

ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapter 9 of Revelation presents the judgments of the fifth and sixth of the seven trumpets which were introduced in Chapter 8. These two trumpets are also identified as the first and second of three great "woes" that will come upon the earth. I want to stress that the judgments of this book are real. They are terrible, horrible disasters, and there is both a literal and a figurative dimension to them.

I received an unsigned note in the offering last week which I will read to you exactly as it was written: "Kindly see to it that your sermon presentation is more entertaining and concise." I am sure that note was sincere and well-intentioned. Probably many of you feel the same way about my messages. I, too, strongly sympathize with those sentiments. I wish there was some way to make these messages more entertaining, and, although I struggle to make them concise, I probably could use some improvement in that area. But I remind you that we are dealing now with what the Old Testament prophets called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." I find it difficult to make such messages amusing or entertaining. It strikes me that to attempt it would be somewhat analogous to hiring a comedian to entertain the witnesses at a public execution! This is not entertaining material, I grant you, but it is true! And we have to face unpleasant truth at times.

Some of you may also be having trouble with the timing of these various events of Revelation. I have been asked, "Are these seals and trumpets and bowls of wrath chronologically sequential, or do they occur simultaneously?" I must admit that that is difficult to determine. As we have seen all along, the Apostle John is given this vision of what is to take place in the last days, from the vantage point of heaven. Thus he is looking at these events from the standpoint of eternity -- and the one great characteristic of eternity is that there is no time there. In heaven there is no sense of past or future. Everything is present -- now! That is why it is so difficult in this book to tell exactly when events occur when they are brought into time.

We are seeing here, then, not chronology but degrees of intensity. It is as though God keeps probing deeper and deeper into the events of the last days. The judgments of the seven seals give us a quick trip through this seven-year period that Daniel identifies as the last days. The trumpets, however, return as it were to a section of the last week and give us a different facet of judgment. That is what we are looking at in Chapters 8 and 9. When we come to the bowls of the wrath of God we will see still greater depths of earth's agony, but just how to fit it all into a time sequence is difficult.

This is made still more confusing by the fact that certain break-off periods -- intermissions I have called them -- which focus on events of special interest, are occurring during this time. We have already seen one of these in Chapter 7 and we will find others as we go on in this book. We could liken the events of Revelation to a missile launching at Cape Canaveral. The countdown proceeds normally and seems to be nearing the end, when suddenly there is a break. The countdown ceases while something is checked out or repaired, and then it resumes right where it left off. That is also somewhat the structure of this book. Perhaps that image may help you in understanding this.

Now in Chapter 9 we arrive at the fifth trumpet, presented in the first six verses:

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find

it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. {Rev 9:1-6 NIV}

This remarkable passage begins with the falling of another great star, not into the sea this time, as we saw under the third trumpet, but onto the earth. Again, this probably speaks of something literal. It is perhaps a great meteor falling from the skies. Many times in history such meteors have fallen to earth and created some degree of havoc and chaos. But here a second star falls. Yet the text clearly indicates that this is not just a literal star, it is also symbolic. It pictures an individual who is given a key by which he opens up the gateway of hell, the Abyss. When once Jesus visited the shores of Gadara on the Sea of Galilee he cast a legion of demons out of a man. The demons begged him, "Do not send us into the Abyss [the same word as here], but allow us to go into the great herd of swine that are feeding on the hillside," {cf, Matt 8:28-32, Mark 5:1-11}. Jesus permitted them to do that, and the swine immediately ran over a cliff and plunged into the sea and perished. It is a strange story, but it portrays the fear demonic beings have of being cast into this great Abyss.

We learn from other Scriptures that demons have already been incarcerated in this Abyss. The book of Jude tells us that there are angels that have been "kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day," {Jude 1:6 NIV}. Apparently we have come to that Day here for as this strange individual opens the Abyss, out of it comes a great cloud of locusts looking like smoke that fills the sky. Once again we are being presented with something literal and symbolic at the same time.

One summer when I was a boy in the state of Minnesota, we were visited with a great plague of locusts. They came in a cloud that actually darkened the sky. I remember hearing them descend onto the standing fields of grain, and it was like listening to a hail storm. As they munched away at the vegetation, the noise was like a rushing river. They destroyed everything in their path, leaving the farmers with no crops at all that year.

It is something like this that John sees when this fifth trumpet blows. But along with this literal visitation of locusts, invisible demons are also released from the very pit of hell into the earth. We must ask ourselves, who is this powerful personage who is permitted to unleash the powers of hell? This links closely with what we saw under the third trumpet when the other great star fell. He was identifiable as a powerful political leader who would change his policy in the midst of the week and thus embitter whole classes of people. If that was a political leader who thus "fell" then here we have a Jewish religious leader who turns apostate, and, by that means, introduces demonic forces upon the earth.

I believe he is Jewish because of the clues that are given in this passage. These demons were told not to harm "the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads." Clearly grass, trees and plants represent people, as we have already seen in Chapter 7, and they specifically symbolize Israel. Yet there is a certain group of them -- 144,000 that were sealed of God -- who are guarded and protected from this demonic control of human thought. The other people are not allowed to be destroyed but only tormented for a period of five months.

What we are doubtless seeing here is what Paul refers to in his Second Thessalonian letter as an important personage who arises in the last days and whom he calls "The Man of Sin" who sits in the temple as God and claims the worship of Israel, and of the whole earth. In other words, here is that great antichrist of the last days, foretold in many Scriptures.

His propaganda is described for us here under the figure of a "scorpion's sting." That will be the effect of his teaching upon those who believe it. It is like a scorpion's sting, producing great agony of mind and heart.

I was in Vietnam in 1960 and one afternoon I lay down to take a brief nap. As I did so I noticed something run across the top of the doorway. It ran down the side of the casing and onto the floor, and there I saw that it was a black scorpion about six inches long. It stood up on its rear legs, defiantly staring me in the face, with its tail curled up over its head, ready to sting. I looked around for something to hit it with, but it ran off and disappeared. I never saw it again, but I was never comfortable in that room! I asked my Vietnamese friends what would have happened to me if it had stung me, and they told me I would have suffered incredible anguish for 24 hours. Nothing would have relieved it, they said. A pain killer would only have made it worse. I would have had to endure it for 24 hours and then the pain would gradually disappear. That is a scorpion's sting, and it is used here to picture a terrible mental torment.

Years ago I had a home Bible class here in Palo Alto, and a young woman who attended told me that when she and a companion had been in Alaska teaching they looked for something to while away the long winter months. They began to play around with a Ouija board, thinking it was just entertainment. But that led them into reading horoscopes and astrology. After several weeks of this she began to hear voices in her head at night, insisting that she get up and write obscene, filthy words on a piece of paper. She could get no relief until she got out of bed and wrote. She would have to write for several minutes, and then she could go back to bed and go to sleep. But it kept getting worse and worse. The sessions grew longer and longer until she would actually have to sit and write for hours before she could get any sense of relief. It became an almost unendurable anguish. This was still going on in her life in California and she asked me what she could do about this. I read to her the Scriptures on demonic possession and prayed with her. We did this on several occasions, and I am happy to announce that she was delivered from this obsession. I have seen her since and she told me that it was a permanent deliverance. But this is the kind of mental anguish described here -- this horrible torment that seizes upon people's minds who open the door to the occult and unknowingly permit the intrusion of demonic forces into their lives.

That delusion is metaphorically described in Verses 7-11:

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. {Rev 9:7-11 NIV}

This describes the nature of the propaganda that this leader will unleash upon the world and the effect of it upon human minds. It is given, of course, in symbols, as is much of the book of Revelation. These are not difficult to interpret. "Crowns of gold" speak of something authoritative. As people hear the teachings and claims of this charismatic leader he impresses them as having great authority and power. "Human faces" speak of intelligence. This teaching will appear reasonable and will seem intelligent, making its appeal to the mind. "Women's hair" describes that which is alluring and attractive. Many will believe the propaganda because it appears to offer much personal advantage.

But it will also be like "lions' teeth" -- a symbol of that which is penetrating, cruel and frightening. That is what begins to happen as those who follow this teaching succumb to its delusion. They find it becomes cruel and vicious. "Iron breastplates" speak of callousness of heart. The demonic powers will be heartless, without mercy. Once the torment begins no appeal can relieve it, there is no way of escape. And it will come with an overpowering sound. That speaks of something which is widely popular. There will be tremendous peer pressure to believe this teaching, so much so that it seems irresistible and overpowering. The "stings in the tails" speak of the terrible aftermath, the mental torment that follows this awful teaching.

Then we are told clearly that it is all under the leadership of an invisible demonic king, the very angel of the Abyss himself. This, of course, is a figure for Satan. This whole account depicts an infusion of demonic forces upon the earth under the leadership of Satan himself in these terrible last days.

The world saw something like this in the days of Hitler and the Nazis. People today who see films of Hitler's frenetic harangues to the German people are amazed that anyone could believe the things he said. It is still an unexplainable phenomenon in history that a whole nation could be carried away by the strange teachings of this deluded and demented man. But it was a mere foregleam of what is coming.

Paul warns young Timothy in his first letter, "In the latter days some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons," {1 Tim 4:1}. Clearly this has been foretold in other parts of Scripture.

We are seeing foregleams of this in our own day. In the '60s there seemed to be a terrible breakthrough of evil

into the world. Strange, demonic teachings were introduced and people began to throw overboard long-obeyed customs and moral standards. We saw many revolutionary movements affecting men. Perhaps even now we are seeing much of the same thing in the delusions of what is called the New Age Movement. There are some things that are good and attractive about it, but much of it is a return to occult practices, and to being controlled by spirits that are supposedly teachers of truth. We are being told that the masters of the minds of men of the past are now available also to us through this kind of teaching. But when one begins to follow such teachings, it has a terrible effect. It leads at last to sheer despair and mental torment. It is, of course, not what is being described here for these powers are greatly limited in our day, but there is something worse of the same nature coming, something that will be permitted wide expression upon the earth.

In Verse 12 we hear the sixth trumpet giving its sound:

The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. {Rev 9:12-16 NIV}

John now hears a voice that comes from the horns of the golden altar. That altar has already come before us in Chapter 8. There we saw the altar of incense on which was offered before God the prayers of the saints who were then on earth. An angel took the fire from the altar and threw it back on earth and fire and judgment followed. What now happens under the sixth trumpet is an answer to the prayers of the saints of that day.

We have already been told what they are praying. A great crowd of martyrs are heard crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" {Rev 6:10 NIV}. This second woe is God's specific answer to their prayer. Notice the answer takes the form of releasing four powerful fallen angels who have been bound for centuries at the river Euphrates. But note also the sovereign control of God. It is a precisely-timed event. They are released at the very "hour and day and month and year" that God had long ago predetermined. No human or demonic power could change that timing!

This is all linked with the Euphrates river, once the ancient boundary between the East and the West. The Euphrates flows out of the mountains of Armenia down through the present lands of Iraq and Iran and on to the Persian Gulf. In the ancient world it formed the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. The Romans lived in constant fear of the Parthian hordes who lived on the other side of the river. Earlier, Israel had also lived in fear of invasion from across the Euphrates because Assyria and Babylonia both had sent their armies down from the north across the river and into Israel.

Many of the commentators have claimed that this army of two hundred million is entirely composed of soldiers from the Eastern nations -- India, China, Japan, Indochina, etc. It is true that the reference to the Euphrates river indicates that a barrier is being removed so the Eastern armies can come into the west, but I do not believe that all two hundred million of these come from the East. The commentators have failed to note that there are four angels released who control this event. Four is the number of worldwide human government. It is a picture of the four directions of earth -- north, south, east and west -- and these soldiers come from all of these directions. It would be almost impossible for any one nation today, or even several of them (such as in NATO), to field an army of that size. No army on earth today has much more than five hundred thousand troops. To field an army of two hundred million would be logistically impossible, even for China. But they do not all come from the east. They come from all directions, and they will gather to one place. In Chapter 16 that place is named for us. There we find the Euphrates river appearing again and this time it is linked with the Mount of Megiddo in Israel, or Armageddon. So this is the first glimpse we have in Revelation of the great armies of earth that will come from all directions, east, south, north and west, and gather in the plain of Megiddo in the land of Israel for the great battle of the last days.

This gathering of armies is further described by symbols, in Verses 17-19:

The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur [or brimstone]. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. {Rev 9:17-19 NIV}

What can this be? Let us remember that we are reading an ancient book in which are described events that are still future to us. What we have here is modern warfare described in military terms of John's day. "Breastplates" of various colors suggest armored chariots -- i.e. tanks, missile launchers, and other vehicles of war, that are camouflaged with various colors (or perhaps are identified by national colors, since this is a conglomeration of armies coming together). "Lion's mouths" that are spouting fire and belching smoke suggest cannons and mortars -- even nuclear missiles -- killing with fire, radiation, and poisonous gases. Tails like snakes that do injury perhaps describe modern helicopters, gunships, which have a rotor at the tail where also machine-guns and missile launchers are located. This may even depict weapons not yet invented. I recognize it is difficult to say precisely what all this means, but it is obvious that here we have a great military campaign, which results in monstrous slaughter of enormous scope. We are gradually being informed of what is about to happen, and we will see other pictures of these same events as the book continues to unfold.

The final scene under the sixth trumpet is the reaction of mankind to these strange and disastrous things.

The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood -- idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts. {Rev 9:20-21 NIV}

Observe that worshipping demons is put first. That is the explanation for this lack of repentance. Here are people who have believed a Satanic lie. It is what Paul calls, in Second Thessalonians, "a strong delusion" {2 Th 2:11 KJV}, a lie from the devil. They have believed this, and therefore they are rendered finally unable to repent. It is because they have begun, unknowingly perhaps and innocently, to worship demons.

We see something of this in the rise of Satanism in our own day. The authorities of this area are very disturbed about the attempts that we hear of to kidnap children. They are concerned not only because they want to protect children, but because they fear that these are attempts on the part of Satanists to obtain children to offer as living sacrifices. That has been proved to have happened in several instances.

The worship of demons finds its expression, we are told here, in idols. These are probably in the form of medals, ritual objects or figures, perhaps even crystals, that people wear around their necks. There is a touch of sarcasm here in the words, "idols that cannot see or hear or walk." These things do nothing for people no matter what they think about them. This superstitious submission to strange teaching is characteristic of the last days. These people would not change their lifestyles even under these terrible judgments. They continued their murders, (which probably includes abortion). It does not look like we are going to make much progress in this terrible, murderous aborting of babies that takes place so frequently today.

They also continued their "magic arts." Actually the word here is an interesting one. It is *pharmakeia*, from which we get our word "pharmacy." It really means drugs.

The awful drug traffic of today is unexplainable, is it not? Why can we not get rid of it? Surely you have asked yourself, why do people do this! In the face of the widespread warnings that we hear today, and the revelation of how damaging this can be, why do people do drugs? Why do they ever start? It is because drugs is a form of magic art. It is a part of the sorceries of these days, yet to be seen in even worse forms.

Their sexual immoralities also continue. Again, we have been subjected to an explosion of this in anticipation of this coming time. Also, of course, thefts, i.e. embezzlements and attempts to steal money from trusted funds. These fill our papers today, all foregleams that God has given us for the days to come. We have not yet reached these days, but these events are warning us of the nature of things yet to come. Even after the awful

bloodbath of a nuclear war, where one out of three die, still there will be no change of heart.

In the face of this obdurate refusal to change, we must ask, "Why judgment?" What is judgment for if it is so ineffectual in producing change? Let us not forget that the book of Revelation has already told us that millions will repent. Let us not ignore that "great multitude which no man can number" {cf, Rev 7:9 KJV} from every tribe and nation and language who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They come out of the great tribulation and appear before the throne of God. They have repented in the midst of judgments. They have believed, and have received the grace of God.

But here is a great number that judgment has not affected in that way. Judgment does not make them listen because their hearts are hardened. They are the impenitent -- unable to believe. They are no longer able to heed because they have refused the grace of God. That is what produces this kind of hardness of heart. God never expected to convert the world through judgment. He knows that well. What judgment does is to make us listen to grace. It makes us take seriously what God is offering as the way of escape. In these terrible judgments we see the power, the majesty, the might, the inescapability of God, and we must ask ourselves, "What can I do to be saved?" That is the effect of judgment. "What shall I do? How can I escape? Is there no way out?" What God then provides to those who feel their peril is a message of grace. It is not when judgment threatens that we turn to God. It is when we see a suffering love that gives itself for us, that bears the hurt and agony and pain -- it is that that breaks and melts our proud hearts, silences our excuses and opens the door to salvation. But then to reject that grace when it is clearly understood to be offered, to turn one's back upon it, is to render the heart unassailable and to make repentance impossible. That is the message of Hebrews 6.

That is where this passage leaves us and I want to leave it at that point. I have been writing a commentary on the book of Hebrews and I have been struck by a question that the writer asks in the second chapter which is really the theme of Hebrews. He asks, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" {Heb 2:3 KJV}. How can you escape if you neglect the offer of the grace of God? God does not want to judge men. He does not like judgment. We saw that last week. But that is all that is left for those who reject the way of escape which the grace and mercy of God supplies.

We have been singing this morning, quite properly, of the mercy and the grace of God. We sang:

And when I think that God his Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross, his burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died, to take away my sin;
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee,
How great thou art; how great thou art!"

That is incredible, is it not? We see how wonderfully tender and gracious God is, how much he wants people to be delivered from judgment, but in the end we must ask, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?"

There may be some among us here who have been coming for months, and years, and have never received the grace of God through receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the face of judgments such as these that are even now present in our land, judgments that speak eloquently of far worse yet to come, we must face this question, "How shall I escape if I neglect so great salvation?"

I leave that question in your mind and heart for you personally to answer in your own life.

Prayer

Father, we are sobered by these revelations of that which is yet to come upon the earth. We see something of your holiness, your power, your majesty, your displeasure with human sin. And yet, always against the background of that, we see your wonderful grace that offers a way of escape. We pray for all who are here this morning, that they will have opened their hearts to the saving grace of Jesus. We pray that life from above may be imparted to them;

that they will know the wonderful promises of grace to fill our life with joy and put songs in our mouths and make us rejoice in a destiny quite different from what we see described here. Help us now and strengthen us to live in the light of these revelations this very day. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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