

"THE STUBBORN PSYCHOSIS OF SINFUL REBELLION"

There is an often-quoted observation about change that says we change for two reasons: Either you learn enough that you *want to* or you hurt enough that you *have to*. It sounds true enough and if you think about it that statement assumes that change does *not* come easy. It's something we have probably all seen in our own lives or in the lives of others – even when change is desperately needed it is often stubbornly resisted. Here's another quote maybe you have heard. *What's the difference between school and life? In school you are taught a lesson and then given a test. In life you are given a test that teaches you a lesson.* When you read the Bible you see God doing this in the story of individual lives and in the story of human history. God works in many ways, sometimes through grace and beauty and sometimes in pain and suffering to bring us back to him and who we were meant to be in relationship to him. One of the truths of Revelation is that as human history draws closer to the final judgment God is going to increase the pressure. Terrible evils that have been restrained by God in grace are going to be released by God in judgment. We may never see these apocalyptic scenarios but there are spiritual lessons embedded in these visions that provide helpful warnings for today.

When I first began looking at this passage I imagined you asking two questions: *First, What in the world is this passage talking about? Second. How on earth does this help me live today? Let's think about both of those questions. First....*

I. WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THIS PASSAGE TALKING ABOUT?

Let's look at two aspects of this. First,

A. What is the significance of the four angels?

In **Revelation 9:12-14** the sixth angel blows his trumpet and a voice says, *"Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates"*. Look at **Verse 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.*

1. What are angels? Some people scoff at the idea of angels, maybe because of some of the cheesy ways we try to imagine them but one of the best and simplest reasons to take the spiritual world of angels and

demons seriously is the fact that Jesus did. Jesus is clear about the reality of a spiritual world and spiritual beings and spiritual warfare. He talked often about Satan and demons and angels. Angels are simply spiritual beings. In Bible there are good or holy angels who serve God and there are evil, fallen angels who serve Satan. Satan was originally an angel – but caught up in pride – he led a rebellion against God. The angels who fell away from God in rebellion against him became darkened and evil. The Bible often calls the fallen angels demons.

2. *The angels in Revelation 9 are bound.* To be bound means to be restrained against their will. The only angels the Bible ever speaks of as *bound* are evil or fallen demonic angels in rebellion against God. These fallen angels, like the devil they serve come to kill.

3. *These evil spirits are bound at the river Euphrates.* The Euphrates was the extreme eastern horizon of the Roman Empire. The river Euphrates was the real but also symbolic boundary. The biggest threat to Roman civilization was a massive invasion from beyond the Euphrates. It was the border of all that mattered most.

4. *These evil spirits are going to be released at a set time.* Verse 15 stresses the hour, day, month and year. No power can trigger this war a moment before the time ordained. No diplomat can hold it back a moment longer than the time chosen by God. So what we see in this vision is that powerful spiritual evil forces that have been restrained by God in grace are going to be released by God in judgment.

B. What's the significance of the army that appears?

1. *It's overwhelming.* Verse 16 says, *The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number.* There were too many to count but he heard the number. The Greek word ten thousand is a *myriad*. It could be literal but it is used in the Bible for a huge number - too many to add up. If I said, *"I have a ton of things to do today"* you know I don't mean I have precisely 2,000 pounds of projects but an overwhelming number. **Psalm 68:17** says, *the chariots of God are twice ten thousand.* Here it's as if Revelation says, *"take a larger number, the largest number you can imagine, double it, then picture it all coming at you at once"*. It's overwhelming.

2. *It's demonic.* In **verses 17-19** he describes how they appeared to him in the vision. *And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them.* He reminds us this is a vision.

- *One principle to remember in Revelation is that a vision doesn't necessarily show you what something will look like but what it really is like.* The best example of that is the antichrist: the one world ruler who leads the world's rebellion against God in the end. He is called "the beast" and described like a dangerous monster in Revelation 13 precisely because that is *not* what he will look like. He will look like a savior but he will be a destroyer. Revelation reveals what he is like not what he will look like on the surface. So we come to a vision like this cautiously and look for the underlying reality.
- *These horses are surreal because they are symbolic.* You could imagine these are literally genetically mutated biologically weaponized horses from hell and if that's what happens – okay. You could also imagine it a description of futuristic weapons: armored personal carriers armed with both flamethrowers and poisonous gas or something like that. It's okay to speculate some but if we stop there we miss what the vision is stressing. These horses are a mash up of familiar symbols found in the Bible and Revelation. That's where we find the key to their meaning. The symbols are all telling us that behind this army are dark, demonic, evil forces.
- *These horses have heads like lions.* The Bible describes Satan as the one who walks around like a roaring lion out to kill and destroy.
- *These horses have tails like serpents.* The Bible describes Satan as the serpent who poisons people and culture with lies.
- *These horses are breathing out fire smoke and sulfur.* Later in Revelation fire, smoke and sulfur are all associated with hell. The horses breathe out *the lethal air of hell itself.*
- *These horses kill with their mouths.* In **verses 18-19** the most deadly power possessed by the horses in the vision comes from their mouths. Later, in **Revelation 16**, when the sixth bowl is poured out demonic spirits come out of the *mouth* of the dragon and the *mouth* of the beast and the *mouth* of the false prophet. In **Revelation 13:5-6** when the dragon – Satan, gives authority to the antichrist to deceive mankind it says he gave him *a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies.*
- *The symbolism brings together three ideas:* 1.) The destruction, 2.) The deception and 3.) The demonic. I think it is a mistake to think since there is symbolism here there won't be a war with a massive mobile army and unprecedented death and destruction.

But the symbolism matters. Picture apocalyptic warfare *provoked* at the inception by satanic lies, *inflamed* to extremes of cruelty by demonic lies and *driven* by the *goal* of demanding the denial of the truth as part of the outcome of the war.

One of scary themes of the Bible is that in the end times there will be great deception. Many people in the churches who professed faith in Christ will fall away from the faith and the world, as a whole, will turn, even more fully, from the truth. Think of incredible spiritual evils that have been restrained by grace being released in judgment so that both physical destruction and spiritual deception wreck havoc together.

Romans 1:25 gives the ultimate indictment of mankind when it says; *“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie”*. The gospel of John says, this is the condemnation: *“Light came into the world and men loved darkness more than light.”* In the sixth trumpet judgment it is as if God is saying: *“You want to go on following Satan, arrogantly enthroning yourself as little gods, you choose to redefine truth and believe the lie, then I’m going to let you have what you are asking for. I’m going to take the lid off the abyss. I’m going to release the evil that I have been graciously restraining, but you naively flirting with if not outright worshipping, and let it have its way with you.”* The holy angels blow the trumpets to get our attention, to warn us, to call us to repentance. C. S. Lewis put it this way: *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speak to us in our conscience and shouts in our pain.”*

If this vision is saying all of that what do we do with it?

II. HOW ON EARTH DOES THIS HELP YOU TO LIVE TODAY?

The last two verses help us with that question: **Verses 20-21**, *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.* This conclusion coming at the end of this vision serves as a warning – scholars say that’s really the emphasis of all of the trumpet judgments. This is all a warning but it is not just a warning of something that is going to happen in the future. It is a warning about forces and principles already in play today. ***The reality and trajectory of spiritual warfare revealed in the book of Revelation is a powerful incentive for a life of repentance.***

Heed the warnings! There is nothing more practical than a clear and timely warning if you are willing to heed it. I love warnings. If there are sharks in the water – I'd appreciate a warning. If the bridge is washed out – I'd like to know. Even little things like, "You're standing on a hill of fire ants", or "There's a pit bull in the back yard." Warnings are not buzz kills. They are lifesavers. So listen to these warnings.

First....

A. Beware the serious sins that characterize ungodly culture

Verse 20 says we sin with both the works of our hands and the worship of our hearts. It talks about worshipping demons and worshipping idols. You might think well "that's not me" but in the Scriptures whenever we worship idols we are worshipping demons and when whenever we worship anything other than God or more than God we are worshipping idols. Colossians says greed is idolatry and underneath is all there are dark and twisted spiritual powers at work.

Verse 21 mentions *murder, sorceries, sexual immorality and theft*. All of that is as present in the modern world as it was in the ancient world. Psalm 139 waxes poetic about how every time a woman conceives God is forming the child in her womb. But the mother's womb is no longer a safe place for the innocent. The culture calls it choice. What does God call it? Sorceries, some self-help is nothing more than that. The word *immorality* here is used in the Bible for any sexual intimacy outside of that between one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage. Our culture hardly has a category for sexual immorality. A commitment to the sacredness of God's design and a desire, to at least not have to participate in the sins that others celebrate, provokes hatred. *Theft* - well, we call it good business and vote those who practice it into political office. This sixth trumpet is called the second "woe". That comes from the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Listen to what one of the most famous of the prophets said, **Isaiah 5:8**
Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! The world calls it progress but we're building a Tower of Babel. It will come down. One indication of the true nature of our sin in the eyes of God is the severity of the judgment it provokes from God. In a culture like ours, in the atmosphere we're in, on the trajectory we're on you've got to fight sin. You may not be able to change the culture but you can guard your heart. Start there. Aim high. Be holy.

Beware of and fight sin. Second,

B. Beware the confusing seduction of spiritual evil.

These spiritual forces of evil that victimize us and want to destroy us also seduce us. Every time you choose to sin and resist repentance you are collaborating with the very spiritual forces of darkness that want to not only dishonor God but also to destroy you.

So if you're here and you constantly are in a kind of skeptical cynical unbelief towards God, lack of trust in God, lack of worship of God, doubting the goodness of God or the reality of God you are at the same time both a victim of and a collaborator with great spiritual evil. The Bible talks about Satan blinding the minds of unbelievers and deceiving and seducing believers. And yet in every place the implication is that we can and should fight and overcome that.

Think about it on a personal level. **Ephesians 4:26-26** says, *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.* If you harbor bitterness and lack of forgiveness towards other people you are, as long as you are in that state, not only a victim of spiritual evil but a collaborator with it and more vulnerable to it. *That reality invites repentance as a way of life.*

Beware the seductive power of spiritual evil. Third

D. Beware the stubbornness of heart that will not repent.

I saw a video last week that has been widely watched. The body cam on an Ohio police officer that stopped a murder suspect shot it. The man pulls a large knife and comes at the police officer. The officer tries to move away and shoots him once. The man gets up and keeps coming. He's hurt but he won't stop. He's saying: "I'm going to kill you and at the same time he's saying kill me" over and over and over again. The officer keeps his gun up just keeps backing up and saying: "Please sir, drop the knife", over and over he says, "get down, drop the knife, stop, just stop". The man keeps on and keeps on while the officer yells louder: "sir, please just get down, let us help you". More officers show up. Finally it looks like one shows up with a Taser and takes him down with that. But while this whole scene is going on you see a picture of what revelation is showing us. This stubbornness that just won't stop no matter how great the hurt or danger. One of the sobering truths of Revelation is that it tells us that most people will not repent. Increased pressure and even pain for most of humanity will be met with the stubborn psychosis of sinful rebellion.

Conclusion

But it doesn't have to be that way. ***The reality of spiritual warfare is a powerful incentive for a life of repentance.***

Revelation gives us one of the most beautiful invitations in Scripture. **Revelation 22:17** says, *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*

Too often we take these invitations for granted. **Revelation 5:9-10** pictures a crucial scene in which Jesus is worshipped. When all of heaven worships him they say you are worthy because *you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.*" The word ransomed is rich. It means to pay the price to set someone free. What was the price that Jesus paid? He took the judgment we deserve and suffered it, bore it, for us on the cross. The sins that we indulge and excuse and cherish, which provokes God's judgment, in which we cooperate with spiritual evil and from which we refuse to repent, he took our place for all that and died to free us from it. That's all his grace and it can be yours for the asking.

Break free from the spiritual psychosis of the mass of humanity and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. It's all grace that he offers – which means you don't earn it. You can't earn it. But you can receive it if you will. So receive it and then let it change you. Let it make you truly humble and deeply hopeful. Let it inspire you to greater love and loyalty to Him.

Amen.