

A PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS

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We are all familiar with the Ten Plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians when he delivered His people from their bondage there. The eighth of those plagues was a plague of locusts (Exod 10:12-20). Those locusts *“covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt”* (Exod 10:15). The Book of Revelation uses many events from the Old Testament as symbols, and chapter nine describes a “woe” that would come with the blowing of the fifth of seven trumpets as part of the opening of the seventh seal of the book. The woe described includes a plague of locusts.

Powerful locusts arising from the bottomless pit

In verse one, “the fifth angel sounded,” and John “saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth.” In Revelation 8:10-11, the star called Wormwood fell to the earth when the third angel sounded, and it turned the waters to wormwood. The falling star indicated judgment from God and the same appears to be the case here in chapter 9. When this star falls, the fifth angel is given *“the key of the bottomless pit.”* In the book of Revelation, the “bottomless pit” symbolizes a source of something evil. Later in the book, the “beast” ascends from out of the bottomless pit (Rev 11:7; 17:8), and Satan is bound by an angel of God in the bottomless pit for a thousand years (Rev 20:1-3). Here in Revelation 9, the opening of the bottomless pit releases a destructive force that torments everyone except for God’s faithful servants. In verse two, the fifth angel “opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.” The smoke is a harbinger of something very terrible to come: *“And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power”* (Rev 9:3).

Torment for all who do not serve God

As we all know, locusts devour anything and everything they can (Exod 10:12-15; Deut 28:38,42), and scorpions deliver a powerful sting to their enemies with their tails. Obviously, these “locusts” that came from the bottomless pit were about to deliver a fearful and painful force of destruction. But good news is found in verse four. The locusts were *“commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads.”* We find this same instruction given to the four angels standing on the four corners of the earth in Revelation 7:1-3. The “servants of God” were sealed by God’s angel in their foreheads (Rev 7:3-8). Therefore, only men who were not the “servants of God” would be hurt by these locusts. For them, there would be an intensely painful torment to the point they would wish to die. Concerning what the locusts would do to the wicked, verses five and six say, *“And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months: and their torment was as the torment of a*

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(continued)

scorpion, when he strikes a man. And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them."

Everything we read here demonstrates that God is in full control of this situation. God gave the key to His angel to release these locusts, and then God restricted them from harming His faithful servants and precisely defined what they could inflict upon the wicked. It is also evident that this does not represent God's final judgment of the wicked, since the punishment is greatly limited in both degree ("they should not kill them") and duration ("five months") in verse five.

Nevertheless, the torment is quite severe and clearly teaches us the lesson that there will be dire consequences upon all those who do not submit to God, and the only escape from God's wrath is by faithfully and diligently serving Him.

A destroying army

It is now our task to consider who or what these locusts are, or what they represent. They are described in verses 7-10. *"And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months."*

According to this description, these "locusts" resemble a great, powerful army. We see the picture of many horses ready for battle with armored and powerful men (with long hair and strong teeth) riding them, with the power to sting men like a scorpion for a brief period of time (five months, which is probably not meant to be taken literally, but does happen to equal the typical life span of a locust). Clearly, these locusts are not literal, but rather symbolize some kind of powerful army of men. Unlike true locusts who eat plants instead of flesh, these "locusts" do just the opposite and behave exactly like an army. Furthermore, one of the amazing things about literal locusts is that they have no "king" over them (Prov 30:27). But these locusts *"had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue has his name Apollyon"* (Rev 9:11). In both Hebrew and Greek, the king's name means "Destroyer." Again, armies of men are commanded by kings, but actual locusts are not. The meaning of the name of their king accurately depicts what this army would do. Some brethren have conjectured that this army is speaking of the barbaric armies that successfully invaded the Roman Empire in the Fifth Century A.D., or even Mohammed and the armies of his followers in the Seventh Century and beyond. But whether this represents God's general judgment of wickedness or represents something more specific we cannot be sure and we feel it is better not to attempt to speculate. The unmistakable message from this first woe is that God has prepared his judgments for the wicked, but will always deliver His faithful servants. *"The Lord knoweth how to deliver the goldy out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished"* (2 Pet 2:9).