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The First Woe: Demonic Locusts

Revelation 8:13-9:12

Introduction

What we have in Revelation 9:1–12 is one of the most disturbing visions in the book of Revelation. But before the fifth trumpet sounds, we hear not one "woe," not two "woes," but three: **"Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth…"**(Rev. 8:13). Remember what we heard around the throne in Revelation 4:8: **"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"** In heaven, the cry is **"Holy, holy, holy!"** Here, the warning to a rebellious world is **"Woe, woe, woe!"** The contrast reminds us of the seriousness of our sin before a holy God.

"Woe" is a cry of anguish and, here, a warning of terrible judgment. Jesus used this word when He confronted religious hypocrisy: **"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"** (Matt. 23:27). He compared them to whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but full of death and uncleanness within. Here in Revelation, the three woes announce the judgments of the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpets.

It is important to remember that Revelation allows us to see the world from heaven's perspective. When the Lamb opened the first four seals, we saw four horsemen: the white horse of conquest, the red horse of war, the black horse of deprivation and exploitation, and the pale horse of death. These realities fill our history books and our daily headlines. But John was shown something our headlines cannot reveal: the horsemen ride only because the Lamb opens the seals. Their authority is given, their power is limited, and their activity remains under His sovereign rule.

Last week, we considered the first four trumpets, which strike the land, sea, fresh water, and heavens. Like the plagues of Egypt, they expose the powerlessness of our idols and the fragility of what we take for granted: our food, our wealth, our water, and even another day. The God who hears the prayers of His redeemed people rules the creation on which His enemies depend. Yet the repeated emphasis on one-third reminds us that these judgments are limited—warnings that call people to repentance.

Before we consider the fifth trumpet, remember two things. First, the seals, trumpets, and bowls revisit the same age from different perspectives, with increasing intensity, all leading to the Day of the Lord when Jesus returns. Think of a powerful tornado: the seals show the danger from a

distance; the trumpets bring its approach into sharper focus, and the bowls reveal the full devastation of its arrival.

Second, what we see in these judgments is creation coming undone—de-creation. God is bringing this fallen order to its end and preparing the way for the new heaven and new earth. Now, with the fifth trumpet, we are shown a terrifying judgment upon those who do not have God's seal. This is the first of three woes! As we consider it, keep asking: What is God showing us about the world we live in, and how should we live in light of what He reveals?

What Is the Demon Locust Horde?

Before I tell you what I believe these creatures are, let me briefly explain how the four main approaches to Revelation understand them. There are differences within each view, but here is the general picture.

> **Preterists** understand most of Revelation as fulfilled in the first century and commonly connect these locusts with judgments surrounding Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70.
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> **Historicists** understand Revelation as an outline of church history and often identify the locusts with Arab Muslim armies and their conquests.
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> **Futurists** understand most of these visions as events surrounding Christ's future return. Many see actual demons released during a future tribulation; others have suggested helicopters, drones, or genetically engineered creatures.
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> **Idealists** understand Revelation as portraying spiritual realities throughout the church age, culminating in Christ's return. They generally see these locusts as demonic powers tormenting those who do not belong to God, under His sovereign restraint.

So, what are these creatures, or who are they? Let's begin with what we are told. After the fifth trumpet sounds, John sees a star that has fallen from heaven, and that star is a "him." Some believe he is Satan or another fallen angel; others believe he is a good angel who descended from heaven. Regardless of his identity, do not miss this: he opens the bottomless pit with a key that was given to him. He is not acting independently of God.

The pit is a place of demonic confinement. Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 likewise describe rebellious angels held for judgment. While these passages describe the same place, they reveal God's authority to imprison demonic powers. Here, the pit is opened, and the demonic locust horde is released. They have **"as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit"** (Rev. 9:11), named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Some identify him as Satan, but I believe he is another fallen angel who commands this horde.

Not every demon is confined to the pit. Paul warns that our struggle is not only against flesh and blood, but **"against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"** (Eph. 6:12). That is why we must put on the whole armor of God.

So, I am convinced these creatures are demonic, given their origin in the abyss and the king who commands them. And remember: we are seeing them through the lens of heaven. This vision exposes the nature of the powers at work.

As with the first four trumpets, the imagery recalls the Egyptian plagues. John writes, **"Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth"** (Rev. 9:3). In Egypt, locusts devoured what remained after the hail (Exod. 10:1–20). But these locusts are forbidden to harm vegetation. Instead, they torment those who do not have God's seal.

Now notice how John describes them: **"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, their hair *like* women's hair, and their teeth *like* lions' teeth; 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**" (Rev. 9:7–9).

Seven times in verses 7–9, John uses the word "like." So, what is the point? These images help us understand the nature of the demonic powers unleashed from the abyss. They are like horses prepared for battle—ready to carry out their assault. On their heads are what look like crowns of gold, suggesting conquest and victory. Their faces are like human faces, suggesting intelligence and cunning. These demons are not mindless insects. Their attack is deliberate and purposeful.

Their hair is like women's hair, which may suggest beauty or seduction, or both. But notice what comes next: their teeth are like those of lions! If the hair suggests attraction, the teeth reveal destruction. Does that not remind you of temptation? Sin draws us in with the promise of something good while concealing what it will cost us. I believe this picture helps us understand how demonic powers work through deception and seduction to bring people into bondage and suffering. The lions' teeth also recall Joel's description of a devastating locust invasion: **"its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness"** (Joel 1:6).

Their breastplates are like iron, suggesting formidable protection, and the noise of their wings is like many chariots with horses rushing into battle. Taken together, these images reveal a terrifying, organized demonic army. Their scorpion-like tails and stings emphasize their power to inflict agony. They are forbidden to destroy vegetation as the locusts did in Egypt. Instead, their victims are those who do not have God's seal, and their torment is so severe that people seek death but cannot find it.

Remember, we are seeing these powers as heaven reveals them. What may appear attractive and persuasive on earth is exposed here as destructive. And by the end of the chapter, people still refuse to repent of worshiping demons and idols! They cling to the very powers whose destructive character this vision exposes.

But do not miss this: their crowns do not make them sovereign, and their armor does not place them beyond God's authority. The Lamb opens the seal, the angel receives the key, and these creatures are given their power. They are told whom they may harm and how long they may torment. Even the powers of darkness cannot go beyond the boundaries God has set.

What Do We Do with the Sounding of the Fifth Trumpet?

So, what are we to do with the fifth trumpet? If Revelation cannot mean for us today what it did not mean for the first-century church, how does the fifth trumpet speak to us, and what warning are we to heed?

I believe two passages help us understand what Revelation 9:1–12 is, at the very least, saying to us today: Exodus 10 (the eighth plague) and Romans 1:18–32. Remember, we must understand the trumpet judgments in light of the Exodus plagues.

Exodus 10 begins with these words: **"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them'"** (v. 1). These signs were to be recounted to future generations, **"that you may know that I am the LORD"** (v. 2). So, Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh: **"Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?'"** (v. 3). They told him to release the Hebrew people, or God would send locusts to consume what remained after the hail. Pharaoh refused, and the plague came: **"Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt"** (v. 15). I believe that, in hardening Pharaoh's heart, God handed him over to his own wicked heart.

Now listen to Pharaoh's response and consider how it helps us understand the fifth trumpet: **"I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me"** (Exod. 10:16–17). Now guess what happened next. Moses prayed, and God removed the locusts. But Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he refused to release God's people. He wanted **"this death"** removed, but he refused to repent. With the tenth plague, death came for Egypt's firstborn. This is the backdrop against which we are to read Revelation 9:1–12.

Now let's look at Romans 1:18–32. We will not look at every verse, but enough so that you get the point. Paul begins, **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth"** (v. 18). What truth? The truth about the God who created everything. Paul explains that **"what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them"** (v. 19). Creation leaves

humanity without excuse, just as Pharaoh was without excuse after witnessing God's power. Yet Paul writes, **"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things"** (vv. 21–23). Now listen to verses 26–32:

> **For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.**
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> **And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.** (vv. 26–32)

So here is my take on Revelation 9:1–12 through the lenses of Exodus 10 and Romans 1. Pharaoh called the locust plague **"this death."** He was alive, but the devastation was so severe that he described it as death. In Revelation 9, the anguish is so severe that people seek death to escape it. Pharaoh wanted "this death" removed; those suffering under the fifth trumpet want death to come. Yet Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and Revelation 9 ends with the same refusal to repent: **"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 … nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts"** (vv. 20–21).

I believe the fifth trumpet shows us something of the judgment Paul describes in Romans 1. When people persist in rejecting their Creator, God gives them over to the wickedness of their own hearts and the sin they insist on pursuing. Here, God permits demonic powers to torment those who do not have His seal. I understand this as God handing a people over to the destructive powers associated with the false worship they refuse to abandon. What kind of worship? The kind in which they exchange the Creator for the creature.

The fifth trumpet releases a demonic horde to bring devastation, as the locusts did to Egypt. Only this time, I believe we are seeing the destruction that sin brings upon those who refuse to worship the Lamb. It reminds me of God's warning to Cain: **"Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it"** (Gen. 4:7). With the fifth trumpet, I understand wicked

humanity to be handed over not only to sinful desires but also to demons who want nothing more than for sin to rip apart the soul of the sinner.

Do we not see this happening before our eyes? Do we not see people losing sight of their God-given identity in pursuit of a self-proclaimed identity? Consider how violent we have become. Consider the ways our pursuit of sin is causing our society to cannibalize itself. I believe we are witnessing the fifth trumpet before our eyes, and I believe things will get worse—far worse! Listen to Paul's description of the last days:

> **But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.** (2 Tim. 3:1–5)

Consider what these demonic creatures teach us about temptation and sin. Their faces suggest intelligence and cunning; this is why Paul warns us about the schemes of the devil in Ephesians 6:10–18. Temptation can sound reasonable and promising, but in the end, sin leads to death.

Their hair may suggest beauty or seduction, but their teeth are like those of lions. Is this not how sin presents itself? It promises something good while concealing what it will cost us. We see the pleasure, the relief, or the joy we think it will bring, but we do not see the teeth that will tear and destroy. This is why those of us who worship the Lamb are told to **"be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might"** and to **"put on the whole armor of God"** (Eph. 6:10–11).

If you are a Christian, let me say that while it is good and wise to recognize how intelligent, cunning, and powerful our enemy is, hold on to that healthy perspective while also knowing that Colossians 2:13–15 is yours to claim:

> "**And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.**"

Through the cross and because of His resurrection, God disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them in and through Jesus. Even before His crucifixion, the demons trembled before His authority! They have no rightful claim over you—you belong to Christ! This is why Paul concluded his magnificent eighth chapter in Romans with these majestic words: **"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Rom. 8:37–39).

However, I would be irresponsible with Revelation 9:1–12 as your pastor if I did not conclude with some questions for you to consider.

1. Is there any part of you that is asking God to remove the consequences of your sin while you refuse to turn from the sin itself?

2. What is it in your life that you are defending that God has told you to abandon?

3. What are you making excuses for that God's Word identifies as sin?

Hear the trumpet sound and heed its warning! Confess your sin and turn from it. Seek the help you need to stop returning to your sin. If you belong to the Lamb, live as one who belongs to Him. And if you do not know Him, come to Him! The One who rules over these terrifying powers is the same Savior who receives sinners who turn to Him.