



## THE REIGN OF SIN

### The Vengeance of God

July 30, 2017

#### Revelation 8-9

##### The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer

8 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

##### The Seven Trumpets

6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. 9 A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.

12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

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!"

9 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. 2 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. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 4 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. 5 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. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

7 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, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; 9 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. 10 They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. 11 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.[b]

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

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 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. 16 The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 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[c] and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 19 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.

20 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, 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

*The seventh seal as the conclusion of the seal series: the last judgment is reiterated as a formal response to the saints' petition in 6:10 that God punish the unbelieving world (8:1–5)*

**1** When the Lamb opens the seventh seal, there results **silence in heaven for about half an hour**. Some argue that this silence means that the seal has no content, thus allowing for the idea that the following trumpets and bowls make up its content and thus refer to events subsequent to those of the first six seal judgments. The silence does have content, however. The OT associates silence with divine judgment. In Hab. 2:20–3:15 and Zech. 2:13–3:2, God is pictured (as in Rev. 8:1) as being in His temple and about to bring judgment on the earth. That the temple is in heaven is to be assumed from texts such as Ezekiel 1. At the moment this judgment is to be delivered, God commands the earth to be silent. In Zeph. 1:7–18, silence is likewise commanded in connection with the “great day” of the Lord and of His judgment (Zeph. 1:14, 18 forming part of the OT background to the phrase “the great day of their wrath” in Rev. 6:17). These announcements of judgment from the Minor Prophets express cosmic end-time expectations (as implied by the pregnant word “all”), which is explicitly expressed in a universal sense in Rev. 8:1. The thought is that this final judgment of God is so awful that the whole world falls utterly silent in its presence. Thus the seventh seal is a continuation of the sixth. Whereas the first five seals deal with the entire period of the church age, the last two deal with the final judgment. As such, they are God’s response to the prayer of the saints in 6:10, “How long, O Lord, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” It is interesting that in Jewish writings silence is associated not only with divine judgment but also with the fact that the prayers of the faithful for that judgment are being heard. John does not give any further details here of the punishment of the wicked because he will do so repeatedly later on (11:18; 14:14–20; 16:17–21; 18:9–24; 19:19–21; 20:11–15). And of course, there is more description of the judgments in 8:3–5.

The duration of this silence is **about half an hour**. “Hour” in Revelation often refers to the suddenness of the time of judgment of the wicked (3:3; 11:13; 14:7; 18:10), whereas “half” is associated with “times” of crisis and judgment in Dan. 7:25; 9:27; and 12:7 (which lie behind the forty-two month period of Rev. 11:3, 9; 12:6; 13:5). **About half an hour** might not refer so much to the precise temporal duration of the silence (**about**) but figuratively emphasize the suddenness and unexpectedness of a decreed judgment. Note that the last occurrence of the expression “one hour” (18:19) is directly followed in 18:22–23 by a description of the aftermath of judgment, which is absolute silence.

**2** The vision of the seven trumpet angels appears to be an interruption of the last judgment scenario of v. 1 continued in vv. 3–5. The verse seems out of place by introducing a new series of judgments which is not picked up again until v. 6. However, we see the apparent awkwardness as part of an interlocking literary transition together with vv. 3–5, which has parallels elsewhere in the book. The placement of v. 2 before vv. 3–5 allows the latter to act as a parenthetical transition, both concluding the seals and introducing the trumpets. The transition functions on both a literary and thematic level (see further comments on the transition below). The narration of the trumpet series resumes in v. 6. John sees seven angels holding seven trumpets. The seven

angels could be identified with the seven guardian angels of the seven churches in chs. 2–3 (see on 1:20).

**3** The primary thematic function of the parenthesis in vv. 3–5 is to pick up and conclude the description of final judgment begun in 6:12–17 and 8:1. As already suggested, the temple atmosphere of this section is part of the OT judgment imagery, which includes the element of silence. Therefore, this parenthesis continues the imagery of the last judgment from v. 1. **Another angel** appears and stands **at the altar**. This may be the “angel of His presence” (Isa. 63:9) or even Christ Himself (as in 10:1; 14:14). The altar in view is the same of 6:9, under which were the souls of the persecuted saints. That **much incense was given to him** is a “divine passive” meaning “given by God” and showing, as elsewhere in Revelation, that the angel is an agent of God whose actions merely indicate prior divine decision. This is consistent with the fact that in 6:10 the saints presented their prayer directly to God and not to an angel, which demonstrates their direct access to the divine throne as priests. That the altar of v. 3 is the same as that of 6:9 is confirmed by the repetition of “altar” three times in vv. 3–5, in connection with the following statement that he added “much incense ... to the prayers of all the saints.” This phrase is almost identical in wording to 5:8, which is then developed in 6:9, showing that the altar and temple theme originate in the temple vision of chs. 4–5. The response to their prayers is that punishment cannot be executed until the number of God’s people destined for persecution is completed (6:11). This cannot happen until history comes to an end. This is why, if 6:12–17 and 8:1 are viewed as a response to this petition, they must be understood as depicting the last great judgment (see on 6:12–17). Vv. 3–5 make this connection between 6:9–11 and 6:12–17/8:1 explicit by formally alluding to 6:9–10. This observation alone provides significant evidence against the traditional futurist view of Revelation, which depends on the contention that the various series of plagues depicted in the book are entirely consecutive in nature.

**4** The fact that **the smoke of the incense** goes up **with the prayers of the saints** shows that the petition of 6:9–10 is now being presented before God. In the Bible, incense is always associated with sacrifice, so that the sacrifice, accompanied by a pleasing aroma, will be acceptable to God. These verses echo Lev. 16:12–13, where the priest takes the censer full of coals off the altar before the Lord, fills his hands with incense, and puts the incense on the fire before the Lord. In Ps. 141:2 prayer is associated with incense and compared to a form of sacrifice: “May my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.” The fact that incense is offered from the altar shows that the prayers of the saints who were slain for their testimony (6:9) represent the sacrifice of their lives in the cause of Christ, and so their petition for judgment in 6:10 has been found acceptable to God.

**5** God’s formal acknowledgement of the angel’s presentation of the saints’ prayers and His positive response is the unmentioned link between vv. 4 and 5. This is evident from recognizing v. 5 as a clear divine answer to the petition of 6:10. The verse formally interprets the scenes of woe in 6:12–17 and 8:1 as the answer to the prayer of 6:10 and demonstrates that God has heard and answered these prayers, for the angel throws fire from the altar down to the earth to signify that the last judgment is taking place. The phrase **peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake** is almost identical to the description of the last judgment in 11:19

and 16:18 (see also 4:5, which serves as an introductory note giving expectation of a final judgment), and is rooted in descriptions of divine judgment in the OT, particularly at Sinai (Exod. 19:16, 18; see also Ps. 77:18 and Isa. 29:6, “You will be punished with thunder and earthquake and loud noise”). Jesus used earthquake imagery to portray woes preliminary to the final cosmic destruction but not part of it (Matt. 24:7, Mark 13:8, Luke 21:11). Richard Bauckham has shown in “The Eschatological Earthquake in the Apocalypse of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977), 228, that 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; and 16:18–21 form a progressive sequence of allusions to Exod. 19:16, 18–19 that systematically build upon one another, commencing with lightnings, sound, and thunders in 4:5 and at each step adding other elements. The effect of these progressive, yet virtually identical repetitions is to underscore the final judgment and that each recapitulated portrayal of the judgment fills out in more detail how it will occur. Therefore, after the introductory note of 4:5 announcing the expectation of the final judgment, each of the remaining phrases is a formal notation that the last judgment has been narrated, but not exhaustively so.

Note that in Exod. 19:16, 19, the judgment is accompanied by loud blasts of a trumpet, which is particularly interesting as the trumpet judgments are about to be unfolded. That v. 5 is about the last judgment is confirmed from 14:18–19, where the judgment day is commenced apparently by the same angel, described in the same language here as in vv. 3–5. There, “another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar,” and commanded a second angel to execute God’s final act of wrath against the earth. The portrayal here is modeled to a great extent on Ezek. 10:1–7, where an angel standing in the temple of the Lord takes fire from between the cherubim and scatters it over the city, emphasizing the decree of God’s judgment narrated in Ezekiel 9. This judgment comes on all the unfaithful, those upon whose foreheads God’s angel did not give a protective mark, exactly as the saints have their foreheads sealed in Rev. 7:3 so that they will be protected in a similar way. The pattern of this passage follows broadly that of some OT depictions of divine judgment against sinners: prayer for help, divine response to prayer, which leads to fire proceeding from the heavenly temple to consume the persecutors (e.g., Ps. 18:6–15; Hab. 3:15). Those not bearing the seal suffer final judgment.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 8:1–5**

*On the silence of God.* Many of the believers to whom John was writing were suffering for their faith. Some may have been asking, “Where is God?” (cf. Psalm 79 and Rev. 6:10). This passage states that there will be a time when God will right the wrongs perpetrated against His people, thus showing that evil will not remain unpunished forever. There are times God appears to be silent in response to our suffering, particularly the suffering of believers experiencing persecution in various parts of the world. How does this passage give us and those who so suffer hope in this regard? Are we in the western world particularly affected by our dependence on material things and relative freedom from persecution? Do our materialism and the philosophy of the age we live in hinder us from a full appreciation of the fact that there awaits a yet unseen judgment at the end of history that will show God and His people to have been in the right all along?

*On the effectiveness of prayer.* These verses present us with the effects of the prayers of the deceased

saints pictured in 6:9–11. The power of these prayers seems to be related to the sacrificial witness of their lives. Do our prayers come out of a sacrificial life, or do we come asking God only to throw us life-preservers to rescue us from our own foolishness? The prayers of the saints as pictured there focus on the holiness and truthfulness of God and a desire for that to be manifested in the execution of His justice. Are our prayers directed toward obtaining benefit for ourselves or glory for God?

***The transition from the seals to the trumpets***

The seventh and last seal has finally been opened. The sixth seal introduced the beginning of the last judgment by portraying the cosmic conflagration and the shrieking cries of terror by the ungodly in response to their imminent judgment (6:12–17). This is contrasted in ch. 7 by the portrayal of the sealed saints, whose faith is thereby protected (7:1–8) with the result that they are enabled to stand in God’s presence forever as a reward for their faithful perseverance (7:9–17). The focus of the last half of ch. 7 is on the time after the final judgment, when the saints receive their eternal reward. Therefore, the seventh seal picks up where the sixth left off, in order to continue the picture of the final judgment. Like 6:12–17, it is a further answer to the saints’ request for judgment to be rendered against the world which persecutes them (so 6:9–11). The final judgment is the chronological end point on which 6:1–8:1 is focused. God will demonstrate Himself to be just and righteous at the conclusion of history. Saints in heaven and especially on earth can be comforted with that fact.

At 5:2ff., it was concluded that removing the seals signified both that Christ has revealed the meaning of OT prophecy concerning redemption and judgment and that He has actually begun to fulfill these prophetic words, as then portrayed in the first five seals. The last two seals, though they also clarify OT prophecy, have not yet been set in motion in history, as they refer to the last judgment. Similarly, the first six trumpets are woes which anticipate the final judgment day (see below).

Therefore, vv. 3–5 continue the final judgment scene of v. 1, and are a continuation of the seventh seal. This means that v. 2 is a parenthetical introduction to the revelation of the seven trumpet trials in vv. 6ff. Such an understanding is indicated by v. 6, where the seven angels have not yet sounded their trumpets, so that the trumpet judgments have not been announced. Therefore, vv. 3–5 record an activity of judgment distinct from the following trumpet woes. Vv. 3–5 are also a development of 6:9–11, where the persecuted saints are depicted “under the altar” and are appealing to God to judge their persecutors. This is apparent above all from the mention three times in vv. 3–5 of the altar in direct connection with the prayers of the saints. An angel takes incense and combines it with the prayers of the saints, and the smoke from the incense, together with the saints’ prayers, ascends before God’s throne (vv. 3–4). This can be nothing other than the saints’ prayer in 6:9–11 that God punish their persecutors, which is now given angelic approval and is formally presented before the divine throne for consideration. The divine response in v. 5 is to send judgmental fire against the earth by the hand of an angel. The response is to be interpreted as the final judgment, not as some trial preliminary to that judgment. This is borne out by the observation that the phrase “peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake” occurs (though the words are in different order) as a description of

the last judgment in 11:19 and 16:18 as a part (respectively) of the seventh trumpet and seventh bowl in conjunction with the mention of the heavenly temple.

Thus vv. 3–5 are an answer to the saints’ prayer for vindication in relation to their persecutors and continues the final judgment scene of v. 1, which itself has resumed at the point where 6:17 stopped. The unity of vv. 3–5 with v. 1 is indicated by the observation that the silence of v. 1 probably refers, at least in part, to the ceasing of angelic praise in heaven so that either God will hear the prayers for judgment or the angels themselves will hear God’s revelatory answer to those prayers (see on v. 1). Vv. 3–5 state the divine answer anticipated in v. 1. The fact that the introduction to the trumpet judgments comes in v. 2 means that vv. 3–5 serve both as a conclusion to the seals *and* as an introduction to the trumpets. A similar phenomenon is found in 15:2–4. It likewise is preceded by an introductory reference to the seven angels who will execute the following sevenfold judgments, which thought is not continued again until 15:5. 15:2–4 temporarily interrupts the beginning narration of the following plague series by continuing a description of the final judgment scene found in 14:14–20 (see further on 15:2–4).

This “parenthesis” in 8:2, in conjunction with vv. 3–5, thus points to the fact that the entire following series of trumpets is also a divine response to the saints’ petition in 6:9–11. This suggests that God is beginning to answer the saints’ prayer for retribution even as they are praying and before the climactic and fundamental answer of judgment day. Indeed, prayer is one of the important military tactics used by the soldiers of Christ (see further the introductory comments on 8:6–11:19). Whereas the focus of the first four seal woes is primarily on the trials which test the faith of God’s people, the focus of the trumpet woes is primarily on the trials which punish the unbelieving persecutors during the same period of the entire church age when the faith of believers is tested. This is suggested by the model of the Exodus plagues, where the same elements which struck the Egyptians were transformed to protect the Israelites.

Both the seals and trumpets literally are subdivided into units of four followed by two, with parenthetical sections between the sixth and seventh. And, as will be seen, the seventh trumpet is likewise parallel with the sixth and seventh seal. Within the series of seven trumpets the first four form a subordinate literary unity, as do the last three. The first set are judgments affecting the sources of human life, while the final three directly strike humans themselves.

### **The seven trumpets (8:6–11:19)**

#### ***The Exodus plagues and the trumpets of Jericho as the background to the trumpet judgments***

The first five trumpets are patterned after five of the plagues of Exodus. The first trumpet (hail, fire, and blood) corresponds to the plague of hail and fire (Exod. 9:22–25); the second and third (poisoning of the sea and waters) to the plague on the Nile (Exod. 7:20–25); the fourth

(darkness) to the plague of darkness (Exod. 10:21–23); and the fifth (locusts) to the plague of locusts (Exod. 10:12–15). As with the Egyptian plagues, the plagues punish hardness of heart, idolatry (since each plague had a judgment suited to a particular Egyptian god), and persecution of God's people. God's overall intention was to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would not release Israel (Exod. 4:21) and so that God would have opportunity to perform His plague signs (Exod. 7:3; 10:1–2). Therefore, these signs were not intended to coerce Pharaoh into releasing Israel, but functioned primarily to demonstrate Yahweh's incomparable omnipotence to the Egyptians (Exod. 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:16, 29; 10:1–2). In this light, they are also judgments executed against the Egyptians because of their hardness of heart. The ultimate purpose of the plague signs was that Yahweh should be glorified. Even when God grants Pharaoh a change of heart so that He releases Israel, He hardens his heart again. The result of this last act of hardening leads to the defeat of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, which results in God's glory (Exod. 14:4, 8, 17). Although the plagues are warnings for which Pharaoh will be held accountable if he does not heed them, they are ultimately intended, at least for the majority of Egyptians, as judgments. For not only has God foreknown and predicted Pharaoh's obdurate response (Exod. 3:19; 4:21; 7:3), He has also caused it (Exod. 4:21; 7:3).

These plagues are now shown to be typological or prophetic foreshadowings of God's judgments against unbelievers throughout the church age and culminating in the last judgment, which initiates the final exodus of God's people from this world of captivity into eternal freedom. While the trumpet plagues bring warning and may cause repentance in some (as indicated by the limitation of the judgments in 8:7–9:21, which implies that God is restraining His wrath to allow for repentance), their primary purpose is the judgment of unbelievers. These plagues also function to demonstrate their hardness of heart and the fact that they are being punished because of such hardness, which is expressed by their persistence in idolatry (so 9:20–21) and their persecution of the saints (cf. 6:9–11).

In the OT, trumpets had a number of connotations, including judgment, warning, victory, and eschatological judgment. Against the background of the Exodus plagues, the emphasis in Revelation with the trumpets must be on the theme of judgment, a judgment unleashed by the resurrection and enthronement of Christ (5:5–14), which have given Him sovereignty over history. In the OT, trumpets also sounded an alarm that a battle against God's enemies was imminent (Judg. 7:16–22; Jer. 4:5–21; Ezek. 7:14). Undoubtedly, the main OT passage in view here is the story of the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6, where trumpets announced the impending victory of a holy war. Seven trumpets were blown by seven priests, and here the trumpets are blown by seven angels who are priestly figures (see 15:6). The ark was present at Jericho (Josh. 6:11–13) and, in its heavenly form, is also present in the heavenly temple (Rev. 11:19). Interestingly, at the Jericho episode (Josh. 6:10–20), there was verbal silence directly linked to a climactic trumpet judgment, which is a pattern found in Revelation 8. The trumpets blown at Jericho by the priests, like the plagues on Egypt, are not warnings at all, but only indicate judgment. This shows further that the trumpets in Revelation primarily connote the idea of judgment rather than warnings designed to induce repentance.

At Jericho, likewise, the first six trumpets precede, but are a necessary preparation for the

climactic judgment of the seventh. Likewise, the first six trumpets of Revelation are necessary primary woes leading up to the decisive judgment of the seventh trumpet at the end of history (see on 11:15–19), when the “great city” (11:8), of which Jericho is a prophetic type, will be decisively destroyed (see on 11:13). This reminds us again that the contents of the seven trumpets do not occur subsequent to those of the seven seals, for the content of the seventh trumpet and the (sixth and) seventh seal is identical: the last judgment. But whereas the first five seals focus not only on the judgment of unbelievers but also on the purifying of believers through suffering, the content of the trumpets focuses only on the effect of the various judgments on unbelievers. In light of the Jericho background, it is suitable that the trumpet judgments are placed immediately after ch. 7, where God’s people have been portrayed as a fighting army (7:3–8), which conducts victorious holy war ironically by remaining faithful despite earthly suffering (e.g., 7:14). The trumpet inflictions coming on the heels of ch. 7 should be seen as another of the ways the saints carry on holy war: they pray that God’s judicial decree will be carried out against their persecutors. The saints wage ironic warfare by means of sacrificial suffering, which makes their prayer of vindication acceptable to God.

And finally, it is beyond coincidence that “a very loud trumpet sound” summons Israel to Mount Sinai to acknowledge God’s kingship and presence among them after the plagues of Egypt have been executed (Exod. 19:16). This OT pattern of destructive plagues followed by the peace of kingship has been partially formative for John’s introduction of the end-time kingship of God in 11:15–19 by the seventh trumpet following the plagues of the preceding trumpets. It is appropriate that likewise a trumpet sound marked a transition between the defeat of Egypt and the imminent defeat of Jericho, all of which was conducted under God’s military leadership.

***The first six trumpets: God responds to the saints’ prayer by using angels to execute judgments on the persecuting world, leading up to the last judgment (8:6–9:21)***

*The first four trumpets: God deprives the ungodly of earthly security because of their persecution and idolatry in order to indicate their separation from Him (8:6–12)*

6 Now the description of the seven trumpet angels introduced in v. 2 but abruptly interrupted is continued. The trumpets do not follow the seventh seal chronologically but only in the order of the visions that John saw: he saw the trumpet visions after the seal visions. The trumpets are a temporal recapitulation of the same time periods pictured in the seals. But whereas the primary perspective of the first five seals was on the trials through which believers must pass, now the focus in the first six trumpets is on judgments which unbelievers, both inside and outside the visible church, must endure. The trumpets resemble some of the trials which were pictured in the seals, but their primary purpose is to punish.

7 The first angel sounds his trumpet and the first of the new series of judgments is sent forth. The first trumpet of **hail and fire, mixed with blood**, is patterned after the Egyptian plague of hail and fire (Exod. 9:22–25). The scope of the plague is widened throughout the earth (affecting parts of the whole world rather than simply Egypt): only **a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees**. The fire is not literal, but figurative (as elsewhere in Revelation, most

clearly in 4:5, but also in 1:14; 2:18; 10:1; 19:12). This is consistent with 1:1, where the visions are said to be a communication by symbols (see the comments there). Here it speaks of God's holy judgment. The fire burns before God's throne (4:5), and likewise the trumpet judgments have their origin "before God" (8:2). The parts of the earth affected by the first trumpet are those dealing with food supplies, as in Exod. 9:25, 31–32 (where likewise only a part of the food supply is destroyed); this is similar to the famine of the third seal in 6:6, where only some food supplies were affected. Another background to this trumpet is in Ezekiel's prophecy that the coming judgment on disobedient Israel would be characterized by famine (Ezek. 4:9–17; 5:1–17). Israel would (significantly) be divided into thirds, the judgment of one third being described in relation to a burning with fire "at the center of the city" (Ezek. 5:2). Ezek. 5:12 confirms the suggestion that the fire burning in 5:2 is a metaphorical portrayal of judgment by famine, since it summarizes the fire as plague and famine. As in v. 7 and in Exodus, Ezekiel's famine does not result in death for all (Ezek. 4:16–17; 5:10, 12, 16–17). Fire and famine are linked also in Rev. 18:8.

**8–9** The second trumpet, continuing the judgment theme of the first, sees **a great mountain burning with fire ... thrown into the sea**, following which **a third of the sea became blood**. Fire, in Revelation and elsewhere, is a well-known image of judgment. In Revelation, mountains speak of kingdoms, both good and bad, earthly and heavenly (14:1; 17:9; 21:10), but in the OT, mountains as representing nations are often used to portray the objects of God's judgment (Isa. 41:15; 42:15; Ezekiel 35; Zech. 4:7). Hence this picture speaks of judgment against an evil kingdom. Jeremiah speaks of Babylon as a destroying mountain which will be burned by fire (Jer. 51:25), and later in the same chapter (vv. 63–64) speaks of Babylon sinking into the waters, never to rise again. Clearly Jeremiah's vision lies behind the trumpet judgment here. Babylon is also described as a stone being thrown into the sea in Rev. 18:21. Jeremiah's prophetic pronouncements thus lie behind both of John's visions. This **mountain burning with fire** represents God's judgment on Babylon, the great city holding sway over the whole evil world system. As in v. 7, fire may again represent famine. The **third of the sea** turning to blood is a direct allusion to Exod. 7:20–21; just as the fish in the Nile died, so also now a third of the creatures in the sea die. That the death of **a third of the creatures in the sea which had life** includes not only non-human creatures but also humans is directly implied by the following clause, **and a third of the ships were destroyed**. This fits a picture of famine in which food sources are affected, while the partial destruction of marine commerce likewise represents partial economic deprivation throughout the world and anticipates the destruction of Babylon as the source of maritime commerce in 18:11–19.

**10–11** With the third trumpet, the judgment of famine appears to be continued. A burning star falls from heaven and pollutes **a third of the rivers and the springs of waters**. The presence of fire continues the previous idea of famine, while the theme of undrinkable water also reinforces the judgment of the second trumpet. Note Ps. 78:44: God "turned their rivers to blood, and their streams, they could not drink." This time the fireball is in the form of not a mountain but **a great star ... burning like a torch**. The star, as elsewhere in Revelation (1:20; 2:1, etc.), is an angelic being often representative of an earthly person or kingdom. The picture thus appears to indicate the judgment of an angel who represents sinful people. These kinds of judgments

continue throughout history and culminate in the final judgment at the return of Christ. The picture here goes back first to Isa. 14:12–15, where Babylon’s guardian angel is pictured as a star cast down from heaven into a pit. The star is called **Wormwood**, which is based on Jer. 9:15 and 23:15, where God judges His disobedient people by giving them wormwood and poisoned water to drink. The uses in Jeremiah are not literal but metaphorical for the bitterness of suffering resulting from judgment. In fact, the image of polluting “wormwood” was chosen to show that the judgment was well-suited to the crime: because Israel’s religious leaders figuratively “polluted” Israel with idolatry, so God is pictured as polluting them with bad water, that is, with the bitterness of suffering. Wormwood is a bitter herb which contaminates water, and is mentioned in Jeremiah and other parts of the OT figuratively to refer to the bitterness of suffering resulting from divine judgment (Deut. 29:17–18; Prov. 5:4; Amos 5:6–7). The polluting of the fresh waters, along with the mention of fire, continues the thought of famine in the previous two plagues. The first three trumpets have been pictured as judgments of fire which affect parts of the earth, sea, and rivers, and of humanity.

**12** The fourth trumpet continues the theme of woe from the preceding ones, but does not refer to famine. It brings a limited measure of darkness, a **third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars** being affected. It is similar to, but more limited in scope, than the description of the last judgment in 6:12–13, where the sun turns black and the moon is covered. The earlier passage refers to God’s final judgment against idolaters and those who persecute His people, so something similar is in view here, though only in a partial sense. The allusion is to the plague of darkness in Exod. 10:21–29. The Jews interpreted the Exodus plague in a symbolic sense, as a spiritual, cultural, or mental darkness. The darkness here may refer to a series of divine judgments which plunge men into despair as it causes them to realize the futility of their idolatry and that disaster is rapidly coming upon them. Fear, terror, hopelessness, and depression may be their response.

That the interruption of light sources in v. 12 is figurative is pointed to by the fact that the vast majority of such imagery in the OT is clearly not literal but metaphorical. When Jeremiah speaks of the judgment which came against Israel because of Manasseh, he alludes to the sun setting while it is yet day (Jer. 15:9). Amos likewise speaks of Israel’s historical judgment, part of it being that God will make the sun go down at noon (Amos 8:9). These were not climactic end-of-the-world events but figurative references to the depth of the effects of God’s judgment which actually came upon the nation and were compared to the decisive destruction of the cosmos at the very end of history. Joel (2:1–10), in phrases similar to Revelation, refers to a trumpet blowing, a fire burning, the sun and moon growing dark, and the stars losing their brightness, all referring to events that actually occurred in Israel’s history rather than to some strange final cosmic cataclysm. Actual historical events occurring from time to time throughout the church age are being referred to here in the same way actual historical events were referred to by Joel, Amos, and Jeremiah, and so the meaning of these events in the sky must be taken in the same figurative manner. Note Eccl. 12:1–2, where the “evil days” leading to death (so Eccl. 12:6–7) are a time when “the sun, the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain” (cf. similarly Job 3:3–10). Zeph. 1:15–16 alludes to similar cosmic disturbances (darkness, gloom, and clouds) as symbolic of God’s historical judgment against

idolatrous Israel, in the context of the sounding of the trumpet and battle cry! See also Isa. 13:10 and Ezek. 32:7–8 for similar references. That these events occur throughout the church age is indicated, on the one hand, by the fact that, like the seals, they are unleashed by the resurrection and ascension of Christ to His heavenly throne and, on the other, by the fact that they are all clearly differentiated from the final judgment, as apparent from the OT allusions and parallels cited above.

The fourth trumpet is the logical climax and point of emphasis of the first set of four trumpets, since it expresses the underlying thought of the first three. It is an emblem of the hardened unbeliever's spiritual separation from God. The darkness is figurative and refers to all those divinely-ordained events intended to remind the church's idolatrous persecutors, and those within the church aligning with the idolatrous culture, that their idolatry is vain, that they are separated from the living God, and that they are already undergoing an initial form of judgment. All four trumpets are concerned with sufferings imposed on the ungodly. This conclusion is confirmed by 7:1–3, where genuine believers have their faith protected by being sealed from the harm directed at the earth, sea, and trees. Vv. 7–11 show that the unsealed are being affected by the trumpet woes, because now the same three objects of earth, sea, and trees are portrayed as harmed. With this in mind, it can be no coincidence that 7:3 is based on Ezek. 9:4–6 and that 8:3–5 is modeled on Ezek. 10:1–7 (see on v. 5). Just as the pouring out of punitive coals on Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10) occurs after the righteous remnant in the covenant community have been given a protective mark on their foreheads (Ezekiel 9), so the same pattern is intentionally followed here and combined with the recollection that the Israelites also received a mark on their doors to protect them from the Exodus death plague. The Exodus–Ezekiel background suggests further that the trumpet trials plague the unsealed both within and outside the visible boundaries of the covenant society.

The tribulations of vv. 6–12 are executed throughout various parts of the earth at all times during the church age, but they do not affect the entire earth or all people. The partial nature of the judgments signifies figuratively that these are not descriptions of the last judgment. It is possible that these are trials which affect all intractable unbelievers until the complete punishment of the judgment day. The command to John in 10:11 preceding the sounding of the seventh trumpet (“You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings”) refers to prophecy against ungodly peoples living throughout the world and shows the widespread effect of the trumpet judgments (reinforced by the fact that the woe comes to all “earth-dwellers”; cf. 8:13). The people John is commanded to prophesy against in 10:11 are the same people he prophesies against in 8:7–9:21.

The parallelism of the first four bowls with the first four trumpets confirms that the judgments in both series come because of idolatry (16:2), but adds the element that these woes also occur because of persecution of the saints (16:5–7). In particular, the second and third bowl portray water becoming blood. The description of the third bowl explains that this punishment was fitting because those judged had “poured out the blood of saints and prophets,” and that God was therefore just when He gave them blood to drink, because they deserved it (16:6). Likewise, the two trumpet judgments where water becomes blood must be related to the same concern that

persecutors get their just deserts.

As already argued, the first three trumpets evoke conditions of famine. Whether these are literal famine conditions or figurative portrayals of suffering is hard to determine. They may be figurative, whereby the famine conditions are nevertheless literal parts of a much broader suffering (the figure of speech is known as “synecdoche,” whereby a part is named to indicate the whole of which it is a part).

The figurative nature of the first four trumpets is pointed to by at least two observations. First, the use of different Greek words for “like” throughout the narration of the trumpets indicates an intended lack of precision in describing what was seen in vision and in particular suggests a metaphorical portrayal (8:8, 10; 9:2, 3, 5, 7–10, 17, 19). This figurative emphasis is underscored by the use of the Greek word *sēmainō* (“communicate by symbols”) in 1:1 and its background in Daniel, where it connoted a figurative depiction (see on 1:1). Second, the exegesis of various images throughout the trumpets has shown a probable figurative bent (e.g., the mountain and the star; see likewise on the speaking eagle in 8:13; see also on 9:1–19). For example, it is hard to imagine a literal situation in which one meteor could fall on a third of the world’s fresh water at the same time.

The Exodus plagues are understood in Revelation 8–9 as a typological foreshadowing of the trumpet plagues, whose effect is escalated to the whole world. The images of famine themselves, as noted above, would not merely be literal references to actual situations of famine, but could generally connote sufferings of all kinds. The sufferings throughout vv. 7–12 are continual reminders of how transient the idolatrous object of the earth-dwellers’ trust is. The sufferings result from deficiencies in the world’s resources, which the ungodly depend on to meet their needs. These trials, coupled with actual death, remind them that they are ultimately insecure. The reason for their predicament is that they place their trust in what is unstable. The climax of these temporal judgments and sufferings is the final destruction of the entire world and its wicked system. The destruction occurs in order to demonstrate the world’s ultimate insufficiency as an object of spiritual trust.

The fourth trumpet also serves as an appropriate transition to the demonic judgments of the fifth trumpet, both dealing with the theme of darkness. Those who abide in spiritual darkness must be plagued by the forces of darkness, whose work it is to draw the dark curtain of unbelief permanently over the spiritual eyes of the ungodly, who are intractable in their unbelief. The use of the word “plagues” (9:20) to describe the trumpet woes suggests that they occur throughout the church age, for in 22:18 “plagues” refers to a curse which can strike anyone throughout the entire church age (including the disobedient within the visible church) who is unfaithful to the message of John’s vision. This telling observation strongly suggests that some if not most of the trumpet judgments happen during the entire period between Christ’s first and second comings, and not merely at a tribulation period immediately preceding and including the second coming. The four trumpets affect three parts of the created order (earth, air, and water), suggesting that the basic content of creation in Genesis 1 is being systematically undone, though not in the same order; the elements affected are light, air, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, sea creatures, and

humans. The notion of a “de-creation” in the first four trumpet judgments is supported by observing that the book climaxes in new creation (21:1ff.).

### SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 8:6–12

*On the purpose of disastrous events within the plan of God.* These verses about the first four trumpets present the plagues of Egypt and God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as a typological model for His judgments of unbelievers throughout the church age. How does this relate to the view we often take of cataclysmic events that happen throughout the course of history in this age? Do we think of such events primarily as warnings designed to wake unbelievers up so as to change direction? Do we think of them as beginning judgments on hardened unbelievers? Do we also see such destructive events, at the same time, as trials through which believers are refined and through which they draw closer to God (as with the purpose of the sufferings in the first five seals)? Many Christians think the events that happen in history are theologically or spiritually neutral, but in fact, Revelation says that they have divine purposes attached to them which are relevant for unbelievers and believers. How one responds to such events is one indication of whether or not a person has a genuine saving relationship to God: Do Christians accept disastrous events as sent from God to refine their faith and to cause them to draw even closer to Him, or do they blame God and become hardened to Him? Does a characteristic negative reaction to devastating events indicate the spiritual darkness that one is in, whether as a pseudo-believer or as an unbeliever outside the borders of the visible covenant community?

*The fifth and sixth trumpets: demons are commissioned to punish hardened unbelievers (8:13–9:21)*

*Introduction to the fifth and sixth trumpets (8:13)*

**13** The last three trumpets are introduced by a phrase indicating a new vision: **and I looked, and I heard**. These trumpets are marked off from the first four literarily by the introductory vision formula together with the eagle proclaiming a threefold “woe” to come upon the ungodly through the remaining three trumpet blasts. The purpose of the literary division is to highlight the harsher aspect of the remaining trumpets.

What John sees is **an eagle flying in mid-heaven**. The Exodus model is still in mind, since there also the plagues became increasingly severe and more specific in their application. The presence of the eagle points to more serious trials, as the phrase **flying in mid-heaven** refers elsewhere only to flying creatures which appear in anticipation of the last judgment (14:6; 19:17; cf. 18:2). The first two woes are also associated with the third, which alludes to the final judgment, by laying the basis for it in the lives of unbelievers and tormenting them in a way which foreshadows their eternal torment. The woes are also worse than the initial four trumpets in that they directly strike the wicked. The reason the wicked are directly affected is that they did not repent from the first four judgments against the environment which supported their lives and lifestyle. The spiritual heightening of the last three trumpets is indicated by the direct involvement of demons. The greater severity of these trumpets is also expressed by their being called “woes,” whereas no name is given the first four trumpets. Vv. 7–12 have emphasized that

the regular patterns of nature's cycles on earth and of the luminaries in the heavens will be interrupted. The implicit theological reason for this is to connote judgment on sinners who have broken God's established ethical and covenantal patterns (so above on v. 12). 8:13ff. makes this implicit theology explicit. This judgment is primarily spiritual in nature, as ch. 9 reveals.

Eagles often signal coming destruction in the Old Testament (Deut. 28:49; Jer. 4:13; 48:40; Lam. 4:19; Ezek. 17:3). Particularly relevant are Hos. 8:1 ("Put the trumpet to your lips! Like an eagle the enemy comes against the house of the Lord") and Jer. 4:13, where the destructive image of an eagle is followed by "woe to us" together with the threefold mention of the sounding of a trumpet as an announcement of judgment in Jer. 4:5, 19, 21. The figure here could be one of the living beings of Rev. 4:7, who is described as like a flying eagle. The metaphorical association of the eagle with judgment is not inconsistent with the probability that it also represents an angelic being, as pointed to by the parallel with 14:6, where the angel flies in mid-heaven to pronounce God's judgment (14:7). In Exod. 19:4, God compares himself to an eagle who protects His people, after having plagued the Egyptians: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself." Now an eagle announces new plagues on the idolaters and earth-dwellers.

*The fifth trumpet: demons are commissioned to torment hardened unbelievers by further impoverishing their souls and reminding them of their hopeless spiritual plight (9:1–12)*

**1** The fifth angel sounds the trumpet, and John sees another vision of judgment. He sees **a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth**. This star is probably the same or at least similar to the star of 8:10, an angel representing sinful people and undergoing judgment along with them. The OT background is Isa. 14:12–15. Jesus uses virtually the same expression to describe Satan's judgment in Luke 10:18: "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning." The expression here may be another way of saying that "Satan ... was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12:9; cf. 12:13). The conclusion that this is a fallen angel is also suggested by v. 11. There the "angel of the abyss" is called "king over" the demonic locusts and is referred to as "Abaddon" ("Destruction") and "Apollyon" ("Destroyer"). The heavenly being who is sovereign over the abyss and locusts in vv. 1–3 is probably the same figure as the one in v. 11, who is said to be "king" over them (for the Satanic nature of this angel see on v. 11).

This fallen angel is given the role of inflicting punishment on sinful humanity. He is given **the key of the bottomless pit**, the realm where Satan dwells, but this key or authority is ultimately given by Christ, who alone holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18). Neither Satan nor his evil servants can any longer unleash the forces of hell on earth unless they are given power to do so by the resurrected Christ (see further on 20:1–3). As the visions of ch. 9 and following are unveiled, the readers are given an ever-expanding definition of the extent of God and the Lamb's sovereignty. They are in ultimate control of Satan's realm. And the saints are to remember this when the forces of evil direct their wrath against them or self-destructively against their own allies, the followers of the antichrist. There is a grand purpose which God is working through it all, which is a basis for hope and encouragement for beleaguered Christians (for

discussion of the problem of how a good God can be sovereign over evil see on 6:1–8).

**2** Dense smoke arises from the abyss when the angel opens it: **The sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit.** The image of darkening of the sun and other parts of the cosmos has already been seen to connote judgment (see on 6:12ff.; 8:12). The image is an allusion to the repeated references to the darkening of the sun in Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15 (cf. Isa. 13:10), where it is a sign of judgment. Joel’s imagery itself is probably a development of the plague of locusts in Exod. 10:1–15 (see on v. 7 below). This was a judgment because of the Egyptians’ hardness of heart in rejecting God’s word through Moses. There is no reason to think that the connotation of judgment has changed here. This is confirmed by the clear meaning of judgment which “smoke” carries later in this chapter (vv. 17–20) and later in the book (14:11; 18:9, 18; 19:3). Consequently, the picture in v. 2 indicates that the judgment formerly limited to the demonic realm is being extended to the earthly realm. As a result of Christ’s death and resurrection, the devil and his legions have begun to be judged, and now the effect of their judgment is about to be unleashed upon unbelieving humanity, who give their ultimate allegiance to him. An essentially identical pattern of widening judgment occurs in 12:7–12; 13:3–8; 16:10; and 17:8 (although in 12:12ff. the saints are also affected by the extension of judgment in the form of persecution and attempted deception). As will be seen below in vv. 3–6, the judgment partly involves deception, which is metaphorically anticipated by the darkening smoke. Darkness throughout the NT symbolizes spiritual blindness (Luke 11:36; John 1:5; 3:19–21; 8:12; 11:10; 12:35–36; Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:9; 1 John 1:5).

**3** Demonic-like beings portrayed as locusts arise from the smoking abyss and go out to the earth. As in the original plague of locusts, it is God Himself who sends locusts upon the earth (the phrase **power was given them** implies God or Christ as the subject; for God as the subject in similar clauses see 6:2–8; 8:2, etc.). The model of the Exodus plagues here confirms that God is the one who has absolute sovereignty over the instruments of the plagues, as is indicated by the clause introducing the locust plague against Egypt: “Stretch out your hand ... for the locusts, that they may come up on the land of Egypt” (Exod. 10:12).

**4** But whereas the Exodus locusts harmed the vegetation, these locusts do not harm **the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree**, but only those **who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads**. The seal is given only to genuine believers. The seal is a sign of God’s sovereign authority and ownership over those destined ultimately to be part of His kingdom and not of Satan’s domain. This means that the faith of Christians is safeguarded by God’s protective presence (see further on 2:17; 7:2–3). Of course, there are unbelievers who become believers throughout this time, but they are those who have been “sealed” beforehand by God’s decree and will believe at some point during their lives. In fact, they become Christians as a result of the sealing activity directed toward them. Part of the harm inflicted has to do with keeping unsealed unbelievers in spiritual darkness (see on 8:12). At the same time, this link with 8:12 implies that these devilish beings cause events which remind the ungodly that they are separated from the living God. Such reminders induce fear and despair as people are forced to reflect on their hopeless situation. That this kind of torment is in mind is made explicit by vv. 5–6. Just as the plagues did not harm the Israelites but only the Egyptians (Exod. 8:22–24; 9:4–7,

26; 10:21–23), so true Christians are likewise protected from the fifth plague.

**5** The locusts, however, **were not permitted to kill anyone**, but only **to torment** them, and only **for five months**. The five-month period could refer by analogy to the dry season or to the life-cycle of locusts, but it is probably symbolic (referring to a limited period of time), as are other numbers in Revelation. That the limitations are divinely imposed is clear from the fact that God determined the temporal limitations of the Egyptian plagues, which are in mind here. The **torment** is primarily spiritual and psychological suffering, since this is the connotation of the word elsewhere in the book with reference to the nature of trials both preceding and including the final judgment (cf. 11:10; 14:10–11; 18:7, 10, 15 [in ch. 18 synonymous with the emotional pain of “weeping” and “mourning”]; 20:10).

The theme of spiritual and psychological suffering explains why sealed believers are not affected, for they have confidence in their destiny in Christ. Deuteronomy 28 also predicts that “in the latter days” (so 4:30) Israel will suffer the plagues of Egypt (vv. 27, 60), including that of locusts (vv. 38–39, 42), because of their idolatry (e.g., v. 14; 29:22–27; 30:17; 31:16–20). This latter-day affliction includes “plagues” (Deut. 28:61) of “madness” (v. 28), darkness (v. 29), “trembling heart,” “failing eyes” (darkness?), and “despair of soul” (v. 65). To whatever degree this Deuteronomy passage is in mind, the notion is applied to those in the visible community of the new Israel who are not part of the invisible community of faith. But this plague likely extends beyond the boundary of the covenant community, since the Egyptian plagues likewise struck those outside the believing community. In fact, the plague predicted by Deuteronomy 28 to come on Israel in the latter days was to be constituted by the very plagues that God had sent on Egypt (Deut. 28:60), because those in the visible community of faith would become as unbelieving as the Egyptians.

**6** John now gives a partial interpretative comment on the vision he has just seen. The spiritual and psychological nature of the torment is emphasized by the fact that **men will seek death and will not find it**—that is, they will want to die, yet be so afraid of death they will not find it within their power to kill themselves. The effect of the locusts is to remind the church’s ungodly persecutors that their idolatry is vain and that they are separated from the living God, and consequently have no hope. In them the prophecy of Moses that the disobedient will be driven mad by what they suffer will be fulfilled (Deut. 28:28, 34). The Exodus plagues caused the Egyptians confusion and despair through the realization that Yahweh was the only true God and that they could not prevail against Him. This realization included an anxious conviction of sin yet unaccompanied by repentance (cf. Pharaoh’s response in Exod. 9:27–28; 10:16–17). So now sinners will live in terror as they realize the idolatrous values on which they have built their lives are but foundations of sand in the face of Satan’s attacks. And, as with the Egyptians, so now the fifth trumpet plague also hardens the victims against turning to God from their despair. Such hardening is actually a deceptive influence of the demons. Believers, by contrast, will fear no evil because they know that, whether they live or die, they are with Christ and that behind the apparent catastrophes and reversals of life a loving and sovereign God is working out His eternal will for their good (Rom. 8:28). In contrast to the ungodly, they take ultimate pleasure in the torments, even death, which the world imposes on them in order that they may give testimony to

Jesus and the word of God: “because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death” (12:11; cf. 1:9; 2:10; 6:9; 20:4).

7 John’s detailed description of the **locusts** here contains three uses of the word **like**, as well as the phrase **as it were**, indicating his struggle to describe what he is seeing. The vision sparks in his mind similar scenes from the OT, as the following verses reveal. So he utilizes the prophetic language which most resembles what he sees. His vision of **locusts like horses prepared for battle** is clearly related to Joel’s portrayal of the plague of locusts attacking Israel (itself modeled on the plague of locusts in Exodus 10), which likewise begins with the blowing of a trumpet (Joel 2:1). As God used locusts to judge Egypt, so in Joel God is portrayed as using locusts to judge unrepentant Israel, out of which only a remnant will be saved (Joel 2:31–32). Joel mirrors the thought of Exodus that the primary purpose of the locust plague is to harden the hearts of unbelievers. Joel’s locusts (whether literal or representing enemy armies) brought famine (1:5–12, 16–20; 2:25) and anguish (2:6). Here the locusts are pictured (v. 4) as not harming the earth’s vegetation, so the damage now envisioned is that of a famine of the soul (the prophets sometimes spiritualize famine, e.g., Amos 8:11–14). This suggests that actual famine conditions observed in the first three trumpets ultimately point to punishments coming upon sinners because of the spiritual famine and barrenness of their souls. The description of John’s locusts represents an exaggeration of their actual physiology: their head is shaped like horses’ heads; their antennae become hair; the destructive effect of their mouth becomes ferocious teeth; their sound becomes the sound of chariots; their armor becomes breastplates of iron. In general, the locusts are translated into human terms and compared to an army. The comparison of the locusts’ faces to **the faces of men with crowns like gold** on their heads evokes their demonic nature. Joel 2:4–7 also compares the locusts to horses and to men prepared for battle.

To attempt to find the *dominant* model for the locusts first in the realm of modern warfare (for instance, helicopters, as one popular writer suggests) instead of OT imagery is not the best approach. Rather than first going forward from John’s time into our present or future, the commentator should first go back from John’s time to the OT, since this is the first clear source from which Revelation derives its images and determines their meaning.

8 The phrase **their teeth were like the teeth of lions** is based on Joel 1:6, where the locusts were like “a nation” whose “teeth are the teeth of a lion.”

9 The phrase **breastplates like breastplates of iron** is a general description of part of the armor of a soldier (or battle horse; cf. Job 39:19–20, where battle horses are compared to locusts). **The sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots, of many horses rushing into battle** is an allusion to Joel 2:4–5: “Their appearance is like the appearance of horses; and like war horses, so they run. With a noise as of chariots they leap on the tops of the mountains ... like a mighty people arranged for battle.” Also see Jer. 51:27, which speaks of the judgment of historical Babylon, is introduced with “a trumpet among the nations,” and compares horses to “bristly locusts,” and Jer. 51:14, which describes enemy armies as “a population like locusts.” The locusts, like so much else in Revelation, must be understood figuratively, and so it would be a mistake to view them as actual physical locusts (note accordingly “likeness” in v. 7 and the

repeated “like” in vv. 7–10).

**10** The picture of the locusts concludes as it began in vv. 3–5 by comparing their authority to the power which scorpions have over their prey and by limiting their authority over people to **five months**. The combination of an army of horses who devour the land and serpents who bite occurs in Jer. 8:16–17, where the picture is similar to John’s combination of horse-like locusts and scorpions who sting. In both passages, the judgment comes on idolaters (Jer. 8:2; cf. Rev. 9:20).

**11** The angel who controls these demonic beings is called **Abaddon** or **Apollyon** (Hebrew and Greek respectively for “destroyer”). Abaddon is closely linked to Sheol or the place of death in the OT (Job 26:6; 28:22; Ps. 88:11; Prov. 15:11; 27:20). These names, together with the statement that the angel is “king over” the demons, suggest that this is either Satan himself or one of his most powerful representatives. Rev. 12:3–4 and 13:1ff. are compatible with this conclusion, since there the devil and the beast are pictured, respectively, with kingly diadems on their heads and as leaders of evil forces. This is in line with the same conclusion already reached about the angel’s identification in 9:1. The two names for Satan express his function in utilizing demons to work among the impious so that they will eventually be destroyed by death of body and spirit. The demonic activity lasting only five months is but a part of the process leading to this final, macabre goal. The sixth trumpet pictures the completion of this process.

**12** This verse is a transition, summarizing the preceding trumpet and introducing the next two. Does the transition indicate that the last three trumpets follow one another in the chronology of history or merely in the chronological sequence of the visions? The first hint that the second meaning is intended is found in the opening expression **the first woe is past**. This does not mean that the events have already transpired in history, but only indicates that the *vision* containing the events is now over. The introductory word **behold** shows an emphasis on the woes as visions instead of events. This is implied also by the concluding phrase **after these things**, which elsewhere in the book refers not to the order of historical events but to the order of visions coming one after another (see on 4:1). Consequently, the sense of v. 12 is, “The presentation of the first vision of woe has passed. See, two more visions of woe will be presented after this first one.” Thus, the primary concern is with the order of visions and not the order of history represented in the three visions.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 9:1–12

*On God using Satan as His agent of judgment.* These verses present a picture of a horrible judgment ultimately directed by God, who uses Satan and his agents to inflict it. Would our first reaction to this be that this is unworthy of a holy God? Why would we react this way? What does it say about our limited view of the seriousness of sin? From another perspective, these verses show that the enemy is not an independent agent, but operates only under God’s authority. Do we tend practically to view spiritual warfare as a struggle between two equals (God and Satan) even though the Bible, as here, suggests otherwise?

*On the significance of understanding the use of figurative language in the Bible.* These verses show us

how John uses the picture of horse-like locusts similar to scorpions to refer to the psychological and spiritual torment that Satan and his agents inflict at the command of God. John in turn borrows the picture from Joel, who likely uses the actual locusts of Exodus likewise figuratively to speak of enemy armies. Regardless of whether the locusts in Joel are literal, in Revelation they are figurative. John, like Jesus, uses pictures and parables which shock the believer into repentance while further hardening the heart of those intractable in unbelief. How best can we explore the true meaning of biblical passages like this? How often do we trace back the true meaning of such passages by discovering their roots in other passages of Scripture?

*On the severity of the judgment of darkness.* These verses present a view of the unbelievers' torment as the forceful reminder that their idolatry is vain, that they are separated from the living God, and that they are without hope. Why, when their situation is so desperate, do people not turn to Christ? Why did only one of the other men on the cross cry out for help? It is said of the atheist Voltaire that his dying words consisted of calling out the name of Christ, alternately as a prayer and as a curse. Is this a measure of the darkness God's judgment sends on the lost? And yet, at the cross, the one criminal who did cry out was answered and received God's mercy.

*The sixth trumpet: demons are commissioned to judge hardened unbelievers by ensuring the final punishment of some through deception until death, leaving the deceived remainder unrepentant (9:13–21)*

**13** The voice coming **from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God** may be Christ's (cf. 6:6) or an angel's (cf. 16:7). Mention of the **golden altar** draws us back to the cry to God for justice from the glorified saints from below the same altar (6:10), and also connects the sixth trumpet with the transitional segment of 8:3–5, which showed that both the seventh seal and the seven trumpets were God's response to the saints' petitions. **Four** stands for completeness in the Bible (on which see the discussion on numerology in the Introduction [6.] and also on 7:1) and **horns** stand for power, so the vision refers to the completeness of God's power coming from His presence (**the golden altar**), a power He is beginning to exercise in response to the prayers of the saints. In 14:18, the altar is directly linked to power over judgment: "Another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar." **Before** (or literally "in the presence of") appears six times elsewhere in Revelation in connection with explicit reference to some aspect of God's presence in the heavenly *temple* (4:5; 5:8; 7:15; 8:3–4; 11:4). All these texts have some connotation of judgment or protection from judgment. These links also point to 9:13 as an allusion to God's power of judging in response to the saints' prayers.

**14** The voice from the altar issues a command to the sixth trumpet angel to release **the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates**. That they had been bound implies they had been restrained against their will, like the demons confined to the abyss in 9:1–3. They are probably also wicked angels. The **Euphrates** does not refer to the literal place the angels were bound and will raise their armies. Rather, the *regions around* the Euphrates (Isa. 7:20; 8:7–8), the "land of the north by the river Euphrates" (Jer. 46:10), or simply the "north," meaning the region of the Euphrates (Jer. 1:14–15; 6:1, 22; 10:22; Ezek. 38:6, etc.), are mentioned in the OT as the area from which armies of destruction come, sometimes against Israel, sometimes against

other nations. The strongest OT echo comes from Jeremiah 46, which portrays the coming judgment on Egypt, the army of horsemen from the north being like serpents, innumerable locusts, having breastplates (cf. 46:4, 22–23), and being “by the Euphrates River” (46:2; likewise 46:6, 10). The **angels** had been **bound** by God and are now released by Him, since the command to **release** them emanates from the divine altar in heaven.

Mention of the **Euphrates** anticipates the battle of the sixth bowl, where the Euphrates is also mentioned. Indeed, the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl describe the same event, but from different perspectives; on the link with the sixth bowl see further on 9:19. As in the OT parallels of the northern invader, so here it is God who ultimately unleashes the corrupt angelic invaders. These angels could be identified as the angelic counterparts to the wicked nations, who dwelled at or north of this boundary (e.g., Dan. 10:13, 20–21). Looking back at 7:1 enables us to identify “the four winds of the earth” being held back with the four beings bound at the Euphrates (and see on 7:1 for the identification of these winds with malevolent angels). The destructive winds “at the four corners of the earth” may now be unleashed against the unsealed (as in 9:4), since the sealing of God’s people has been completed (7:3–8), and they cannot be harmed by the effect of the angelic winds. John’s vision thus understands the Euphrates as a biblical reference for the place (spiritual rather than geographical) where Satan will marshal his forces against God’s people. The fact that the four angels of 9:14 are at the particular locality of the Euphrates and not the four corners of the earth is a mixing of metaphors, whereby the river sums up the end-time expectations concerning the direction from which will come the final onslaught of the Satanic enemy, which will affect the whole world (see on 16:12–16).

**15** That the four angels had been “bound” means that they had not been allowed to carry out the function for which they had been waiting. But now, having been **prepared for the hour and day and month and year, they were released, so that they might kill a third of mankind**. The specific listing of time periods indicates that these angels are released according to God’s sovereign timetable. The point of specifying down to the hour the time of releasing these hordes is to emphasize that all events of history, whatever Satan’s involvement, are under the ultimate authority of God.

**16** The four angels have power over ungodly spiritual forces, which are pictured as a multitude of armies on horses. The size of the demonic army is **two hundred million** (literally “double myriad of myriads” or “twice ten thousands of ten thousands”). The number is symbolic, as with other numbers in Revelation. The word *myrias* (“ten thousand”) is used in Greek to refer to an innumerable multitude. In the plural, it is used in the OT in the same way (Gen. 24:60; Lev. 26:8; Deut. 32:30; 2 Chron. 25:11–12; Mic. 6:7; and especially Dan. 7:10). Never in the Bible does it refer to a specific number unless prefixed by a numerical adjective (as in “three myriads” or 30,000 in Esth. 1:7 LXX). Use of the double plural (“ten thousands of ten thousands”), prefaced by the further intensifier “twice,” makes it almost impossible to calculate accurately and shows that a symbolic reference is indicated here. Note that in Jer. 46:2, 4, 6, 10, 22–23, one of the backgrounds to this text, the conquering armies ride on horses (v. 4), wear armor (v. 4), are compared to a serpent (v. 22) and locusts (cf. v. 23), and are (significantly) of innumerable

number.

**17** What John has heard in vv. 13–16 is explained further in visionary form in vv. 17–21. The riders have **breastplates the color of fire and hyacinth and brimstone**, the horses are described as having **heads of lions** (emphasizing their destructive power), and **out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone**. As with the description of the locusts in the fifth trumpet, the piling up of hideous descriptions underscores the demons as ferocious and dreadful beings. Fire and brimstone in the OT (sometimes linked with smoke) indicate a fatal judgment (as here) within the course of history (Gen. 19:24, 28; Deut. 29:23; 2 Sam. 22:9; Isa. 34:9–10; Ezek. 38:22). The idea of God’s judgment of His enemies is figuratively expressed in 2 Sam. 22:9 (= Ps. 18:8) by the similar phrase “smoke ... and fire from his mouth.” In Rev. 11:5, the expression “fire proceeds out of their mouth” refers to the punishment the two faithful witnesses execute against their persecutors. The fire is a figurative reference to their prophesying and testimony (11:6–7). There, the rejection of their testimony commences a spiritual judgment of the persecutors and lays the basis for their future final judgment (see further on 11:5–6). That the image of fire “proceeding from a mouth” is figurative is apparent from other parallels in the book. For instance, 1:16 (cf. 2:12, 16) and 19:15, 21 portray Christ judging His enemies by means of a sharp sword “proceeding from His mouth.” 2:16 alludes to some form of temporal punishment, whereas 19:15, 21 has to do with the defeat of Christ’s enemies at His return. Like the fire in 11:5, the sword in Christ’s mouth is figurative and probably refers to the condemnation of sinners through His word (as implied from 19:11–13).

**18** The destructive nature of the judgment executed by the demonic horses is reemphasized by repetition from v. 17 of **the fire and the smoke and the brimstone, which proceeded out of their mouths**. The overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah from Gen. 19:24, 28 is uppermost in thought among other possible parallels, since the precise combination of **fire, smoke, and brimstone** occurs in the OT only there. As in v. 17 above, Genesis 19; Isa. 34:9–10; and Ezek. 38:22 describe the same kind of fatal judgment John foresees here. **The fire and the smoke and the brimstone** are now called **three plagues** from which **a third of mankind was killed**. This continues the description in v. 15, which means that these fiendish horses are the agents through whom the four angels of v. 15 conduct their dreadful work. They kill the whole person, both physically and spiritually. They carry out, not the final judgment, but a judgment that is linked to the final judgment and that prepares for it. They cause the physical death of idolaters, compromisers, and persecutors of the church, who are already spiritually dead. The plague of “killing” includes all kinds of death which the ungodly undergo (from illness, tragedy, etc.). *The death stroke against their bodies makes certain their spiritual death for eternity*. In this sense, it can be said that death here includes both the spiritual and physical dimensions. Thus fire and brimstone, referred to three times in vv. 17–18, refer exclusively elsewhere in John’s writing to the final and eternal judgment of ungodly idolaters (14:10; 21:8), the devil, the beast, and the false prophet (19:20; 20:10). This connection with final judgment in other passages of the book implies that the execution of death by the demonic horses is the beginning of the divine action which eventually secures unbelievers for their final judgment in 14:10 and 21:8, for which they must wait.

**19** The horses' **tails are like serpents and have heads**, and **with them they do harm**, like the scorpion-like locusts of 9:10, whose tails have "power to hurt men." This particular harm, then, may refer not to death, but may be similar to the spiritual torment (preceding death) of the fifth trumpet, although the sixth trumpet in general brings widespread death, intensifying the woe of the fifth. The smoke of the fifth trumpet is now joined by fire in the sixth trumpet. The smoke and resulting darkness are metaphorical for a punishment of deception (see 8:12; 9:2–3), and the fire is metaphorical for lethal judgment (see v. 18).

That **the power of the horses is in their mouths** points to demonic deception resulting in judgment. Part of the deception manifests itself through false teachers affirming the legitimacy of some form of idolatry for Christians (e.g., cf. 2:6, 14–15, 20–21). The harm of deception (usually leading to idolatry) is also seen as a judgment in the OT and NT generally (e.g., Isa. 6:10–12; 29:9–14; 63:17; Pss. 115:8; 135:18; Rom. 1:18–32; 2 Thess. 2:9–12; the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 4–14 is a well-known example of the activity of Satan referred to in this text). The deceptive facet of the sixth trumpet is implied by its unique parallels with the sixth bowl, especially with respect to a judgment of deception "coming out of the mouth" of Satanic beings (16:13, where three evil spirits come out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet). In like manner, the dragon's attempted deception of the church is depicted by the metaphorical statement, "the serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman" (12:15). The authority given by the dragon to the beast by which he deceives men is explained as "a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies ... against God, to blaspheme His Name and His tabernacle, that is, those who dwell in heaven" (13:5–6). Therefore, part of the effect of the demons' mouths in 9:17–19 is to intensify the deception of unbelievers.

The power of the horses lies not only in their mouths but also **in their tails; for their tails are like serpents and have heads; and with them they do harm**. This does not mean that the horses literally have serpents as their tails, for as the first part of the verse comments generally and implicitly on the *similarity* of the tails of the demonic horses to serpents, the second part continues the metaphor by saying that the harm inflicted by the heads of the serpent-like tails is as lethal *as* serpents who bite. The piling up of metaphors not completely consistent with one another is not for the purpose of portraying a nicely systematic or logical picture (of a literal but bizarre creature at home in a science fiction novel) but to *bring an emphasis* (in the same way, it is not in line with the intention of 5:8 to ask how each elder is able to play a harp and hold a bowl of incense at the same time). The metaphor of the serpent enforces further the connotation of the mouth of the demonically-inspired false teachers as that which harms through deception. Through the serpent simile, the idea of promoting falsehood is heightened. This reinforces the link of the horses to Satan himself, who is known in Revelation as "the serpent" (12:9, 14–15; 20:2). John understood that the sufferings he was narrating were already occurring, and were not to be limited to a period only immediately preceding the Lord's return. This is also hinted at by another conspicuous parallel in Luke 10:17–19, where "the demons" (v. 17) are called "serpents and scorpions and ... the power of the enemy" over which Christians presently have power but which can still "injure" unbelievers (v. 19). Jesus called the Pharisees serpents and vipers because they were blind guides leading others astray (Matt. 23:16, 33), and Prov. 23:32–35 speaks of wine as a serpent whose sting leads to delusion. The sting of the serpent, as represented

by the smoke of 9:2–3, comes first in the form of deception. This deception leads unbelievers on to the final effect of the sting—God’s final judgment.

Our conclusion from the above is that the images of vv. 17–19 are not figurative for the destruction wrought by modern warfare, but connote the destruction of deception leading to spiritual and physical death. This conclusion has been arrived at by a contextual comparison of the images within the Apocalypse, rather than by comparing the images with similar ones in the world of modern warfare, or even of past warfare (for instance, some have attempted to identify the scene with the Islamic invasions of the fifteenth century).

Although a detailed analysis of ancient Jewish literature is beyond the scope of this shorter commentary, it may be helpful to note here that the combination of serpents and scorpions in Rev. 9:3–19 reflects the broader linkage in biblical and ancient Jewish thought, where the combination was metaphorical for judgment in general and deception or delusion in particular (e.g., Deut. 8:15; Sirach 39:30; CD VIII.9–11 [“vipers” and “snakes”]; Luke 10:19; Mishnah *Aboth* 2.10; Midrash Rabba Num. 10.2). In Num. 21:6 and Deut. 8:15 the reference is to “fiery serpents,” which is similar to the threefold repetition of fire in connection with the serpents in 9:17–19. In the Numbers passage their bite, as here, kills a significant portion of the people because of unbelief. Sirach 39:27–31 provides a striking parallel with Rev. 9:3–4, 15–19, which reflects Jewish and biblical tradition standing in the background of John’s train of thought: “All these things are for good to the godly; so to the sinners they are turned into evil. There be spirits that are created for vengeance, which in their fury lay on sore strokes; in the time of destruction they pour out their force, and appease the wrath of him that made them. *Fire* and ... *death* ... all these were created for vengeance ... *scorpions [and] serpents* ... punishing the wicked to destruction ... *they shall be prepared on earth, when need is; and when their time is come, they shall not go beyond his word.*” According to Sirach, these afflictions occur generally throughout all ages.

Likewise, John understood that the sufferings he was narrating were already occurring and not to be limited to a period only immediately preceding Christ’s return. This is also hinted at by another conspicuous parallel in Luke 10:17–19, where the demons are called “serpents and scorpions and ... the power of the enemy,” over which Christians presently have power, but which can still harm unbelievers. The harm associated with the two repellent creatures is sometimes metaphorically expressed as deception, which is undoubtedly implicit in the passage from Luke. Ps. 58:3–6 refers to the “wicked” who “speak lies,” have “venom like the venom of a serpent,” and are further compared to a “deaf cobra.” The teeth of the wicked liars are compared to the “fangs of the young lions” (cf. Rev. 9:8–10, 17; Sirach 21:2). Similarly an early Dead Sea Scrolls document compares the High Priest in Jerusalem and the Roman authorities with “the poison of serpents and the head of asps.” This metaphor explains the harm of false teaching and deception, which the High Priest has caused (CD VIII.9–13); in the same document, those participating in the same false teaching are compared to “kindlers of fire and lighters of brands” and to spiders and adders (V.14–15). The text of Deut. 32:33 in the Aramaic Bible (the Palestinian Targum) refers to the “evil counsels ... [and] wicked thoughts” of idolatrous Israelites as being “as serpents’ heads.” Likewise, Aramaic Jerusalem Targum of Deut. 32:33

speaks of “their malice like the head of asps.” In addition, in Targum Onkelos Deut. 32:32–33 affirms that upon Israelite idolaters “plagues will be evil as the heads of serpents, and the retribution of their works like their venom,” and then compares their punishment to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, as does Rev. 9:18 (on which see above).

Prov. 23:32–33 states that strong wine “bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper” resulting in the eyes seeing “strange things” and the mind uttering “perverse things.” The serpent-scorpion metaphor is thus used to describe a “woe” of delusion (Prov. 23:29–33). This may show that the rationale for using serpents and scorpions to signify doctrinal deception is that part of the literal suffering of their bites can be that of mental delusion, which precedes and then culminates in death.

In another Dead Sea Scrolls document, the “pit” and “abyss” open and spit out billows, arrows, and “the spirits of the Asp” against hardened hypocrites, “leaving [them with] no hope” (1QH III.16–18, 25–27; V.27). This affliction arising from the pit is interpreted as deceptive influences (especially false teaching) affecting the ungodly, but not those truly loyal to God (II.12–34; IV.5–22). In Mishnah *Aboth* 2.10, the words of the wise exponents of Torah do harm to those who do not obey them. In apparent contrast to the imagery in Revelation 9, it describes the effect of the *words of the wise* on the disobedient as “the sting of a scorpion ... the hiss of a serpent ... coals of fire.” Yet this is actually similar to Rev. 11:5 (the judgment issuing from the mouths of the witnesses), and overlaps generally with some of the above imagery in its emphasis on judgment through the infliction of harm. Indeed, it associates closely the metaphors of scorpions and serpents with judgment, though in this case the focus is on the effects of true teaching on those responding wrongly to it.

These OT and Jewish parallels show that in John’s time, scorpions and serpents, far from referring to instruments of modern warfare like destructive helicopters or jets, were metaphorical images for false teaching. If so, it is likely that the way the demons in Revelation work their deception is through human false teachers, which is a problem in the churches of Revelation (e.g., 2:14–15, 20–24; 22:18–19).

**20a** For the rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues, the plagues served as warnings and were not intended to have a redeeming but a damning effect. In fact, they **did not repent of the works of their hands**, but continued to **worship demons and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood**. The torment of the tails did not kill all the wicked, but those remaining were nevertheless still affected in that they did not repent and continued to remain hardened toward God. Indeed, they worshiped demons (who continued to deceive them) and idols and continued headlong into their sinful lifestyle (on which see vv. 20b–21). This shows again that the sixth trumpet is an escalation of the fifth by its introduction of death, though the sixth still continues to unleash the affliction of the fifth against all the surviving non-elect. These plagues will have a redeeming effect only on a remnant of compromisers inside the church and idolaters outside the church who have been sealed beforehand and finally benefit from the seal’s protective function. The pattern of the Exodus plagues is still apparent. Just as the death of the firstborn led to the decisive judgment at the Red

Sea, so here the death of others as a warning sign does not induce repentance, but prepares for the final judgment of the intractably impenitent at the seventh trumpet (11:18). The theological purpose of the warning is that God, by providing sufficient opportunities for spiritual reform, should demonstrate His sovereignty and especially His justice in finally judging the entire host of “unsealed” people at the seventh trumpet. The pastoral purpose is to remind the readers that antagonism to their faithful witness will continue to the end of history and that they should not be disheartened because it is part of God’s plan in which they can trust.

**20b–21** The remainder of v. 20, together with v. 21, explains from what the ungodly did not repent. They **did not repent of the works of their hands**, but continued to **worship demons and idols**. The typical OT list of idolatrous practices according to their material substance (so Pss. 115:4–7; 135:15–17; Dan. 5:4, 23; Deut. 4:28; the list here most closely echoes Dan. 5:4, 23) is prefaced by a summary of the spiritual essence behind the idols (Ps. 106:36–37; 1 Cor. 10:20). Idols are one of the main instruments used by the forces of darkness to keep people in that darkness. Part of the OT judgment of idolaters is that they ironically reflect the unspiritual image of the idols, so that they likewise are spiritually not able to see, hear, or walk (Pss. 115:5–8; 135:18; cf. Isa. 6:9–10). This may be the precise manner in which the demons anesthetize the idolaters of Rev. 9:20–21 with spiritual ignorance and insensitivity. Hence, idolaters are punished by means of their own sin.

The vices listed here—**murders, sorceries, immorality, and thefts**—are associated with idol worship in both the OT and the NT (e.g., Jer. 7:5–11 [cited by Jesus in Matt. 21:13]; Hos. 3:1–4:2; 2 Kgs. 9:22; Isa. 47:9–10, 48:5; Mic. 5:12–6:8; Nah. 1:14; 3:1–4; Acts 15:20; Rom. 1:18–32; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), as in Revelation (see on Rev. 2:14, 20–22 with respect to “immorality” [*porneia*]; see also 21:8; 22:15). Indeed, idolatry is the root sin responsible for these other vices. The repetition of “repent” in 9:20–21 could be linked with the theme of repentance in the letters, especially 2:21–23, where the word occurs three times as a challenge to repent from idolatry, which is there synonymous with spiritual fornication (*porneia*). This would mean that there are many in the churches who will not repent, and so the gruesome description of the demons here is intended also to shock some among the true people of God out of their complacent condition, as well as to bring others to true repentance.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 9:13–21

*On the seriousness of deception.* These verses present a picture of ferocious creatures representing demonic spirits who bring torment on unbelievers. A careful examination of the picture shows that the actual form in which these creatures confront people is often that of human false teachers (inside and outside the visible church), who promote worship of anything other than the true God. Is it possible that by a literalistic interpretation of Revelation, whereby we expect to be confronted by supernatural horses with tails of serpents or by some modern military lethal force, we could miss the very present spiritual reality of these beings in our midst? How seriously do we take the threat of false teaching? Do we see it as a disagreeable but merely human phenomenon, or as something empowered by powerful demonic spirits? How do we respond to such threats? Do we always unswervingly go to God’s Word for protection, since it is

the only source of truth against such threats? Elsewhere John says, “You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:14); that is, strength to overcome the false teachings from the devil (in the context) comes only from “the word of God.”

*On the nature of idolatry.* These verses present a picture of idolatry largely in line with that of the OT: the worship of idols of gold, silver, and other materials. The larger context of Revelation, which speaks of the destruction of all created things, shows that these human materials stand for anything that is not God, that is, worship of the creation rather than the Creator. What forms of idolatry exist in our society? Gold is not evil in itself, but is if it is worshiped. What about sports, careers, leisure activities, or the acquiring of money and material possessions? What of things clearly evil, such as pornography? How extensive is idolatry in our experience? Is part of the deception that we have restricted “idolatry” to the worship of literal idols? Whatever we are committed to more than God is an idol, including worship of ourselves.

*On the perniciousness of idolatry.* John links idolatry here with murders, sorceries, immorality, and thefts. If the OT observation is to be taken seriously, idolaters become as blind and dumb as what they worship. They thus become anesthetized, in the words of the commentary, to all that is good and of God, even as they fall deeper and deeper into the clutches of the forces of darkness, as John portrays so vividly. Is this how idolatry leads to these awful forms of sin and rebellion? How has Satan used idolatry to lead people into further darkness? Is there a point beyond which repentance is impossible? How can we guard ourselves against even the beginnings of idolatrous practices, since we know where these practices inevitably lead?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beale, G. K., & Campbell, D. H. (2015). *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (pp. 164–198). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.