

Revelation 9:1-12 – The Fifth Trumpet

What is Christian faith? One answer might be to list all the things Christians believe. But by the word "faith", the New Testament refers to what we "depend on", not just to the things we think are true. So what should Christians depend on? The apostles preached "faith in Christ" (Acts 20:21), "faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:22), "faith in Christ" (Gal 2:16), "faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20), "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory" (Jam 2:1), belief "in Him" (1 Pe 1:8), and "faith in Jesus" (Rev 14:12). Christian faith, according to Jesus' own apostles, is faith in Jesus and in Jesus alone. The book of Revelation ends with an invitation to sinners, to come to Jesus by faith, i.e., depending on Jesus alone for everlasting life: [read Rev 22:17b]. That's what "faith" is, receiving the gift that Jesus alone can give you: life. You can't pay for it (He already did); you can't earn it (He already did). That's why you need to come and drink the life-giving water of Jesus "without price". If you try to pay for it or earn it you cheapen what Jesus already did for you. One of the main goals of the Book of Revelation is to persuade people to believe in Jesus. It gives predictions that come true; it gives promises that can be trusted; it gives warnings of what happens when you ignore Jesus or try to mix anything with pure faith in Jesus. Nowhere in Revelation is this clearer than in the fifth trumpet. Both in the wording of the prophecy, and in the details of the fulfillment, we are encouraged and warned to believe only in Jesus.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpets form the main skeleton of the rest of the prophecy of Revelation, leading up to the second coming of Christ we are still waiting for today. And the warning of the eagle in 8:13 marks these trumpet blasts as three woes, calamities about to happen to the people living in the land. As I've traced the fulfillment of the first four trumpets up to the collapse of the mighty Roman Empire in the year 476, and the four waves of barbarian invasions predicted in 8:6-12, we should now expect that the next trumpet, the first great calamity, should happen next, sometime around the sixth century. Those four trumpets targeted the Roman controlled territories of the Empire--the "one third" of the three government districts at that time. The real seat of power, however, had been moved to Constantinople in modern Turkey, the capital of the Christian, Greek-speaking, Byzantine Empire. It was a Christian empire, but false-doctrines abounded. Especially in the east, debate raged about whether Jesus was God or merely "a god" (the Arian heresy). And in the west as well as the east, the Bishop of Rome, now called, "the popes", encouraged people to pray to images of saints. By the 600's, the Byzantines had gained control of North Africa, and were managing to hold off the Persian Empire in the east. But then a calamity happened that nobody expected, but that changed the world. This morning as we explore the meaning of these symbols, and then how they were fulfilled, what I want you to keep in mind is that so-called Christians were at that time largely denying either the deity of Jesus, or the sufficiency of Jesus--praying to Mary and icons of dead saints. In both the east and the west, Christianity was increasingly apostate--having "fallen away" from the Gospel-centred faith of the apostles.

An army of locusts [read vv1-6]

The first thing we must notice about this army of locusts is that God is in control. I have three reasons for saying that: a) the locusts come from the smoke, that comes from the pit, that is opened by the "fallen star" (don't worry about how weird that seems, we'll come back to it). But the key to open the pit is "given" to the fallen star (v1). He receives it from someone with greater authority. B) Locusts in nature eat vegetation but don't hurt people. These locusts though, are "given power like the power of scorpions" (v3). Again, they receive it passively from someone in control. C) Finally, the imagery of "locusts", just like the hail and fire, the waters becoming bloody and bitter, and the darkness of the

earlier trumpets, are images taken from the 10 plagues God used to punish Egypt and free Israel from slavery. The locusts were the eighth plague. And “plagues” are not just diseases, but punishments from God. So as soon as we see the symbol of locusts in Revelation 9, we are reminded that God is punishing someone, and when we read that the key to the bottomless pit, and the power of scorpions, is “given” to the fallen star and to the locusts, we are reminded that this is all part of a judgement from God. All the trumpets are sounded because the Lamb opened the seventh seal in 8:1. Jesus is exercising divine and sovereign rule.

Their king [read v11, 1]

Because Jesus is in control, it’s sort of surprising when we read in verse 11 that the locusts are serving Satan. Verse 11 has to be read together with verse 1. The symbol in verse 1 is “a star fallen from heaven”. That reminds us of three things: first, “stars” in the book of Revelation are symbols for “angels”. Jesus Himself gave John that interpretation in 1:20, “the seven stars that you saw in my right hand... are the angels of the seven churches”. (But you also need to remember that in Greek, the word “angel” literally means “messenger”—sometimes then stars represent human messengers serving God, or even serving false gods, and sometimes they represent spirits created to serve God.) Second, verse 11 tells us that this “fallen star” is “the angel of the bottomless pit”, who is called “Abaddon” or “Apollyon” in Hebrew and Greek—two words meaning “destruction” and “destroyer”. Third, though it’s not hard to this out with all these clues already, the first clue, “I saw a star fallen from heaven” takes us back to Jesus’ words to his disciples in Luke 10:18, [read Lk 10:18-20]. Just as Jesus is in control; just as Satan himself, though fallen from serving God is still under the rule and authority of Jesus, so Jesus gives His followers authority over “the spirits” (Lk 10:20), the demons who, like “serpents and scorpions”, torment unbelievers. What the Destroyer intends for harm with these locusts, Jesus intends for good. The smoke from incense in Rev 8:4 is the prayers of believers that Christ makes acceptable to God. This smoke is impure, unholy prayers of a religion that’s not from heaven, but from the pit.

Their power [read v3]

The scorpion-like power given to this locust-army is intended to point believers to realize the power behind this plague is a demonic power (like Jesus said in Luke 10:18-20), and that even when the powers of darkness seem to prevail, ultimately Jesus promise believers everlasting life and triumph—“rejoice that your names are written in Heaven” (Lk 10:20). Still, for those who suffer under this locust invasion, their power feels very real, and their victims feel tormented. That power was “given to them”, meaning even when it looks like the demonic power behind them is more powerful than Christ, don’t forget that their power to torment is a delegated power under the sovereign control of the Lord Jesus: not just the divine source, but also the limits placed on their power show how true that is [read v4]. I’ll come back to verse 5 in a few moments, but first look at verse 6: [read]. They are not permitted to do what literal locusts always do: eat vegetation, so they aren’t literally locusts, but people sent to harm people God was judging—not believers in Christ (v4b)—and not even to “kill” many unbelievers [read v5].

Death-by-locust is not a real thing. But the imagery is not hard to figure out because the wording is taken from Amos 8:12 and adapted here with tragic irony. The Old Testament book of Amos was written sometime around c.740BC, about 20 years before the northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped out by the Assyrian Empire. The thing that shocked Amos’ hearers at that time was that Israel really thought God was still on their side, even though they worshipped other idols and astrological “star” gods. And Amos comes along and says that just as God was going to judge Israel’s neighbours for their wickedness, God

was also about to judge Israel for their apostasy. In Amos 5:8, God taunts demonic “star-gods” with proof of His sovereign power. And then in Amos 8:12, God says through Amos, because Israel didn’t put up with real Bible-teaching when they had the chance, soon they won’t be able to find a good Bible teacher anywhere: [read Amos 8:11-12]. That was ancient Israel. But when this locust-army invades sometime after the fall of the Roman Empire in the early Middle Ages, people won’t even seek God’s Word. There will be no real repentance. They will prefer instead to be swallowed-up and eaten by the locusts, but even the locusts will not accept them. In Daniel’s prophecies, like in Revelation, metaphors for death (being “devoured”, “thrown down”, “trampled” c.f. Dan 7:7, 23; 8:10, 24, and c.f. 8:12) refer to peoples swallowed up and absorbed by their conquerors. But the locusts will at first segregate more than assimilate the people they conquer.

Their appearance [read vv7-10a]

The descriptions of the locusts starts with a word used only once in the book of Revelation: “appearance”. Interesting since this book is so visual! The point is to emphasize that the symbol is of locusts—their “appearance” includes 8 descriptive clues to help readers identify what invading army the locusts represent. Three of those clues (lion’s teeth, war horses, & chariots) come from Joel 1-2. Joel predicted a powerful nation was going to invade and conquer Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah, and symbolized them as locusts [read Joel 1:4, 6; 2:4-5]. Joel called them “a powerful nation”, meaning they weren’t actual locusts but people invading the Holy Land. These symbolic descriptions in Rev 9 then lead us to expect a powerful nation to invade the Holy Land. Moreover, since locust plagues in Israel came from the south, we should expect this plague under the fifth trumpet to come from the south of Israel. The other clues—gold-coloured crowns and human faces (v7), resembling long hair (v8) and iron breastplates (v9)—since they aren’t clues from the Bible, are probably meant as literal descriptions.

Their time [read vv 5a, 10b]

The tormenting power of these locusts is specifically named as a feature of the scorpion-like tails they are given. We learned from Jesus’ words in Luke 10 that this is a clue that their success would be due to demonic, spiritual power. So what demonically-inspired, powerful nation, invaded the Holy Land from the south, as a judgement on apostate Christians, that refused to integrate Christians into their population, but did allow true Christians to remain alive; who rode horses, had gold-coloured crowns, looked like they had long hair, iron armor, and showed up sometime after the fall of Rome in 476 AD? The historian Justo L. Gonzalez writes, “Out of Arabia, a forgotten corner of the world that had been generally ignored by both the Roman and the Persian empires, a tidal wave of conquest arose that threatened to engulf the world. In a few years, the Persian Empire had vanished, and many of the ancient Roman territories were in Arab hands.”ⁱⁱⁱ Mohammed, the founder of Islam, claimed to receive the words of the Quran from the angel Gabriel.ⁱⁱ There is no doubt in my mind that he really saw an angel, one “fallen from heaven” (v1), but it wasn’t Gabriel: in Hebrew he is called Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon, “the Destroyer” (v11). And using biblical imagery, the writings he received were not “light”, but “smoke” that obscures the light and brings darkness over the land.ⁱⁱⁱ Inspired by his demon-inspired teaching, waves of soldiers swarmed over Arabia, the Middle East, and North Africa.^{iv}

In 622, Mohammed was forced to flee Mecca because of opposition to his preaching, and he found safety in Medina. 10 years later, under his "successors" (*caliphs*) had conquered much of Arabia to the south, then turned east, and then north, and finally west.^v Their horse-back armies (famous for gilded-helmets wrapped in turbans, chain-mail down the back of the neck, & chain-mail shirts)^{vi} invaded the

Holy Land, taking Damascus and Jerusalem from the Byzantine Empire in 638; then Egypt in 642. North Africa, Spain, France--as well as totally consuming the Persian Empire with astonishing speed.^{vii} It's remarkable that though Muslim policy allowed Christians to live, they were forced to live "as dogs" under harsh laws, paying protection money and subjected even to ordinary Muslims.^{viii} But verses 5 and 10 specifically say the locusts were allowed to torment for five months. How does that fit the first waves of Muslim Arab invaders? I've explained before that time periods in Bible prophecy are normally on the scale of a year in history for every symbolic day: the principle is laid down in Numbers 14:34—forty years wandering in the wilderness for forty days of unbelief by the spies sent to Canaan. In Ezekiel 4:5 God assigned Ezekiel a symbolic day for every year of Israel's punishment: [read Eze 4:5a] and again the prophecy was given as "a day for each year" (Eze 4:6). In Daniel 9, seventy symbolic weeks of days until the coming of Christ are fulfilled on the scale of a real year for each symbolic day. Scripture tells us how to interpret time periods in symbolic prophecies: a day for a year.^{ix} So 5 months, or 150 days (a normal life-span for locusts!)^x = 150 years of initial Muslim conquest. From 632 on, Muslim forces devoured territory until they were stopped in France by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732, "which marked the end of the first wave of Moslem expansion"^{xi}—at least in the west. In the East, the rapid conquest in the name of the Muslim god, "Allah", was resisted at the siege of Constantinople in 718, and then began to be reversed after the first great victory of the Byzantine army at the Battle of Akroinon in 740, on the edge of the region of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3. By 750 the border between the Muslim Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire were stabilizing—*150 years since Muhammad was visited by the fallen angel.*^{xii} In 762, the new Caliph moved his capital from Damascus, further away from Byzantine territories to Baghdad, beginning a "golden age" of Islam where its rulers became less consumed with conquest, and more concerned with culture.^{xiii}

You know what's amazing? Some Christian pastors and bishops in the Byzantine empire had been telling people that praying to icons of saints was idol-worship. In the 720's, after years of Arab victories, the Byzantine Emperor, Leo III, seemed to listen.^{xiv} He tried to lead the Byzantines away from idol-worship, but in the end, resistance from the popes in Rome and from the majority of the clergy led to more, not less, pollution of the Gospel and pure faith in Christ in Byzantine lands, and of course, in Western Europe as well.^{xv} One purpose of the fifth trumpet prophecy is to turn believers to worship and trust in Christ alone, the Lord who works all things for our good, according to His purposes. We need to remember that especially when it looks as if evil is winning. It's not. The victory belongs to Jesus, and every subsequent fulfillment of Revelation leads closer and closer to Christ's final and glorious victory: In Revelation 9, we again see that what Christ's enemies intended for evil, Jesus intends for good. [read Rev 9:12]

ⁱ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol 1 (Prince Press, 2001), pp 248-249.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 249. C.f. *Wikipedia*, "Muhammad: Beginnings of the Quran" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad#Beginnings_of_the_Quran]. Accessed October 19, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ C.f., Gen 19:28; Ex 19:18; Amos 5:18-20, 8:10; Joel 2:10b, 30-32; 3:15

^{iv} C.f. the reference to Midanite Arabs in Judges 6:5-6 as "locusts".

^v Gonzalez, p. 249

^{vi} *Wikipedia*, "Rashidun Army" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashidun_army#Helmets]. Accessed October 17, 2018]; Also see Mayer, L. A. "Saracenic Arms and Armor." *Ars Islamica*, vol. 10, 1943, pp. 1–12. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4515613]. Accessed October 17, 2018. Muhammad claimed that Allah invented chain-mail armor! (Surah 21:80 in the Quran says that Allah taught David how to make "metal coats of mail".)

Two 19th century writers did a good job of refuting the efforts by Elliott and others to identify the descriptions of the locusts with the Saracens. They showed Elliott was inconsistent in seeing some parts of the descriptions as literal (breastplates of iron) while others are symbolic (crowns like gold meaning linen turbans). [*The Locusts, the Euphratean Horsemen, and the Two Witnesses; Or, the Apocalyptic Systems of the Rev. E. B. Elliott, Dr. Cumming, and Dr. Keith Proved Unsound*, by Robert GOVETT, John CUMMING (London: James Nisbet & Co, 1852), pp 27-30.] However, as I show here, further knowledge of early-Islamic armor shows gold-coloured “gilded” helmets wrapped in turbans with aventails were typical, as were chain mail shirts. However, I differ from Elliott that beards aren’t necessarily what “faces of men” means.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} See Oral E. Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus* (Wipf and Stock, 2007), p204. A rather rose-coloured description of the policy toward “dhimmis” is found at Wikipedia, “Rashidun Caliphate: Treatment of conquered people” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashidun_Caliphate#Treatment_of_conquered_peoples]. Accessed October 19, 2018. A somewhat more balanced discussion of the *jizya* poll-tax on *dhimmis* is found at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jizya>.

^{ix} For a thorough explanation and defense of the year-day principle of interpretation, see the excellent 37-page essay in E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, Vol. 3, pp268-297.

^x *Wikipedia*, “Desert Locust” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_locust]. Accessed October 19, 2018.

^{xi} Ibid., Gonzalez, p. 249.

^{xii} Ibid. “Muhammad: Beginnings of the Quran”.

^{xiii} Ibid., “Abbasid Caliphate: Decline of the Empire”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbasid_Caliphate#Decline_of_the_empire]. Accessed October 19, 2018.

^{xiv} *Wikipedia*, “Arab-Byzantine Wars” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab%E2%80%93Byzantine_wars]. Accessed October 19, 2018.

^{xv} Ibid., Gonzalez, pp. 259-260. C.f., *Wikipedia*, “Byzantine Iconoclasm: The First Iconoclast Period 730-787”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Iconoclasm#The_first_iconoclast_period:_730%E2%80%93787]. Accessed October 19, 2018.