at last week. To give a brief recap, chapter 8 gave us a picture of seven angels with seven trumpets. Each time a trumpet is blown, judgments come upon the earth. Last week, I said that the first four trumpets bring judgments that come throughout this age, the time between Jesus’ first and second comings. These judgments depict nature being affected in various ways, with people being affected indirectly. The way I interpreted these judgments is that there are natural disasters throughout this age; there are kingdoms that come crashing down; people are given over to false prophets and teachers, peddlers of lies; and people remain in spiritual darkness because they don’t want to come to the light, for fear of getting their sins exposed.

But chapter 8 ends with this verse, verse 13:

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!”<sup>1</sup>

This warning separates the last three trumpet blasts from the four earlier ones, and it signals that these last three are more serious. As I’ve said throughout this series on Revelation, the language and imagery of this book of the Bible is drawn primarily from the Old Testament. In the Old

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Testament, there are times when eagles are associated with judgment and war. In the book of Jeremiah, which was written around the time that part of the kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom known as Judah, was being judged for her sins, there is a passage that mentions a trumpet and an eagle. In Jeremiah 4, the prophet is told to blow a trumpet throughout the land, to tell people to go into fortified cities, for God was bringing disaster and great destruction from the north. The kingdom of Babylon, the world's superpower at that time, was going to come and destroy Jerusalem. Jeremiah 4:7 says:

A lion has gone up from his thicket,  
a destroyer of nations has set out;  
he has gone out from his place  
to make your land a waste;  
your cities will be ruins  
without inhabitant.

A few verses later, in Jeremiah 4:13–14, we read:

- <sup>13</sup> Behold, he comes up like clouds;  
his chariots like the whirlwind;  
his horses are swifter than eagles—  
woe to us, for we are ruined!
- <sup>14</sup> O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil,  
that you may be saved.  
How long shall your wicked thoughts  
lodge within you?

That passage goes on to talk about an army coming from a distant land to destroy Jerusalem, “because she has rebelled against me, declares the LORD” (Jer. 4:17). Trumpet, eagles, woe, judgment, destruction—that’s what we see in Revelation 9. We see what happens when the fifth and sixth trumpets are blown. I believe that these judgments are part of, or lead us to, the end times.

Let’s look at what happens when the fifth trumpet is blown. Here are verses 1–6:

<sup>1</sup> And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. <sup>2</sup> He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. <sup>3</sup> Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. <sup>4</sup> They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> They were allowed to torment them for

five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. <sup>6</sup> And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

There are two important things to see here. One is that there is a fallen star who “was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit,” the abyss. Stars in this book are often angels, and it seems that this is a fallen angel, a demon. Perhaps it is Satan himself, the devil. The language of “was given” is called the divine passive. If you remember your school days, there is a difference between the active voice and the passive voice. The active voice is used in a statement like “the dog bit me.” The dog is the subject, the agent, the verb is in the active voice, and the object is me. The passive voice is used in a statement like “the dog was bitten by me.” Now the dog is grammatically the subject, but I’m the agent, and the verb is in the passive voice. When we read this language of “was given” in the Bible, without there being a clear agent mentioned, that agent is usually if not always God. Why would God give a demon or Satan the keys to anything? Well, all authority comes from God. Nothing can happen on earth without his permission. Read the opening chapters of the book of Job to see that reality. Satan thinks he is great and mighty, but he’s just a dog on God’s leash, doing God’s will. God uses evil beings to bring about his plans.

And here God’s plan is judgment. God has made us for himself. The reason that we exist, and that anything exists, is for God. We were made to glorify God, to know him, reflect his glory, resemble him, rule over the world by coming first under his rule, love him, and obey him. But the fact is that we don’t do this well, if we try to do it at all. Instead of loving God and treasuring him above everything, instead of making God our great goal in life, we run from him. We knowingly do what is wrong, and as a result, our lives and the world are a mess. We might think that other people are the problem—they’re the bad guys, they’re the ones who do evil. But the fact is that we all do some evil, and if we’re honest, we would acknowledge that evil lurks within us.

I just started reading a book called *Confronting Christianity* by Rebecca McLaughlin. It’s an explanation and defense of the Christian faith. In it, she writes this:

It has been said that no friendship in the world would last a day if we could see each other’s thoughts. Run that test on yourself between now and tomorrow. Think of everyone you spend time with and ask, would I let them see a transcript of my thoughts? My marriage would die. My children would be crushed. My

friends would leave. My thoughts are not all bad: many are good and kind and true. But like a bag of flour infested by maggots, no part of me is pure.<sup>2</sup>

God cannot put up with that impurity forever, because it infests and ruins his creation. God wants to restore his creation, purify it of evil, and he can't do that apart from judgment. But God is patient. He hasn't brought the final judgment yet, because he is giving us all more time to repent and, for Christians, to make disciples.

So, when this star opens the door to the abyss, smoke rises, and all hell breaks loose. We're told that there are locusts who have the power of scorpions. They are told not to harm nature this time, but to torment those who are not sealed by God. I talked about the seal earlier, when we looked at chapter 7.<sup>3</sup> The seal is not a literal or visible mark. But the idea is that God knows his own people. They are marked out as belonging to him. And those who belong to God will be spared this torment. But those who lack that seal, who don't belong to God, will be tormented for five months. They will seek death, but they won't be able to find it. They will want to die, but they can't—at least yet.

To understand what's happening here, we need to understand the reference to locusts. Locusts were part of God's judgment against sin. They are mentioned among the various curses for breaking covenant with God (Deut. 28:42). When God rescued Israel out of Egypt, he sent ten plagues upon Egypt, and one of them, the eighth plague, consisted of locusts, which devoured all the crops of the land (Exod. 10:12–20). Even after this devastation, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, still would not repent of his evil.

Locusts are also mentioned in the book of Joel, which talks about the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, much of what happens here is a reference to the book of Joel. That book also speaks of a trumpet sounding, the day of the Lord coming, and darkness and judgment (Joel 2:1–2). It says that the locusts would devour Judah (Joel 1:4). The locusts are later associated with the armies of Babylon, which are also described as people who destroy with fire and as people who have the appearance of horses (Joel 2:3–4). Locusts, horses, and judgment are also mentioned in Jeremiah 51:14, 27. (Remember that the “destroying mountain” of Babylon, which is mentioned in Jeremiah 51:25, is alluded to in Revelation 8:8–9.) The locusts here could symbolize armies that God uses to punish people. Or, since they seem to be coming from the pit,

---

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: Twelve Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 212–13.

<sup>3</sup> See the sermon, “Sealed from Every Tribe,” April 25, 2021, <https://wbcommunity.org/revelationsermons>.

the realm of the dead and demonic, perhaps they are demons. Whatever they are, they torment people.

The fact that they torment people for five months might come from the fact that the lifespan of locusts is about that length of time. I don't think we need to read anything more into the length of time than that. The point is the torment will last for a definite, limited amount of time.

Let's read the next two paragraphs, verses 7–12:

<sup>7</sup> In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, <sup>8</sup> their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; <sup>9</sup> they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. <sup>10</sup> They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. <sup>11</sup> They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

<sup>12</sup> The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

These locusts have the appearance of horses, but they also wear what looks like golden crowns, and they have human faces. They also have long hair and lion's teeth. The description is meant to be frightening. Some of the descriptions, such as the lion's teeth, come from the book of Joel (Joel 1:6). The fact that they have human faces and golden crowns might indicate that these are human warriors. Or, the fact that they resemble multiple animals who have crowns might be an indication that these are perverted copies of the four living creatures that we encountered in chapter 4 (Rev. 4:6–7). One creature had a human face, and another was like an eagle. Also, the elders in heaven have golden crowns. If the locusts are demonic, then the fact that they resemble creatures in heaven is an illustration of an important truth: Satan often copies godly things, perverting them and twisting them for his purposes. Satan doesn't have the power of God. He can't create something entirely new. But he perverts what God has made, and that's something we'll see later in the book.

The point here is that these locusts are led by a king, an evil angel who is called Abaddon and Apollyon. The first word means "destruction" and the second one means "destroyer." In the Old Testament, Abaddon is the realm of the dead (Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Ps. 88:11; Prov. 15:17; 27:20). Apollyon, the destroyer, might be Satan himself. Or it could simply be an angel of death. When the tenth plague fell upon the land of Egypt, the "destroyer" when throughout the

land, killing the firstborn of all who were not covered by the blood of a sacrificed lamb (Exod. 12:23; Heb 11:28).

Let's now look at what happens when the sixth trumpet is blown. Here are verses 13–19:

<sup>13</sup> Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, <sup>14</sup> saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” <sup>15</sup> So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. <sup>16</sup> The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. <sup>17</sup> And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. <sup>18</sup> By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. <sup>19</sup> For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

Now, something even worse happens. Before, there was just torment. Now, we're told a third of the population dies. Four angels have been holding back an army at the Euphrates. Four often stands for the totality of the world, so these angels have been overseeing the so-called four corners of the earth. In the Old Testament, Israel's enemies, such as Assyria and Babylon, came from beyond the Euphrates. So, I don't think the Euphrates is meant to be understood as a literal geographical location. Rather, the enemies of God's people will come to judge, just as God used Assyria and Babylon to judge in the Old Testament.

We're told that this army consists of 200,000,000 mounted troops. I'm not sure that we're to take that number literally. It is reminiscent of the “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels in heaven that we read about in chapter 5 (Rev. 5:11). But the point is that they are a large force. It has been estimated that the population of the world was around 200,000,000 million at the end of the first century, so perhaps that's what the number means.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, they are terrifying. They have breastplates that look like fire and sulfur, which reminds us of what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 (see Gen. 19:24). They ride on horses that appear to have lions' heads, and they breathe fire and smoke and sulfur. We were told that the locusts have the power of scorpions, and here we're told that the tails of the horses are like serpents. Scorpions and serpents are associated with danger and punishment. But Jesus told

---

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estimates\\_of\\_historical\\_world\\_population](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estimates_of_historical_world_population).

his disciples that they would be able to tread on serpents and scorpions without getting harmed (Luke 10:19). So, perhaps these two trumpet blasts do indicate things that happen throughout this age, though it would appear that things get worse right before Jesus comes to earth.

I don't know that we should try to associate what happens with these fifth and sixth trumpets with any specific event in the news. Some interpreters have tried that, and they seem to be very wrong. The point is that God will bring torment and death upon the earth, and that these things are judgments against sin. But this is not yet the end. We're told that there are some who witness such things and still refuse to repent of their sins, just like Pharaoh. Look at verses 20 and 21:

<sup>20</sup> The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, <sup>21</sup> nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

This is stunning. Apparently, these people don't associate the torment and death with divine punishment. Or maybe they do realize that torment and death comes from God, but they don't care. They refuse to turn away from worshiping false gods and demons, and they refuse to stop murdering, engaging in occult practices, sexual immorality, and theft. It seems that the idolatry and other sins are representative of the Ten Commandments. They are also violations of the two greatest commandments, to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:36–40). The fact is that we all commit these sins. We fail to worship the one true God. Instead, we love, trust, and obey created things rather than the Creator. Instead of loving our neighbor as ourselves, we covet, we lie, we hate people, we lust, we're greedy and selfish. God is right to bring judgment against such evils.

But there is hope. I said earlier that the Old Testament book that provides much of the background of this chapter is the book of Joel. And though Joel talks about coming destruction, it also promises salvation to those who turn to God. Consider Joel 2:12–13:

<sup>12</sup> “Yet even now,” declares the LORD,  
“return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
<sup>13</sup> and rend your hearts and not your garments.”  
Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;

and he relents over disaster.

Even now, if we would return to God, if we would feel genuine sorrow over our sin and repent, God is gracious to forgive us our sins. God promised that those who would turn to him would experience restoration. He said he would restore what the locust had taken away. He promised that they would eat and be satisfied (Joel 2:25–26). Joel 2:32 says, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.” There is a way to escape this torment and death. That way is to call upon the Lord in faith, to ask him for mercy, to confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. And if you do this, you will also turn away from your old life, from putting other things in your life before God. You will turn away from sinning. That doesn’t mean you’ll be perfect, that you’ll never sin; but it does mean that your life will be changed.

How is it that we can simply return to God and be spared this destruction? Does God simply sweep our evil under the rug and forget it? No. The reason we can be spared God’s wrath is because Jesus undertook it. He suffered torment and death on our behalf. God doesn’t just let evil go. As a perfect judge, he must punish sin. And since he loves his creation and his people, and since he loves his own glory, he won’t let sin go unchecked forever. There will be a final day of the Lord, a judgment that is final, so that the evil of this world will be removed entirely, and that a new creation will be established. But the amazing thing is that God the Father took sin and put it on his Son, who willingly absorbed the penalty that sin deserves.

To those who are not yet Christians, I will say this: Will you turn to this Savior today? Or are you afraid to give you up our idols and your sins? Sin promises more pleasure and security than God gives, but that is a lie. God doesn’t want you to turn from your sin so that he can take away your fun. He wants to take something away from you that is destroying you so that you can have something better. God will judge sin, and he will judge sinners. The only way out is to find a new life in Jesus, to run to him for safety, and to live life for him. Will you do that today? If not, what are you waiting for?

The fact is that for some people, no amount of proof, no great demonstrations of God’s power, will bring them to repentance and faith. They would rather die than change. That is a sad fact. The only way that we can ultimately change is if God changes our hearts. If you feel some glimpse of your own sin, and if you understand the terror and destruction that await those who



don't repent, perhaps God is working on your heart right now. Don't run away from that. Lean into it. Learn everything you can about God, about Jesus, and about the Bible. I would love to help you do that.

For Christians, I will say this: God uses passages like this to show us the ugliness and evil of sin. Sin deserves destruction. So, turn from your sin. This passage also shows why there are times when our best efforts at evangelism won't produce results. Some people will always refuse to repent. But don't lose heart. There are some who will call on the name of the Lord, and they will be saved. So, take heart. And realize that if you are marked out as God's, you will not be tormented forever. It is hell to want to die and not be able to. But that will never happen to you. You will suffer. You will experience pain. But if your life is hidden in Christ, you will not be destroyed. Your destination is not the pit, but life with God in a new creation. As 2 Peter 3:13 says, "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."