

Revelation 9 — The Wise Sinner

Introduction

Revelation 9 is not an easy chapter to read. Smoke pours from the abyss. Strange creatures resembling locusts emerge from the darkness. People are tormented and long for death, but death escapes them. Then another trumpet sounds, another army appears, and the destruction increases. By the end of the chapter, after everything John has seen, perhaps the most disturbing words are not about the locusts or the horses or the smoke at all. They are these: “The rest of mankind ... did not repent” (9:20–21).

That may be the key to the chapter. Revelation 9 is certainly about judgment, but it is also about repentance—or more precisely, the refusal to repent. God warns. Judgment comes. Evil demonstrates what it does when given room to operate. Yet people continue clinging to the very things that are destroying them. That raises a question—what does a wise sinner do? “Wise sinner” sounds almost like an oxymoron, but all of us are sinners. The wise sinner is the one who recognizes where sin leads, hears the warning of God, and turns around while there is still opportunity to do so.

Chapter 8 prepared us for what is coming. The first four trumpets affected the created world, and repeatedly the damage was limited to “a third.” Judgment was real, but it was restrained. Then an eagle flying in midheaven cried, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth” because three trumpets remained (8:13). Chapter 9 gives us the first two of those woes. John spends considerably more time describing them than he did the first four trumpets. The imagery becomes darker, the suffering becomes intensely personal, and the consequences fall directly upon human beings.

But we need to remember how we have been reading Revelation from the beginning. This was not written to twenty-first-century people trying to identify helicopters, missiles, nuclear weapons, or some army appearing on tonight’s news. It was written to congregations in the first century who knew what oppression looked like and needed to know that the powers threatening them were neither ultimate nor unlimited. Revelation pulls back the curtain and shows them another dimension of their struggle. There is evil in the world, and there is spiritual evil behind much of what human beings experience, but even the forces emerging from the abyss do not have unrestricted authority. Again and again in this chapter, they are “given” permission. Their time is limited. Their victims are limited. Their power is limited. Evil is frightening, but evil is not sovereign.

That distinction matters. Revelation 9 does not ask us to become fascinated with demons. It asks us to see clearly what destruction looks like and then to look beyond it to the One who

remains Lord over everything John sees. The chapter is full of darkness, but darkness has boundaries.

1. The Fifth Trumpet — Revelation 9:1-6

“The fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth; and the key of the bottomless pit was given to him” (Revelation 9:1).

Notice the language immediately. The key is “given” to him. Whoever this star represents, he does not possess independent authority over the abyss. He receives the key from someone. That small detail is easy to miss when our attention is captured by everything that comes pouring out afterward, but it continues one of Revelation’s important themes. Evil acts, but it does not act without limits.

John has used stars symbolically before. In Revelation 1, the seven stars are the angels of the seven congregations. Here the star behaves personally: he receives a key and opens the abyss. We therefore do not need to imagine an astronomical object crashing into the earth. John is showing us a spiritual actor in an apocalyptic vision.

The abyss itself already had meaning for people familiar with the biblical world. It represents the deep, the place of darkness and confinement, and in the New Testament it becomes particularly associated with the imprisonment of evil spiritual powers. That makes an interesting connection with the account of the demon-possessed man in Mark 5 and its parallel in Luke 8. When Yeshua confronts the demons, Luke tells us that they begged Him “not to command them to go away into the abyss” (Luke 8:31). They knew what the abyss represented, and they did not want to go there.

That man is worth remembering as we enter Revelation 9. He lived among the tombs. He cried out night and day. He injured himself with stones. People tried to restrain him with chains, but no one could subdue him. Everything about the scene speaks of isolation, darkness, torment and destruction. Then Yeshua arrives. When the story is over, the man who had been uncontrollable is sitting down, clothed and in his right mind (Mark 5:15). The contrast could hardly be stronger. The forces associated with the abyss destroy; Yeshua restores.

In Revelation 9, however, the abyss is opened. Smoke rises from it “like the smoke of a great furnace,” so thick that the sun and the air are darkened (9:2). Smoke throughout Scripture often accompanies judgment and destruction. Abraham looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah and saw “the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28). At Sinai, “Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace” (Exodus 19:18). John continues to use biblical vocabulary. Darkness is spreading across the scene, and from that darkness something emerges.

Locusts come out of the smoke.

For a reader of the Tanakh, locusts already carried terrifying associations. Egypt had experienced them as one of the plagues of the Exodus (Exodus 10:12–15). Joel described an invading force with the imagery of a devastating locust swarm and sounded the alarm: “Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain!” (Joel 2:1). We encountered that verse in the previous chapter because the connection becomes especially important here. John is not inventing his imagery from nothing. Once again, Revelation expects us to have the Tanakh open beside us.

But these are no ordinary locusts. They are given power like scorpions, and they are specifically commanded not to harm the grass, vegetation, or trees—the very things ordinary locusts would devour. Instead, their torment is directed toward people, although even here there is a boundary: they may not harm “the people who have the seal of God on their foreheads” (9:4). The imagery is deliberately unnatural because John is describing something more than an agricultural disaster.

And once again their authority is limited. They are permitted to torment for five months, but not to kill. We do not need to turn the five months into a prophetic calculation. The emphasis is on limitation. There is a beginning and there is an end. The torment does not continue forever.

That limitation would have mattered enormously to Revelation’s first hearers. Some of them were living under powers that seemed unstoppable. Rome looked permanent. Persecution could feel endless. Spiritual opposition could seem overwhelming. John does not pretend that their suffering is imaginary. Instead, he shows them something more important: no destructive power has the final word. Even when the abyss opens, somebody else still holds the boundaries.

And that brings us to one of the most haunting sentences in the chapter: “In those days people will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will flee from them” (9:6).

John wants us to feel the horror of that sentence. But he does not want us to stop there. The question running underneath chapter 9 is already beginning to emerge: when people finally see what destruction produces, will they turn? Will suffering awaken them? Will warning lead to repentance? Or will they cling to the darkness even while the darkness is destroying them?

2. The Locust Army — Revelation 9:7–12

John now tries to describe what he is seeing, and the repeated word is “like.” The locusts are like horses prepared for battle. On their heads are what appear to be crowns like gold.

Their faces are like human faces. Their hair is like women's hair, their teeth like lions' teeth, and their breastplates like breastplates of iron. The sound of their wings is like the sound of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. Then John returns to the scorpion imagery: they have tails with stings, and their power to hurt people is in those tails.

We should pay attention to all those comparisons. John is not giving us a zoological description so that centuries later we can identify the creature. He is struggling to describe a vision. "It was like this ... and like this ... and like this." If we turn every detail into a separate code to be cracked, we can easily lose the cumulative effect. John wants us to hear the noise, see the movement and feel the terror of an overwhelming invading force.

Once again Joel is close at hand. Joel's locust army has the appearance of horses; it charges like war horses; it makes a noise like chariots; and before it "the land is like the garden of Eden, but behind it, a desolate wilderness" (Joel 2:3-5). John takes imagery his readers already knew and intensifies it. These locusts are not eating crops. Their attack is directed toward human beings.

Yet even this frightening army is restrained. That point is worth repeating because John repeats it. They have authority, but authority has been given to them. They torment, but they may not kill. They operate for a limited period. They may attack people, but not those who bear the seal of God. Revelation never allows the Destroyer to become the sovereign.

Then John tells us something ordinary locusts do not have: a king. "They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon" (9:11).

Both names carry essentially the same idea: destruction or destroyer. John gives us the name in Hebrew and then in Greek, ensuring that nobody misses his point. The force behind this army is characterized by what it does. It destroys.

That takes me back to an incident from years ago at our Jews for Jesus bookshop in Sydney. Two young men wearing balaclavas came running toward the shop. It was about 1 in the morning. One carried a metal pipe and the other a cricket bat. In a matter of seconds they smashed the front window and ran away. They did not enter the shop. They did not steal anything. Apparently, they simply wanted to destroy something.

The police asked why they might have done it. Channel 7 asked me essentially the same question. I could speculate, of course. Perhaps they wanted to frighten us. Perhaps they wanted us to leave. Perhaps destruction itself gave them some momentary satisfaction. But I could not get inside their minds, and I still cannot. What I could see was the result. Something good had been damaged for no apparent gain to the people who damaged it.

Destruction is like that. It ultimately produces nothing but ruin.

Yet I remember something else from that interview. I was asked what I would say to those young men if I had the opportunity. My first thought was that I wanted them to know the forgiveness and eternal life God had extended to me without merit. I wanted them to know the Lord. I wanted the people who had come to destroy something of ours to discover the One who restores.

That contrast is important in Revelation 9. Abaddon destroys. Yeshua gives life. Yeshua Himself described the contrast when He said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Revelation gives us frightening pictures of destruction, but it never asks us to admire the Destroyer. It asks us to recognize him by his fruit.

The fifth trumpet concludes with the sobering announcement, “The first woe is past; behold, two woes are still coming after these things” (9:12). There is more to come.

3. The Sixth Trumpet — Revelation 9:13-19

“The sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God” (9:13).

That altar should sound familiar. Back in chapter 8, the prayers of the saints rose before God from the golden altar. We said there that heaven is not indifferent to the prayers of God's suffering people. Now, as the sixth trumpet sounds, a voice comes from that same altar. The judgments unfolding on earth have not become disconnected from what John has already shown us in heaven. The voice commands the sixth angel, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates” (9:14).

For John's first readers, the Euphrates was not simply a blue line on a map. It carried centuries of memory. Beyond that region had come armies that devastated Israel and Judah. Assyria came from the northeast and destroyed the northern kingdom. Babylon came and eventually destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The Euphrates first appears in the biblical story in Eden, as one of the four rivers. So even the mention of this river invites the reader to ponder the sweep of the biblical story. The Euphrates could also function in the biblical imagination as a boundary beyond which danger waited.

It also had immediate significance in John's world. Rome's great eastern rival, the Parthian Empire, lay beyond the Euphrates. The Romans knew what it was to fear attack from the east. That does not mean John is simply predicting a Parthian invasion, any more than the locusts should be reduced to one particular army. But the imagery would not have been abstract to John's first readers. An enormous mounted army arriving from beyond the Euphrates communicated danger in a language they understood.

Again John emphasizes control and limitation. These four angels have been “prepared for the hour and day and month and year” (9:15). The wording is strikingly precise. They are not accidentally released because heaven has lost control of events. Their moment is appointed.

Then John hears the size of the cavalry: “two hundred million” (9:16). The number is almost beyond comprehension, and that is probably precisely the effect John intends. He hears the number of an army too vast to count by ordinary means. As elsewhere in Revelation, we should resist the temptation to scan modern military statistics looking for a nation capable of fielding exactly 200 million soldiers. John is communicating overwhelming force.

When I first came to faith in 1971, I read a book that taught me to see these numbers, places and symbols as references to precise countries, contemporary leaders and current events. That particular book even identified China with the army of 200 million. That excited me then. These days, however, I think my reading is much more Johannine: I want first to understand the images as John and his original hearers would have understood them.

The horses and riders are described with the same kind of fantastic imagery we encountered in the first half of the chapter. The riders have breastplates the color of fire, hyacinth and brimstone. The horses have heads like lions, and from their mouths come fire, smoke and brimstone. Their power is in their mouths and in their tails, which are like serpents and have heads capable of inflicting harm.

Once again, this is apocalyptic imagery rather than military journalism. John is not giving us technical specifications for weapons that will be invented two thousand years later. He is describing a vision of destructive power using biblical images of judgment. Fire, smoke and sulfur immediately recall the language of divine judgment elsewhere in Scripture. What John sees is terrible because destruction is terrible.

There is, however, a significant difference between the fifth and sixth trumpets. The first demonic force was permitted to torment but not to kill. With the sixth trumpet, death enters the picture: “A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which proceeded out of their mouths” (9:18).

But even here we meet that familiar fraction: a third. We encountered it repeatedly in chapter 8. A third of the earth, a third of the trees, a third of the sea, a third of the waters, a third of the heavenly lights. Now a third of humanity. The judgment has intensified dramatically, but it remains limited. Two-thirds remain.

And that means two-thirds still have an opportunity to respond.

This is where the chapter turns. John has shown us smoke, darkness, torment, destruction and death. Surely those who survive will understand. Surely they will abandon the false gods that cannot save them. Surely after seeing where their loyalties have taken them, they will turn toward the living God.

Surely they will repent. But they don't.

And that refusal, rather than the strange appearance of the locusts or the enormous number of the cavalry, may be the most frightening thing in Revelation 9.

4. They Still Did Not Repent — Revelation 9:20–21

“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands” (9:20).

There it is. After all the noise and smoke, after the locusts and the scorpions and the cavalry, after torment and death, John brings us to the real issue. People have survived the judgment, but survival has not necessarily produced wisdom. They are still alive, but they have not turned.

That is why I keep coming back to the strange expression I used at the beginning: a wise sinner. The wise sinner is not someone who has managed to stop being a sinner through superior moral effort. The wise sinner is someone who sees the direction in which he is traveling and turns around. He repents. Revelation 9 shows us people who have received warning after warning and yet continue to refuse to return.

Notice what John says they refuse to abandon: “the works of their hands.” That expression ought to send us back into the Tanakh. The prophets repeatedly mocked the absurdity of making an idol and then worshiping it. Isaiah describes a man cutting down a tree, using some of the wood to warm himself and bake his bread, and then using the rest to make a god before which he bows down (Isaiah 44:14–17). Psalm 115 says of the idols of the nations, “They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear” (Psalm 115:5–6). Daniel uses almost exactly the language John uses when he rebukes Belshazzar for praising “the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand” (Daniel 5:23).

John therefore is not suddenly changing subjects. Idolatry lies beneath everything we have been watching. Human beings worship what they themselves have made and then become captive to it. Revelation is going to expose that theme more fully as the book continues, particularly when worship becomes the dividing line between allegiance to the beast and allegiance to God. Chapter 9 prepares us for that conflict.

We should also be careful not to imagine that idolatry disappeared when people stopped bowing before little statues. An idol is ultimately something created that receives the

allegiance belonging to the Creator. Wealth can do that. Power can do that. Nation, success, sexuality, security and even religion can do that. I remember a moment in Thailand on a tour at a Buddhist temple where other tourists were throwing small sticks towards a statue of Buddha. I didn't participate, although invited. We may shake our head at someone bowing before an image of wood or stone while we still remain remarkably devoted to the works of our own hands.

John adds something even darker. They did not repent "so as not to worship demons" (9:20). Scripture has made that connection before. Deuteronomy 32:17 says that Israel "sacrificed to demons who were not God." Paul later makes the same connection when discussing pagan sacrifice in 1 Corinthians 10:20. The point is not that every physical idol contains a demon. It is that false worship is never spiritually neutral. When people give ultimate allegiance to something other than the living God, they are participating in a spiritual rebellion larger than themselves.

And then comes the final verse: "and they did not repent of their murders nor of their witchcraft nor of their sexual immorality nor of their thefts" (9:21).

The Greek word translated "witchcraft" or "sorceries" is *pharmakeia*. It can refer to sorcery, magic and the use of potions associated with occult practices. It is tempting because of its resemblance to our word "pharmacy" to turn this into a condemnation of modern medicine or pharmaceutical drugs. That would be importing a modern argument into John's text. His world knew magical practices, spells, potions and attempts to manipulate spiritual powers, and that is the world his language evokes.

Look at the list as a whole: murder, sorcery, sexual immorality and theft. These are not mysterious apocalyptic sins. They are terribly ordinary human ones. After all the extraordinary imagery in the chapter, John finishes with recognizable rebellion. People kill. People manipulate spiritual power. They misuse sexuality and take what belongs to others. And underneath all of it is worship directed toward something other than God.

That makes the end of Revelation 9 much closer to us than the strange creatures at its beginning. Judgment by itself does not necessarily produce repentance. We sometimes imagine that if people could only see enough evidence, experience enough consequences, or become frightened enough, they would turn to God. Revelation 9 gives us a much more sobering picture. A person can experience the consequences of rebellion and still cling to the rebellion. Pain may awaken someone, but pain does not automatically change the heart.

Repentance requires more than fear. It starts with volition and requires turning.

What Are We Supposed to Do?

What should a person do in light of what John shows us? Revelation was never given merely to satisfy our curiosity about strange creatures emerging from an abyss. The opening blessing of the book is given to the one who reads, hears and “heeds the things which are written in it” (1:3). We are supposed to do something with what we hear.

First, believers should believe. No matter what is happening or will happen. As a result of all we have been studying, about the Sovereign One, the One who sits on the throne, we should endure. That has been one of the messages of Revelation from the beginning. John's first readers were facing pressures that could make Rome and its power seem permanent. Revelation says otherwise. Evil may be terrifying, but it is limited. The locusts are given authority. They are given a period of time. They are forbidden to kill. The four angels at the Euphrates are released at an appointed time. Even when destruction seems to run loose, it has not escaped the sovereignty of God.

That does not mean suffering is insignificant. John never says, “Don't worry; it doesn't really hurt.” Revelation takes suffering seriously precisely because it was written to suffering people. The encouragement is not that believers will never experience darkness. The encouragement is that darkness does not get eternity.

Second, sinners should repent. That means all of us. We should not read Revelation 9 pointing through the window at the terrible people outside. The question is what I will do when God exposes the things to which I have given allegiance. A wise sinner does not defend the idol. He does not polish it. He does not blame somebody else for it. He turns.

Third, we should remember what God desires even for people who are presently opposed to Him. I think again about those two men who smashed our shop window. My hope was not that God would find them and smash something of theirs. I wanted them to know the forgiveness I had received. That remains the gospel response to people caught in destruction: not approval of what they are doing, and not denial of its consequences, but the hope that they will turn and find life.

That is the tragedy at the end of Revelation 9. The door to repentance has not disappeared. The survivors simply refuse to walk through it.

Takeaways

We see the nature of evil so that we will recognize it, resist its claims and remain faithful to Yeshua.

Evil destroys, but evil is limited. The abyss is not the throne room. The Destroyer is not the King of kings.

Judgment is also a warning. There is still opportunity which must be answered with repentance.

Finally, the most dangerous condition in Revelation 9 is not being frightened. It is being hardened.

The wise sinner hears the warning and turns toward God.

Memory Verse

“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands.”

Revelation 9:20

What's Next?

Revelation 9 has been noisy—trumpets, wings, horses, armies and destruction. Chapter 10 changes the scene. A mighty angel descends from heaven with a little scroll in his hand, John hears seven peals of thunder that he is forbidden to record, and then he is told to take the scroll and eat it.

It will be sweet in his mouth.

And bitter in his stomach.

John is about to learn something every messenger of God eventually discovers: receiving the Word of God and carrying the Word of God are not always the same experience.