

## Introduction

### Revelation 9:13–21 ESV

<sup>13</sup> Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, <sup>14</sup> saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. <sup>17</sup> And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. <sup>18</sup> By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. <sup>19</sup> For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound. <sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>21</sup> nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

#### 1. The big picture of the book

- Revelation shows Jesus and God’s plan. It is meant to be read, heard, and kept. “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” ([Revelation 1:3](#), ESV).
- It is apocalypse, prophecy, and a letter. The visions unveil what is really happening. The words call for a response. The letter cares for real churches.
- So far. We saw the risen Christ among the churches in chapters 1 to 3. We saw the throne and the Lamb in chapters 4 and 5. The Lamb opened the seals in chapter 6. God sealed His people in chapter 7. The trumpets began in chapters 8 and 9.

## 2. Where the sixth trumpet fits

- The trumpets are warnings. They are severe, but they are not final. Many judgments affect a third. That shows restraint and mercy in the middle of judgment.
- The fifth trumpet brought torment but not death. The sixth trumpet brings death to a third. The aim is still to lead people to repent before it is too late.
- The altar of incense links prayer and judgment. “And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth” (Revelation 8:3–5, ESV). In our passage a voice speaks from this altar. God answers the cry for justice in His time.

## 3. How to read this kind of vision

- The images are real communication, but not photographs. Think of symbols that carry meaning. The point is what they say about God, evil, judgment, and the human heart.
- Numbers carry meaning. A third points to restraint. The set time points to God’s control.
- Let Scripture interpret Scripture. This vision borrows words and pictures from the Old Testament. We should listen for those echoes.

## 4. Old Testament roots that shape this passage

- Plagues pattern. The trumpet judgments echo the Exodus plagues. God judged Egypt to expose false gods and to free His people. See Exodus 7 to 12.
- Fire and sulfur. God judged Sodom with fire and sulfur. “Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven” (Genesis 19:24, ESV).
- Idols that cannot help. The prophets mocked idols that have form but no life. “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands” (Psalms 115:4, ESV). See also Isaiah 44:9 and Jeremiah 10:3–5.

- The Euphrates as a border of threat. God promised land to Abram up to “the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18, ESV). In the prophets, that river often marks the place from which invading powers rise. See Isaiah 8:5–8 and Jeremiah 46.

#### 5. First century setting

- John wrote to churches in the Roman world. They faced pressure to worship the emperor and the gods of the empire. Some faced slander, loss, and violence.
- Rome feared enemies to the east across the Euphrates. The Parthians were known for skilled cavalry and sudden raids. Early Christians would have known that fear language. John’s vision uses Euphrates imagery to speak about threat. Yet he shows the deeper truth. Behind human armies stand spiritual powers. God still sets the limits.
- The point is not to map every image to a single army or weapon. The point is to show how God governs judgment and calls people to turn.

#### 6. What to listen for in Revelation 9:13–21

- A voice from the altar. God hears and acts in answer to prayer.
- Bound powers released at God’s time. Evil is on a leash until God allows it to act.
- An army beyond counting. This signals overwhelming judgment that no one can stop.
- Fire, smoke, and sulfur. These echo Sodom and the plagues. They show the horror of judgment.
- The climax is moral. Even after all this, many “did not repent.” That is the tragedy the passage exposes.

## Verse-by-verse

### I. Verse 13: The Sixth Trumpet and the Altar's Voice

#### **Revelation 9:13 ESV**

<sup>13</sup> Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God,

#### **What John hears**

The sixth angel sounds his trumpet. But before anything happens, John hears a voice. The voice comes from the four horns of the golden altar before God.

This is the altar of incense. It stood in the earthly tabernacle and temple between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The priest burned incense on it morning and evening. The horns were projections at each corner. Blood was applied to the horns on the Day of Atonement. See Exodus 30:1–10 and Leviticus 16:18.

In Revelation the golden altar appears earlier. "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne" (Revelation 8:3, ESV). The prayers of the saints rise like incense before God. Then fire from the altar is thrown to the earth and judgments begin.

### **The voice from the altar connects prayer and judgment**

The voice does not come from the throne. It comes from the altar where prayers have been offered. God's judgments are not random or disconnected from His people's cries.

Remember the fifth seal. The martyrs under the altar cry out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10, ESV). God hears that prayer. The judgments that follow are part of His answer.

## **II. Verse 14: Release at the Euphrates — Restrained Powers Unleashed**

### **Revelation 9:14 ESV**

<sup>14</sup> saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates."

### **Four angels bound**

The voice commands the sixth angel to release four angels. These angels are bound. That word matters. They are not free agents. They are held in check until God permits them to act.

The fact that they are bound suggests they are hostile. Good angels serve freely. Evil powers are restrained. See 2 Peter 2:4, "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment." See also Jude 6.

Here, four angels are held at the Euphrates. When God's appointed moment comes, they are released.

## **The Euphrates: geography with meaning**

The Euphrates is a real river. It flows through modern Iraq and Syria. In the Old Testament it marked the northeastern boundary of the land God promised to Abraham. "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates'" ([Genesis 15:18](#), ESV).

But the Euphrates also became a symbol of threat. Armies from Assyria and Babylon crossed it to invade Israel and Judah. The prophets used Euphrates language to speak of judgment.

Isaiah warned Judah. "The Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks" ([Isaiah 8:7](#), ESV).

Jeremiah spoke of Egypt's defeat at the Euphrates. "Concerning Egypt. About the army of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish and which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah" ([Jeremiah 46:2](#), ESV). Later in the same chapter he calls it "the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance" ([Jeremiah 46:10](#), ESV).

Rome feared the Parthian Empire to the east, beyond the Euphrates. Skilled cavalry from that region had defeated Roman legions. Early Christians hearing John's vision would have known that fear.

## **What the symbol means**

John is not predicting a single modern army. He is using a picture his readers understood. The Euphrates means the place where destructive power waits. It is the boundary where enemies gather. When God lifts the restraint, the invasion begins.

Behind human armies stand spiritual powers. The four bound angels point to demonic forces that animate earthly violence and chaos. God keeps them on a leash. When the time is right, He releases them to accomplish His purpose.

## **Application**

God restrains evil. That is a mercy we often overlook. The world is not as bad as it could be because God limits what wickedness can do.

But restraint is not forever. When people persist in rejecting God, He may lift His hand and let them experience the fruit of their rebellion. Paul describes this in [Romans 1](#). Three times he says, "God gave them up" ([Romans 1:24](#), [26](#), [28](#), ESV).

We should not presume on God's patience. The bound angels will not stay bound forever.

And when crisis comes, when it feels like chaos is flooding in, remember this. God is still sovereign. Even the release of destructive powers happens at His command, not by accident.

### III. Verse 15: Appointed Time, Partial Judgment

#### **Revelation 9:15 ESV**

<sup>15</sup> 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.

#### **Prepared for the exact moment**

The four angels were prepared. Not just prepared in general, but prepared for a specific moment. The hour, the day, the month, and the year.

This is precision. God does not react to events. He does not scramble to respond to chaos. He has appointed the time down to the hour.

This echoes what Paul wrote. "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" ([Acts 17:31](#), ESV).

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew this truth. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" ([Ecclesiastes 3:1](#), ESV). Even judgment has its appointed moment.

Daniel saw visions of kingdoms rising and falling. Again and again the text says things happen at "the time appointed" ([Daniel 11:27, 29, 35](#), ESV). History is not random. God governs it.

#### **What this means about God's sovereignty**

When disaster strikes, people ask where God was. The Bible answers: He was and is on the throne. He permits and He restrains according to His wisdom and justice.

This does not make God the author of evil. James is clear. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" ([James 1:13](#), ESV).

But God does ordain that evil will be judged by its own fruit. He allows people and nations to reap what they sow. He uses even wicked powers to accomplish His purposes. Then He judges those powers for their wickedness.

### **A third of mankind killed**

The result is devastating. A third of mankind is killed. Not a few. Not a small percentage. A third.

This is the same fraction we saw with the earlier trumpets. A third of the earth burned (Revelation 8:7). A third of the sea became blood (Revelation 8:8). A third of the rivers poisoned (Revelation 8:10). A third of sun, moon, and stars darkened (Revelation 8:12).

Why a third? Why not half or all?

Because judgment here is still restrained. It is severe, but not final. Two-thirds survive. The door to repentance remains open.

God's judgments in history are warnings. They show what is coming. They give people a chance to turn. The final judgment will not be partial.

Jesus spoke of the days of Noah. People were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, "until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all" (Luke 17:27, ESV). That was total. But before the flood, God waited. He gave time. Noah preached righteousness for years (2 Peter 2:5).

The third that is killed is a massive, sobering judgment. But the two-thirds that survive are being given another chance.

### **Application**

We live in the time of patience. God has not yet released all restraints. He has not yet poured out final wrath. He is giving time.

That time is a gift. It is not a sign that God does not care or that judgment will never come. It is mercy stretched out so that more might repent.

But mercy has a limit. God's appointed time will come. We do not know the hour, the day, the month, or the year. But God does. And when it arrives, delay is over.

So we should respond now. We should examine our lives. We should turn from sin. We should trust in Christ while the door is open.

## **IV. Verse 16: Myriads of Myriads — The Incalculable Cavalry**

### **Revelation 9:16 ESV**

<sup>16</sup> The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number.

### **Two hundred million**

John hears the number of the mounted troops. Twice ten thousand times ten thousand. That equals two hundred million.

In Greek the phrase is "myriads of myriads." A myriad is ten thousand. The doubling emphasizes vastness beyond counting.

Some try to make this literal. They look for nations that could field an army of two hundred million. But that misses the point of apocalyptic language.

In John's day, the entire population of the Roman Empire was perhaps sixty million. A two hundred million-soldier army was unthinkable. That is exactly the point. This is not a census. It is a symbol of overwhelming, unstoppable force.

### **Old Testament background for countless hosts**

The Bible uses "myriads" to speak of God's power and the vastness of His hosts.

The psalmist declares, "The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary" ([Psalm 68:17](#), ESV). God's armies are beyond number.

Daniel saw a vision of the Ancient of Days. "A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened" ([Daniel 7:10](#), ESV). Myriads serve God in heaven.

Moses sang of God coming with myriads of holy ones ([Deuteronomy 33:2](#)). Jude quotes this when he warns of the Lord's coming to execute judgment ([Jude 14-15](#)).

The number signals something beyond human scale. It is meant to inspire awe and dread.

### **Why John heard the number**

John does not count them himself. He hears the number. Someone announces it to him.

This underscores certainty. This is not guesswork or exaggeration. The number is known, even if it is symbolic. God knows exactly what is coming. Nothing is out of control.



It also sets up the horror of what John is about to see. Hearing "two hundred million" prepares him for a vision of terror.

## V. Verse 17: The Terrible Imagery — Lion-Headed Horses, Fire, Smoke, Sulfur

### **Revelation 9:17 ESV**

<sup>17</sup> And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths.

### **A vision, not a photograph**

John is careful to say, "This is how I saw the horses in my vision." He is describing what he saw, not giving a technical manual for a future weapon system.

The images are symbolic. They communicate truth through pictures. The pictures borrow from the Old Testament and from the fears of John's world.

### **The riders and their breastplates**

The riders wear breastplates. Breastplates are armor for battle. These are not just any breastplates. They are the color of fire, sapphire, and sulfur.

Fire is red or orange, blazing and consuming. Sapphire is deep blue, often associated with heaven and the throne of God ([Exodus 24:10](#); [Ezekiel 1:26](#)). Sulfur is yellow, the color of brimstone.

These three colors match the three plagues that follow. Fire, smoke, and sulfur. The armor announces what is coming. The riders are dressed in judgment.

### **Horses with heads like lions**

The horses do not look like normal horses. Their heads are like lions' heads.

Lions are predators. They are fierce, powerful, and deadly. The lion is the king of beasts. In Scripture, the lion often represents strength and terror.

The wicked are described as a lion. "Like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush" ([Psalm 17:12](#), ESV).

Peter warns, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" ([1 Peter 5:8](#), ESV).

But the lion is also a symbol of royal power. Jesus is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" ([Revelation 5:5](#), ESV). Context determines whether the lion is a figure of righteous might or predatory evil.

Here, the lion heads signal aggression and deadly power. These are not mounts for a parade. They are engines of destruction.

### **Fire, smoke, and sulfur from their mouths**

Out of the mouths of these horses come fire, smoke, and sulfur. This is not natural. Horses do not breathe fire. This is apocalyptic imagery pointing to supernatural judgment.

Fire, smoke, and sulfur recall the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground" ([Genesis 19:24–25](#), ESV).

Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Smoke rose from the land "like the smoke of a furnace" ([Genesis 19:28](#), ESV).

Sodom became the Bible's clearest picture of sudden, total, deserved judgment. Jesus used it as a warning. "Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed" ([Luke 17:28–30](#), ESV).

Isaiah also uses fire and smoke as images of God's wrath. "And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones" ([Isaiah 30:30](#), ESV).

The lake of fire in Revelation burns with sulfur. "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" ([Revelation 20:10](#), ESV).

So fire, smoke, and sulfur are the vocabulary of divine wrath and final judgment.

### **What comes from the mouth matters**

The plagues come from the mouths of the horses. In Revelation, what comes from the mouth is significant.

Jesus has a sharp two-edged sword coming from His mouth (Revelation 1:16; 2:16; 19:15). That sword is His word, which judges and conquers.

The beast and the false prophet speak blasphemies and deceive (Revelation 13:5–6; 16:13–14).

Here, the mouths of the horses pour out destruction. Words and breath carry power. In this vision, the breath is death.

## VI. Verse 18: Three Plagues, A Third Killed

### **Revelation 9:18 ESV**

<sup>18</sup> By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths.

### **Three plagues identified**

The text names the three plagues clearly. Fire, smoke, and sulfur. These are the same elements mentioned in verse 17. The colors of the breastplates matched them. Now they are named as the means of death.

Calling them "plagues" connects this passage to the Exodus. God sent ten plagues on Egypt. Each plague exposed the impotence of Egypt's gods and demonstrated the Lord's power.

The goal was repentance and release. Pharaoh was given chance after chance to let God's people go. He hardened his heart. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The plagues escalated. Finally, the firstborn died and Pharaoh relented, at least for a moment.

The trumpet judgments follow that pattern. They are severe warnings meant to lead to repentance before the final outpouring of wrath.

### **A third of mankind killed**

This repeats the number from verse 15. A third. It is a catastrophic death toll, but not total annihilation.

The fifth trumpet brought torment without death. The sixth trumpet brings death. The escalation is clear. Ignoring the warnings brings greater judgment.

Yet even here, mercy is present. Two-thirds survive. They have another opportunity to turn.

## **The cause is clear**

The text does not leave the cause vague. A third of mankind was killed "by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths."

This is divine judgment mediated through these symbolic horse-riders. It is not random disaster. It is not mere natural catastrophe. It is God-permitted, God-timed, God-measured wrath.

## **VII. Verse 19: Destruction and Deception — Mouths and Serpent Tails**

### **Revelation 9:19 ESV**

<sup>19</sup> For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

### **Power in two places**

The horses have power in their mouths and in their tails. This is unusual. Normal cavalry depends on speed, the skill of the rider, and weapons like spears or bows. These horses are different. They are dangerous from both ends.

The mouths pour out fire, smoke, and sulfur. That is the killing power. The tails wound. Both ends bring harm, but in different ways.

### **Tails like serpents with heads**

The tails are not ordinary tails. They are like serpents. They have heads. They wound.

This is composite imagery again. John is layering symbols to communicate something about the nature of this judgment.

Serpents in Scripture carry strong associations. The serpent in the garden deceived Eve. "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?'"  
([Genesis 3:1](#), ESV).

The result was sin, death, and exile from Eden. The serpent became a symbol of Satan himself. "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" ([Revelation 12:9](#), ESV).

Serpents also appear as instruments of judgment. When Israel grumbled in the wilderness, "the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people

of Israel died" ([Numbers 21:6](#), ESV). God provided healing through the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole, which Jesus used as a picture of His own crucifixion ([John 3:14–15](#)).

So serpent imagery points to deception, danger, and satanic influence.

### **Mouths kill, tails wound**

The distinction matters. The mouths kill with fire, smoke, and sulfur. That is direct, devastating destruction.

The tails wound. The word means to harm or injure, but not necessarily to kill. Wounding can be physical, but it can also be moral or spiritual.

Deception wounds. It twists the truth. It leads people into sin and error. It damages the soul even when the body survives.

This dual attack reflects the nature of evil in the world. There is overt destruction that kills. War, violence, disaster. But there is also deception that corrupts. Lies, false teaching, seductive ideologies.

Paul warned about both. "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" ([2 Corinthians 11:13–14](#), ESV).

The tails like serpents suggest that behind the visible catastrophe is a deeper spiritual assault. People are not just dying. They are being deceived and led further from God.

### **The echo of earlier warnings**

Jesus warned that the end times would include both disasters and deception. "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains" ([Matthew 24:6–8](#), ESV).

But He also warned, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" ([Matthew 24:24](#), ESV).

The sixth trumpet vision combines both. Physical destruction kills a third. Spiritual deception wounds the survivors and hardens their hearts against repentance.

### **The satanic dimension**

The serpent tails point to the demonic dimension of these judgments. This is not just human conflict or natural disaster. There is a spiritual war behind the visible chaos.

Paul explained this. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" ([Ephesians 6:12](#), ESV).

The four bound angels released at the Euphrates are hostile spiritual powers. The cavalry they lead is a vision of judgment with a demonic source.

But even these powers are under God's control. They were bound. They were released at His command, at His appointed time, to accomplish His purpose.

## VIII. Verse 20: The Indictment — No Repentance from Idolatry

### **Revelation 9:20 ESV**

<sup>20</sup> 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,

### **The shocking verdict**

Here is the climax. After all the warnings. After a third of mankind is killed. After fire, smoke, sulfur, and serpent-tailed horses. After the severity of divine judgment is on full display, what happens?

The rest of mankind did not repent.

This is the tragedy the entire passage is driving toward. The judgments were meant to awaken people. To shake them. To show them the emptiness of their idols and the reality of God's holiness. But it did not work.

Their hearts remained hard.

### **What they refused to repent of**

They did not repent of the works of their hands. This phrase points to idolatry. It echoes the language of the prophets.

Isaiah mocked idol makers. "All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing?" ([Isaiah 44:9–10](#), ESV).

He describes the process. A man cuts down a tree. He uses part of it to warm himself and bake bread. With the rest he makes a god and bows down to it. "And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!'" ([Isaiah 44:17](#), ESV).

The absurdity is clear. A block of wood that a moment ago was fuel is now treated as divine. Isaiah concludes, "A deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'" ([Isaiah 44:20](#), ESV).

Jeremiah speaks the same way. "Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good" ([Jeremiah 10:5](#), ESV).

### **Demons and idols**

John connects idol worship with demon worship. "Nor give up worshiping demons and idols."

Paul made the same connection. "What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons" ([1 Corinthians 10:19–20](#), ESV).

Idols are physical objects with no life or power. But behind idolatry stand demons. They use the idols to draw worship away from the true God. They deceive people into serving created things rather than the Creator.

This is why idolatry is so serious. It is not just foolishness. It is spiritual adultery. It is giving to demons what belongs to God alone.

### **Idols that cannot see, hear, or walk**

John lists the materials. Gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. These are the same materials named in Daniel when Belshazzar used the vessels from the temple to throw a feast. "They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone" ([Daniel 5:4](#), ESV). That night the hand wrote on the wall. Belshazzar's kingdom was finished.

The list of materials shows the range. Gold and silver are precious. Bronze is strong. Stone is durable. Wood is common. Idols span the economic spectrum. Rich and poor both bow to things made by human hands.

But none of them can see, hear, or walk. They have no perception, no awareness, no agency. They cannot help. They cannot respond. They cannot save.

When crisis comes, the idol is silent. When judgment falls, the idol is helpless. People cry out to gold and silver, and there is no answer.

### **Why people cling to idols even in judgment**

This raises a hard question. If the idols are so obviously powerless, why do people cling to them even when judgment is falling?

Because idolatry is not primarily rational. It is spiritual bondage. It is the human heart's default mode after the fall. We are idol factories, as Calvin said.

Idols give the illusion of control. I made it. I can manage it. I can use it for my purposes. The true God is uncontrollable. He is holy. He demands surrender. Idols demand nothing but maintenance.

Idols also flatter our pride. I chose this god. I crafted this system. I am in charge. Repentance requires humility. It requires admitting we were wrong, that we need rescue, that we cannot save ourselves.

And behind it all, demons work to blind minds and harden hearts. "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#), ESV).

So even when the idols fail, people double down. They blame circumstances. They try another idol. They refuse to face the truth. This is the tragedy of the hardened heart.

## **IX. Verse 21: The Indictment — No Repentance from Vice**

### **Revelation 9:21 ESV**

<sup>21</sup> nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

### **The list of sins**

Verse 20 focused on idolatry. Verse 21 lists specific sins that flow from idolatry. When people worship false gods, their lives reflect it. Wrong worship produces wrong living.

The list is not exhaustive. It is representative. These four sins cover a range of moral corruption.

### **Murders**



The first sin is murder. The Greek word is *phonos*. It means the unlawful killing of another person.

Murder violates the image of God in human beings. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" ([Genesis 9:6](#), ESV).

It was the sixth commandment. "You shall not murder" ([Exodus 20:13](#), ESV).

Jesus expanded the command to include anger and contempt. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire" ([Matthew 5:21–22](#), ESV).

John wrote, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" ([1 John 3:15](#), ESV).

Murder here may refer to literal bloodshed, but it also speaks to the heart attitude behind the act. A society that does not repent of murder is a society that devalues human life. It treats people as obstacles, tools, or entertainment.

## **Sorceries**

The second sin is sorceries. The Greek word is *pharmakeia*. It is the root of our word "pharmacy."

In the ancient world, *pharmakeia* referred to the use of drugs, potions, and spells. It was associated with magic, witchcraft, and occult practices.

The Old Testament strictly forbade it. "You shall not permit a sorceress to live" ([Exodus 22:18](#), ESV). "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord" ([Deuteronomy 18:10–12](#), ESV).

Paul listed *pharmakeia* among the works of the flesh. "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" ([Galatians 5:19–21](#), ESV).

Sorcery is an attempt to manipulate spiritual forces for personal gain. It seeks power apart from God. It opens doors to demonic influence. It is rebellion dressed as enlightenment.

The fact that people did not repent of sorceries means they clung to occult practices even in the face of judgment. They preferred the darkness of deception to the light of truth.

### **Sexual immorality**

The third sin is sexual immorality. The Greek word is *porneia*. It is a broad term that covers all sexual sin outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

It includes fornication, adultery, prostitution, homosexual acts, and other deviations from God's design.

God's design for sex is clear. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" ([Genesis 2:24](#), ESV). Jesus affirmed this ([Matthew 19:4–6](#)). Paul repeated it ([Ephesians 5:31](#)).

Sexual sin is uniquely serious because it involves the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" ([1 Corinthians 6:18–20](#), ESV).

The Greco-Roman world was saturated with sexual immorality. Prostitution was common. Adultery was expected. Homosexual practices were celebrated. The culture saw sex as recreation without moral weight.

The church was called to be different. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God" ([1 Thessalonians 4:3–5](#), ESV).

The refusal to repent of sexual immorality means people continued to treat sex as a playground rather than a gift to be stewarded according to God's design.

### **Thefts**

The fourth sin is thefts. The Greek word is *klemma*. It means stealing, taking what belongs to another.

The eighth commandment is clear. "You shall not steal" ([Exodus 20:15](#), ESV).

Theft treats other people as means to an end. It disrespects boundaries. It takes without permission. It violates trust.

Theft can be direct or indirect. Taking property is direct. Fraud, extortion, corrupt business practices, and exploitation are indirect forms of theft.

Paul commanded, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" ([Ephesians 4:28](#), ESV).

The Roman world was full of theft. Corruption was common. The powerful exploited the weak. Slaves were property, their labor stolen. Taxes were often extortion.

The refusal to repent of thefts means people continued to live by greed rather than generosity, by taking rather than giving.

### **The pattern in the list**

These four sins cover key areas of life. Murder relates to violence and the value of life. Sorcery relates to spiritual rebellion and occult bondage. Sexual immorality relates to the body and relationships. Theft relates to property and justice.

Together they paint a picture of a society in moral collapse. And the point is not just that these sins exist. It is that even after catastrophic judgment, people do not turn from them.

### **The connection to idolatry**

These sins are the fruit of the idolatry mentioned in verse 20. When people worship demons and idols, they become like what they worship.

"Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" ([Psalm 115:8](#), ESV).

Idols have no moral authority. They make no demands for righteousness. So idol worshipers live without restraint. They follow their passions. They exploit others. They deceive and destroy.

Paul described this downward spiral in [Romans 1](#). People exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship created things. So God gives them up to dishonorable passions and a debased mind. The result is a list of sins that sounds much like [Revelation 9:21](#). "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful,

inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Romans 1:29–31, ESV).

And the verdict is the same. "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Romans 1:32, ESV).

### **The tragedy of the hardened heart**

This is the most sobering part of the passage. The judgments are severe. A third of mankind is killed. Fire, smoke, and sulfur pour out. Serpent-tailed horses wound. The power and terror of divine wrath are on display.

And still, hearts do not soften. People do not turn. They do not cry out to God. They cling to their idols and their sins.

This is what hardness looks like. It is not that people do not see the judgment. They do. It is not that they do not feel the consequences. They do. But they refuse to admit they are wrong. They refuse to humble themselves. They refuse to repent.

Pharaoh was like this. Plague after plague fell on Egypt. His magicians admitted, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19, ESV). But Pharaoh hardened his heart again and again.

The problem is not lack of evidence. The problem is the will. The heart that is set against God will reject even the clearest signs.

### **The warning for us**

This passage is a warning. Do not presume that you will repent later. Do not assume that a crisis will automatically bring you to your knees. The human heart is capable of astonishing hardness.

The writer of Hebrews warns, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:12–13, ESV).

Today is the day to repent. Today is the day to turn. Today is the day to abandon idols and trust the living God.

Because tomorrow, your heart may be harder than it is today.