

The most recent issue of Time magazine contains an article entitled “Porn and the Threat to Virility” by Belinda Luscombe. It tells the story of how broadband internet and the smartphone, two huge leaps forward in technology have made it easier than ever to consume not just pictures but videos privately and for free.

Scores of young men, having been “marinated in porn” as adolescents and young adults, are now unable to experience a sexual response with a real, live woman. They are only able to respond to pornography. One lifelong user is quoted saying:

When I think about it, I've wasted years of my life looking for a computer or mobile phone to provide something it is not capable of providing.

But it's not just that pornography is incapable of providing what it promises no matter how much you consume—rather, pornography is consuming its users. It keeps promising more and better sex, but it delivers loneliness and impotence. *In other words what you consume ultimately consumes you.*

This phenomenon is one of the main themes of our passage, which teaches us that

Evil will ultimately turn on its followers, therefore we must turn to God for protection and salvation.

First, let's look at the nature of the evil described here in the passage:

I. The Star, the Pit, and Locusts are symbols of Evil

A. The Star/Angel

We have already learned in chapter 1 that “stars” often represent angels. Most likely that is the meaning here, but there is disagreement about whether this is an evil angel or a good angel who simply opens the bottomless pit.

It seems best to take it as an evil angel (perhaps Satan himself) for three reasons:

1. In other Jewish writings from the same time period, the notion of fallen angels or fallen stars always concerns their moral fall—they didn't just descend but they were cast out of God's holy presence.¹
2. On a related note, there are no known instances where a good angel is described as “fallen.”
3. The angel given the key to the bottomless pit would seem to be the same as the “king over the bottomless pit” called Abaddon and Appolyon in v. 11.

In either case though, the meaning of the passage is not greatly changed because the angel (be he good or bad) is God's instrument in this scene to open the pit and release the locusts which are the main symbol of the passage.

B. The “bottomless pit” or “The Abyss”

The pit in question isn't just a deep whole, but more or less a technical term “The Abyss” (as NIV). The Abyss in John's day was thought of as a prison for demons and fallen angels. For instance, in Luke 8 when

¹ See 1 Enoch 88:1-3, *Testament of Solomon*, and cf. 2 Enoch 42:1ff

Jesus heals a demon possessed man, the demons beg him not to send them back to “the Abyss” (same word here).

The Abyss was also associated with the realm of the dead, or Hades.² A holding place for the wicked, not exactly the same as Hell or the Lake of Fire, but certainly no picnic either. In Revelation 11 and 17: the beast or beasts come up out of the Abyss.

So we suspect, if an angel (whether good or bad) is about to unlock the Abyss—whatever comes out is not going to be good.

C. The Locusts

This suspicion is confirmed in verses 2-3 as “smoke like the smoke of a great furnace” rises, the sun is darkened, and from the smoke come locusts with power like scorpions. You can see that all of these things are signs of judgment if you look at the passages from Joel on your insert or on the screen.

1. The point of the locusts isn't that they are literal super-locusts, or helicopters, or whatever else.

a. First, though Joel (like Revelation) seems to draw on the Exodus plague of locusts, he already goes beyond the literal locusts as a *metaphor* this time for an invading army (probably Babylonian). Cf. verse 4 and verse 6.

b. Second, they come from the Abyss with a fallen angel as their king. Given what we know about the Abyss, they are demons, or some other demonic force, and they bring torment. Whatever form they actually take is secondary to what they actually do.

c. The description of the locusts in v. 7-10 is made up primarily of descriptions already present in Joel (read Joel 1-3) describing the Babylonian army God has brought against his rebellious people.

like horses prepared for battle (Joel 2:4): 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 (Joel 1:6);⁹ they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots (Joel 2:5) 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.

A lot of the other imagery probably comes from the Parthians, who were the only real military threat to Rome in John's day. There were known for armored horses, for having long hair, and for their tactics—they had perfected the art of riding forward and shooting backwards. They would retreat up a hill and lay waste to anyone who pursued them.³

But the locusts here in Revelation are a different kind of army, they are forbidden from killing, they come against the enemies of God with torment.

What of the crowns and human faces? I take it that these composite creatures with human faces parody the four living creatures in Revelation 4 (cf. Ezek 1, Isa. 6). ***These locusts are a cheap imitation of the four living creatures, and they serve the king of called Destruction who is himself a parody of the Living God who is bringing all things to the New Creation.***

² See Romans 10:7, Ps. 63:9

³ See Virgil, *Georg.* 3.31; Horace, *Od.* 2.13.18; Propertius, *Elegies* 2.10.13–14) in Craig S. Keener, *Revelation in The NIV Application Commentary*, Book 20. (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan). Kindle Edition.

In other words, the point of the fallen star, the Abyss, the pit, and the locusts is to help you look evil right in the face, and see how terrifying it is. But remember these things are written down for the churches, not for the unbelievers (ultimately). They function as a warning against compromise or loss of conviction. All true Christians who hear them should repent and cling to Christ as their only security.

This is like Super Doppler radar, or maybe the Hurricane warnings from NOAA. Now I know in Florida people don't freak out when there's a hurricane—"Florida Man" takes it as an opportunity to do foolish things and get on the news. None-the-less, those warnings are meant to help you avoid what is coming. That's a bit what Revelation is like, it's a warning saying don't envy the godless—they will be judged, don't compromise your convictions—God's people are sealed from judgment.

So, The Star, the Pit, and Locusts are symbols of terrible Evil.

II. The Evil turns on its followers to torment them.

Now that we see how these images show the evil forces in full going on here, we can see how that evil turns on its followers.

A. The followers of evil are the recipients of the torment.

Chapter 8 ended with the Eagle flying overhead crying out:

“Woe, woe, woe, to those who dwell on the earth”

Those who dwell on the earth is an idiom, a short-hand phrase for those who do not worship God & the Lamb and are not members of the Bride, but who serve the Dragon, the beast, and are citizens of Babylon. They oppose the worship and work of God. The Eagle says it is upon these that the woes come.

Chapter 9:4 tells us the same thing in different language: The locusts are only to harm the...people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. Remember in Revelation 7 we learned that all believers are sealed from God's wrath. To have the seal on your forehead means that you worship God and the Lamb, you hold fast to the testimony of Jesus, and you've been sealed by the Spirit. God's wrath will not be poured out on you because you are in Christ who has absorbed God's wrath toward you on the cross.

But the king of the Abyss has no such concern or commitment to his followers, he revels in torment, and he turns on his own people. This is the alligator eating the other alligator.

Just as the demon of pornography has and is ruining a generation, so on a larger scale the Devil and his lieutenants torment his followers. This is always the pattern of evil, sin, and idolatry. If you continue to worship money you'll be greedy, no amount of money will ever be enough, and eventually you will commit more and more immoral and/or illegal acts that end with you losing all your money. The same with power—there is always someone with more power or influence than you, and you will lose yourself trying to catch up by lying, cheating, and pandering.

You could substitute a dozen other pursuits there as well, anything that we put at the center of our life that isn't Jesus will ultimately ask us to sacrifice everything for it, to die for it. But Christ has died for you already—and promises to be sufficient for you, to give everlasting joy, even when you fail him.

What you consume, ultimately consumes you.

B. The way the Evil forces “torment” in v. 5 is most likely psychological and emotional.

The word “torment” here (βασανισμός and the cognate verb βασανίζω⁴) emphasizes psychological or emotional torment. Verse 6 says people “long to die” and other places in Revelation the same word for “torment” seems to focus not only the external reality but the internal reality (cf. 11:10; 14:10–11; 18:7, 10, 15; 20:10). In ch. 18 the same word “torment” is used again as synonymous with the emotional pain of “weeping” and “mourning”⁵

Deuteronomy 28 predicts that Israel, when she has rejected God will experience, the plagues like Egypt, including locusts, as well as “bewilderment of heart” (v. 28-29), madness (v. 34), despair (v. 65), and their life will hang in doubt and they will have dread of heart (v. 66-67). The locusts bring torment of every psychological and emotional manner, and its likely they do so via physical means.

I read a powerful depiction of this kind of emotional anguish or torment this week in an article by Melissa Valentine. [I’m not saying she is experiencing God’s judgment, or the locust plague, I’m saying her anguish is a small illustration of the internal torment the locusts will bring] Her 19 year old brother was shot and killed when she was 16, and she has constantly experienced survivor’s guilt in the 15 years since. She writes about not being fully alive, about how she doesn’t allow herself to feel sadness or disappointment because it would compete with the sadness of losing her brother. She talks about how a text from a friend who dreamt about her brother stopped her day in its tracks. That:

*In some primordial way, without any effort on my part, his death asks, and asks constantly: who are you to grow older year after year? Who are you to want? Who are you to achieve? Who are you to be alive?*⁶

For a period of five months (perhaps literal, but likely symbolizing the restricted length of the torment) The locusts will bring an anguish even worse than Melissa’s to everyone who does not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

Finally, because **Evil** always **turns on its followers to torment them:**

III. We must turn to God for protection and salvation

A. We can turn to God for protection because he is sovereignly orchestrating all things.

Our passage starts in 9:1 talking about the fifth trumpet. This trumpet blows because the fourth blew, because the third blew, etc. all the way back to “Worthy Is the Lamb” who was slain to open the scrolls. This, even these locusts, happens under God’s sovereignty.

But there’s more, John uses a series of “divine passives” in this passage as he does throughout Revelation. Basically, a divine passive is when we have a verb, but the actor isn’t described. So in

9:1 “He was given” (who gave?—God)

9:3 “They were given” (who gave?—God)

9:4 “They were told” (who gave?—God)

9:5 “They were allowed” (same word as “given”)

9:6 God limits the time (5 mos) and the extent (they can’t kill)

These demonic locusts are on a leash. They can’t harm those who have been sealed by God through faith in Christ. God, highlighting his mercy, limiting even the harm and torment they bring on the dwellers upon the earth.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 497.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://jezebel.com/we-need-a-new-word-for-survivor-1768050599>

Sometimes we wrestle with this idea of how God can be sovereign, even using and restraining the force of evil...When we face or see calamity, suffering, perhaps even judgment we tend to blame God, ask where he is, what he is doing. But think of it this way...

Revelation promises that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and this scene in Revelation 9 is a step in the plan of God's *ensuring* that NHNE comes to pass. Because God is all good, he chose the best plan, even though its hard to understand at our level. The point is not for us to understand everything, but to respond.

Luke 13:1-5

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

B. We must turn to God for protection and salvation because that is the purpose of the judgment.

Even in the day of the exile, when God brought Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem, the prophet said this:

Joel 2:12

*"Yet even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments."
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.*

And that is what God is looking for in Revelation 9 and in every other time when judgment and calamity come. He restrains the judgment for a time (Rev. 9 hasn't happened yet), and he restrains the intensity, in the hopes that people will repent. And when they don't it serves to condemn them at the final judgment—even though evil was consuming them—they blamed God, and though he was patient and merciful they did not repent.

That's where Revelation 9 ends up... people do not repent.

Revelation 9:20-21

²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, ^tdid not repent of "the works of their hands nor give up worshiping ^vdemons ^wand 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 point of telling us now about the judgment that's coming is so that we might turn away from our evil, sin, and idolatry and cling to Christ. Don't lost heart, don't compromise, don't think "the liberals" or "those un-churched people" or whoever have it better. The point of the judgment of Rev 9 when it comes will be the same as telling us in advance: when you see these things repent, hold fast to Christ who took your judgment on the cross.

^t See ch. 2:21

^w Deut. 31:29; Jer. 1:16; 25:14

^v See 1 Cor. 10:20

^w Ps. 115:4-7; 135:15-17; Dan. 5:23

Someone posted this week about a new arrangement of the hymn "Come, Ye Sinners." I love these verses, which beautifully depicts God's call to repentance to all people

**Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.**

**Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.**

**Let not conscience make you linger,
Not of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.**

You don't come because you are fit, because you've cleaned yourself up, bc you haven't looked at porn or been greedy of followed after any other false God, you are saved because you call on Jesus who died for you. You see that the evil you consume will consume you. You see that judgment is coming, and that you deserve it. You repent, and turn to God.

The way Joel ends his prophecy of judgment on Israel would be a good summary of Revelation 9:

Joel 2:30-32

³⁰ "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ³² And *it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

The most important question isn't finally, "Who the star is?" or "What are the locusts?" The question is, "Have you called on the name of the Lord?" and "Will you call on him today?"

Amen.