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REVELATION 9

THE REAL HELL'S ANGELS ARE COMING

Some Christians do not like the Book of Revelation. That has been the case throughout the history of the church. Martin Luther did not care too much about it. And it is the only book in the Bible John Calvin never wrote a commentary on.

One of the problems many people have with Revelation, is that there is so much violence in this book. Today, there is much discussion going on about the violence found in Scripture. It is often focussed on some of the graphic descriptions of violence in the Old Testament, but the book of Revelation is also under attack.

What ought we to think of this? It is true that we read about armies, war-horses, aggressive beasts, battles, and people getting killed. But Revelation does not give many graphic descriptions or bloody details.

And there is something else. You can criticize Revelation and other Bible passages because of all the violence. But what about the high demand in our society for movies with a lot of aggressive violence? Or the popularity of many violent video-games? It seems that violence is part of our culture. It is present in the world in which we live, and it always has been, whether we like it or not.

In that sense Revelation is a realistic book. It describes the history of our world. This history is filled with cruelty and brutal violence. It is, therefore, no wonder that to a certain extent Revelation reflects this violent picture.

This does not mean that Revelation glorifies violence. But the Kingdom of God can only come when God's enemies are gone. That is why God warns them. But they will not go voluntarily. And he will not let the wicked get away with their evil. That is not a matter of meaningless violence. That is a matter of just judgments.

When we read Rev. 9 we feel how dark and threatening God's judgments are becoming. On his way to the end of the world God uses two more trumpet blasts to unleash powers from hell to call all nations and all people to come to their senses.

THEY POISON HUMAN MINDS

Recall, that we are still looking at John's vision of the seven angels sounding seven trumpets. We heard the first four already, and now we will listen to the next two. The difference is that the emphasis here is on devilish activities. As a matter of fact, it is the first time we hear that God is using devilish powers for his purpose, to carry out his judgments.

When the fifth angel sounds his trumpet, the vision becomes freaky. So far everything we have seen took place in heaven and on earth. But now for the first time the "Abyss", or "bottomless pit" is also involved.

John sees a star *that had fallen from the sky or from heaven to earth*. What is this 'star'? Or who is it? Is it Satan? The Bible tells us that the Devil rebelled against God and lost his position (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). In Rev. 12:9 we read about him as the 'great dragon' or 'ancient serpent', who *was thrown down to the earth*. Is there perhaps a connection with what Jesus says in Luke 10:18, that he *saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*? Or is it just an unknown evil angel? Here again opinions differ.

We then hear that this star *is given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit*. The word is also translated as *Abyss*. It refers to the place where evil spirits, demons, devils, even Satan himself, are dwelling. In Luke 8:31 many de-

mons beg Jesus *not to command them to go into the Abyss*. In line with Revelation 20:1–3 we can say that the “Abyss” is hell before God’s final judgment. Here Satan’s henchmen are awaiting trial.

In this vision it is pictured as some place under the earth, somewhere deep down, from where the surface of the earth can be reached via a shaft. But do not go look for it. It is a vision. Words like “underworld”, or “underground” do not suggest that you can literally find it somewhere underneath here. It is the opposite of above, of heaven. That means it is as far away from God’s throne room as one can go.

However, that does not mean that God has nothing to do with this. The opposite is true. We hear that “the key was given.” And that “the locusts were given power.” And that “they were told.” God does that. In other words: these demonic powers only operate within God’s plan and under God’s control.

It is comforting to know in this brutal world that the One who sits on the throne in heaven rules. And that even devils and demons can do nothing without the Almighty God allowing it. We think sometimes that evil rules, and we wonder why God does not put an end to it. Do not worry, he will! Evil does a lot of damage, but God uses even the work of Satan as his judgment and as warning for the wicked.

So, yes, the “key to the shaft of the Abyss” symbolizes the authority to let the demons out. And when that happens, the ‘underworld’, so to speak, wanders into this world with the purpose to torture and to kill. That sounds pretty frightening. And it is! But remember, it is only possible with God’s permission.

As the history of our world unfolds and comes to completion, devils are let loose on the earth. And they are going everywhere. Satan fills the world with demons and evil influences. The inspiration from hell is spreading and being felt all over.

This is visible in John’s vision, when after the opening of the shaft, black, dense clouds of filthy, stinking smoke billow upward and spread over the earth. The smoke and evil fumes are penetrating everywhere. It becomes a layer of smog that darkens the sun and the sky. Air pollution at its worst.

This depressing picture of gloom and doom symbolizes how the forces of evil fill our human world with the smoke of deception and delusion. Smoke-screens everywhere. When people are led to believe whatever they want, except the Word of the Living God, spiritual darkness creeps in and the result is moral confusion. Satan is clever enough to work in a very subtle way, but it is penetrating everywhere in human society. If you have ever read C.S. Lewis' "Screwtape Letters" you know what I mean.

But there is more. Out of the dark smoke John sees a huge swarm of locusts coming down on the earth. In Northern Africa, Arabia, and the Middle East desert locusts are a real terror for the farmers. A locust plague is totally destructive. They devour all the green vegetation, strip the land bare, and cause a devastation you can only comprehend if you have seen it.

Think of the 8th plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:12-20). And that one was only affecting the land of Egypt. This is happening on a global scale. The prophet Joel also gives a graphic description of the impact of an enormous swarm of locusts (Joel 2:1-11).

But what we see here in Revelation 9 goes way beyond this. For these are not normal locusts. These are hellish locusts. Remember where they come from. In addition, normal locusts are voracious eaters of grass and greenery, but these are not. The demons from the world below appear in this world in the monstrous forms of locusts, armed with the weapons of scorpions, the silent killers of the desert.

Here is a horrific army of evil spirits, who were told to leave the green grass and plants alone, and to focus on torturing people. But not all the people. The attack targets God's enemies, the people who do not belong to Jesus Christ. As it says here, *only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads*, referencing back to Rev. 7.

When John goes on to describe these locusts, we get a terrifying picture. It is hard to describe exactly what demonic powers look like, and you feel that John is searching for adequate words and images. In v.7-9 he uses a lot of similes: "It was like this..., or something like this..., or it resembled..."

We do not need to over analyse the details of this aggressive army of savage and almost invincible warriors, evil angels ready to attack, bound for victo-

ry, and approaching with the thundering sound of horses and chariots. It is a graphic description of an intimidating and frightening spectacle. The real hell's angels are coming!

However, these are not 'purebreds' of the underworld. They also have human features. *Their faces resemble human faces and their hair is like women's hair.* They combine characteristics of the world below and this world. The demons come with a human face. Evil can take many sinister forms, but in the end it has a human face.

We know that the evil things in this world are instigated by Satan and his demons. But evil has a fertile soil in our human nature, which is *so corrupt that we are unable to do any good and inclined to all evil.*⁵ This is because in the end all evil in this world is the result of our rebellion against God's will.

So, yes, in these locusts we have some dangerous and frightening attackers. They are also well organized. They have a king. Naturally, locusts do not have a leader, but these ones are led by *the angel of the Abyss.* We cannot really confirm who this is. Satan? It is possible. The same one who in v.1 was described as "the star fallen from heaven"? That is also possible. But we do not know for sure who he was either.

We do know that the name of this king, *Abaddon* or *Apollyon*, means "Destroyer". That tells us that here we have a Dark Lord who is opposing our Lord Jesus Christ, the "Saviour".

So how are they going to do this? How do these locusts attack? V.10 tells us that *they had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to hurt people.* This goes back to v.3 where we read that *they were given power like the power of scorpions,* and to v.5 where *the torment the people suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it stings someone.*

Scorpions are small, nocturnal animals that live in desert-areas. From a few species of scorpions the sting can be deadly. But even if it is not fatal, the poisonous sting of a scorpion causes a burning fever, painful suffering, and terrible agony.

5 Heidelberg Catechism, Question & Answer 8.

This symbolism of a plague of locusts, with scorpion-like features, points at the influential powers of hell that are operating in human hearts and minds. To be stung means to be injected with devilish ideas, theories, and deceptions in your mind. The apostle Paul warns Timothy against *departing from the faith and being devoted to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons* (1 Tim. 4:1).

God allows the powers from below to sting people who do not hold on to the truth of his Word. In other words, he allows the powers of darkness to poison human minds, to confuse human thinking, and to corrupt human society. The demons, the evil spirits on earth, are missionaries from hell, real hell's angels.

This is strong language. When we look around it does not look so bad. In our secular society many decent, well-meaning people live without God, and many of them seem perfectly happy and fine with that. They enjoy life. And quite often their thoughts, ideas, theories, moral views, and things like that, sound clever and reasonable.

But do not be fooled by the view from below. John's vision with the view from above shows the horrible reality. Joy and happiness without God are temporary and not real. People get paranoid about their material wealth, their health, or their looks. The emptiness can only be filled with more and more new stimulus all the time. And in the end, evil will not bring the fun and success people desire and expect, but suffering. And if something terrible happens unexpectedly, something they cannot control, they panic. Without God, life becomes miserable and meaningless.

Only one thing can protect you against this poisonous sting. That is the seal of God on your forehead. This seal is what identifies you as belonging to Jesus Christ and living under his protective care. When he is your Master, you do not have to fear. The seal of God's ownership is able to resist the demonic powers that try to poison your mind. They will not harm you. Repent and find God's grace and reconciliation through Jesus' death on the cross. Seek your life outside of yourself in Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead. Then you carry his seal and Satan will not get you.

If not, the sting of the scorpion-like locust will prove to be self-destructive. God's judgment will give people over to become victims of the demonic

powers they have embraced. Then life will deteriorate to the point that people would rather be dead than alive. But that will not help.

And yet, the suffering is not unrestricted. It is only temporary. God sets the boundaries because his goal is repentance. These horrible locusts will be allowed to torture people for a limited time, symbolically indicated as not more than five months. Many will survive and have time to repent.

THEY KILL HUMAN LIVES

Then we hear the sixth angel sounding his trumpet. Now things get even scarier! John hears this anonymous voice coming *from the horns of the golden altar before God*. We have seen this altar before. That was in Rev. 6:9 and 8:3. And again you can find a number of speculations as to who is speaking. We do not know for certain, but one thing becomes clear, whoever's voice it is, what it says has the approval of the One who rules from the throne in heaven.

The voice from the altar instructs the sixth angel to *release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates*. This sets in motion a horrible scene, an unprecedented disaster up until that point in time.

These four angels are not the same as the ones mentioned in Rev. 7:1, who were *standing at the four corners of the earth*. The ones in our text are “angels of wrath” or “angels of death”. They are authorized to launch some pretty frightening developments, and they gladly do so. But note again (in v.15) that they can do nothing unless and until God commands it, exactly at his time.

The *great river Euphrates* was far to the east of Israel, and in the Old Testament that was often the direction where the enemies of God's people would come from: the Assyrians and the Babylonians. It is symbolic for the hostilities God's children are facing, because of the great conflict we are all part of in this world.

With the view from above, Revelation shows that there are two major cities in this world. The one is the *Great City of Babylon*, symbol of the evil world,

which is hostile to God. In contrast with this, we see the *New City of Jerusalem*, the eternal dwelling place of the Holy God and his people.⁶

In connection with these cities, there are also two major rivers. The Euphrates belongs to Babylon and is associated with bringing death and destruction. In contrast with this, the river of life is flowing from the throne of God down Main Street of the New Jerusalem, to give life to all who live there. In other words, the name “Euphrates” alerts us that we are going to see a glimpse of the horrors that come out of Babylon.

So then, what is happening when these four angels are going at it? Now remember, as we have noted before, what John sees interprets what he hears, or the other way round.

He hears the number of the mounted troops: 200 million. That is an incredibly huge army. But what does he actually see? What John sees in the v.17 and 19 makes clear that this is not just a large human army, but a demonic cavalry. It explains that the number he heard is a symbolic number to emphasize that the evil powers have an enormous endurance, because of their huge reserves. There are always new armies available, ready for battle.

John sees an incalculable number of fearsome creatures, horses and riders that look really weird and frightening, because they have only one purpose, that is to destroy and to kill human lives. John sees a world full of violence!

It is kind of freakish to see how horse and rider blend together and become one bizarre creature. Their breastplates take on the same colours as what comes out of the mouths of the horses: the red of fire, the dark blue of smoke, and the yellow of burning sulphur that is belching forth from the mouths of these creatures, products of the underworld that reflect the suffocating atmosphere of hell.

What adds to our bewilderment is the frightening mix of body-parts. The powerful bodies of war horses have heads like the heads of lions and tails like snakes with aggressive heads. Indeed, these fire-breathing creatures can attack also with their tails.

⁶ See the contrasting descriptions in chapter 17 and 18, versus chapter 21

Different from the locusts we saw before, these bizarre monsters lack all human-like characteristics. They come straight from hell, directly from the Abyss and no one on earth can stop them. The real hell's angels are coming. And the effects are dramatic. These devilish creatures will bring hell to earth, as they go around killing one-third of mankind. This is a horrible picture.

The destructive power of these killing-machines is enormous. But you cannot identify these living beings with flame-throwers in the front and deadly poison-sprayers at the back with particular weapons. They symbolize the terrible war-tools and war-machinery of every description in any time. Today you can think of missiles with nuclear warheads, chemical weapons, or other weapons of mass-destruction.

What we see here represents war. Not one specific war but all wars throughout the centuries. Many wars have been ravaging the world during the history of mankind. For most people 'war' was often a more 'normal' situation than 'peace'. And the number of victims runs in the millions. You only have to think of the two world wars in the 20th century.

Not many people like war, but it's good to remember that, just as all other things, war is also included in God's plan, God's decree. And he can even use 'war' as a warning-voice to call the wicked to turn to him.

Sometimes one has to take up weapons for a just cause, to protect freedom and restrain greater evil. And yet, let us not glorify war. It always comes with much pain, suffering, and horrible misery. So-called "war heroes" will tell you that 'war is hell'. It does terrible things to people. In times of war men can turn into incarnate devils.

What do we do with all this, today? We live in this world, which is filled with never-ending violence. And there is always a war, or a civil war, being fought somewhere in this world, in which people commit horrible and bloody atrocities. But there is still time for repentance. With one-third being killed, two-thirds continues to live.

How do we look at this in the light of the Bible? Here is the answer. In this broken, sinful world, wars are God's judgment on evil people, on wicked mankind. In wars the God who rules from his throne in heaven unleashes hellish powers. That makes wars truly horrifying and the blood of the vic-

tims cries out to heaven. But it also makes for serious warnings and very urgent calls to repent.

Is there any good news in this? Yes, there is, even when God's people become victims of terror and bloodshed. The good news is that God is just and righteous as he punishes evil and wickedness, hatred, and meaningless violence.

He comes to establish his kingdom here on earth. Hold on to your Saviour Jesus Christ, and through the dark and dangerous alleys of this world he will lead you to the safety and security of his eternal kingdom. For his kingdom is the kingdom of true justice and true righteousness. He will rule from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth.

THEY HARDEN HUMAN HEARTS

What is the result of all this? Throughout the period of the last days, the final phase of history, the exalted Christ, who rules all things in accordance with God's plan, will again and again inflict disasters as his warnings and calls to repent and be saved.

How do survivors respond to all those warning disasters between Jesus' first and second coming? Do people come around to honour God? These loud trumpet blasts are supposed to awaken stubborn mankind to see its destructive ways, to obey God and to turn to Jesus Christ. That is the purpose. God warns. Is anybody listening? Do we see massive dramatic conversions everywhere?

The big picture is clear: no, it does not happen despite all these warning voices. Sometimes, when terrible things happen, people are shocked, scared, and they panic. But when it is all over, these feelings disappear, and life goes on as if nothing has happened. After the 9/11 disaster (2001) in New York the churches were packed with shocked worshippers. But that lasted only a few weeks.

The rest of mankind did not repent of the work of their hands, says John. The survivors who have experienced these disasters had time to repent. But you can hear how deeply disappointed John is when he concludes that the lure

of spiritual promiscuity by trusting in idols, false gods, is much stronger than the threats of God's judgments: torture, plagues, and Satanic monsters of the deep.

Foolish and stubborn, they continue to ignore and resist the living God by turning to powers that cannot do anything, counterfeit, useless and powerless gods. They continue to dismiss God's commands and refuse to serve the one true God. That is going on everywhere. Today, the gods of money, power, sex, sports, hedonism, self, and you name it, may be more popular than the gods of gold, bronze or wood, but it all works the same way.

God's unfolding judgements harden people in their resistance. The plagues, the terror of the real hell's angels do not soften human hearts, but instead, harden them. It is like the reaction of the Pharaoh to the plagues in Egypt. Every time he ignored the urgent call to let the Israelites go, he dug himself a deeper hole.

This is what is happening in our world today. Yes, God's church continues to be gathered. People do repent and follow Jesus Christ. But the big picture, especially in most of the western world, is one of resistance and incredible hardening in evil, despite God's judgments that show his powerful presence in the world.

This means that this world will continue to be a world without peace, a world filled with violence. For this stubborn unwillingness to repent will bring about, via the seventh trumpet, the outpouring of the bowls of God's wrath (Revelation 16), which will lead to the culmination of the final judgment. All this heightens the suspense at this moment in Revelation because it urges us to *wait for the day of God, and so hasten its coming*, as Peter puts it in 2 Peter 3:12.

What does this mean for the church today – for you and me?

First of all, it is comforting. The exodus is coming. Full freedom is on the horizon. We will reach our destination, as with joy we will enter the gates of the New Jerusalem.

Secondly, it is a warning. Yes, also for us! "Do not conform to the world". That is a real danger. The temptation of modern idol-worship, worshipping the works of our hands, is very much alive for us. It is so easy to replace

worshipping the living God with whatever you think will give you joy, happiness, security, hope, satisfaction, fulfilment. Ancient and modern idols look different, but they have one thing in common. *They cannot see or hear or walk* (v.20). They do nothing!

In the third place, it is also encouraging. With all these horrible judgments that ravage this evil world, we may be inclined to leave the world alone, to hide in safety, waiting for the whole thing to blow up. That is what Jonah tried to do, when in smug self-confidence he was waiting for the destruction of Nineveh (Jonah 4).

However, in this violent and unrepentant world the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes even more urgent.

In this darkening world ruled by evil powers from hell, spreading the gospel of the living God as a God of grace in Jesus Christ is the most pressing issue for the church.

There is still time to repent.

Let the world know that the King is coming.

2. The list of the twelve tribes of Israel in the verses 5 – 8 is different from the list(s) in the Old Testament (like in Genesis 49). Find the differences and explain what you think the reason might be for those differences.
3. If *the prayers of the saints* (meaning: the believers or the church) are going to have such a major impact on what is going to happen on earth, what do you think was the content of these prayers? What did the believers pray for?
4. When we pray – either personally, as family or as church – we pray that God may bless mission, evangelism, and that the Holy Spirit may open hearts and minds for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we also pray for justice and righteousness? For Jesus' return and the coming of God's kingdom? For the Last Judgment? What should we pray for?

Chapter 14 – Revelation 8:6-13

1. Can we recognize the disasters, triggered by the first four trumpets, in the time in which we live? How does God want us to respond to these disasters?
2. How does Revelation 8 help us to respond to people that say: 'If God is responsible for, or even involved in all the terrible things that are happening in the world, I cannot believe in a cruel God like that'....?
3. Read Romans 8:18-25. How can this passage help us to understand what is happening in Revelation 8:6-13?
4. The disasters following the trumpet-blasts in Revelation 8:6-13 are at least partly the results of *the prayers of the saints*, the church (Revelation 8:3-5). What does this teach us about what the church should be praying for?

Chapter 15 – Revelation 9

1. What does Revelation 9:6 mean? What is the only way out of the human misery?
2. In verse 13 we hear about *a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God*. In Revelation 6:9 this same altar was connected with the voices of the martyrs, and in 8:3,4 it is connected with the

prayers of the saints. What kind of connection could there be between the voice coming from this altar and the frightening and violent destruction that is unleashed by this voice here in Revelation 9? Can Christians pray for God's judgment over evil and wickedness?

3. How does God's love for the world and the joyful message of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ – how does that fit with the picture of a God who inflicts the horrible terror of ruthless warfare on this world. What does this imply for the message of the church today?
4. Can we recognize what we read in the verses 20 and 21, as something that is happening in our society today? Should this stop us from reaching out in our society with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

Chapter 16 – Revelation 10

1. What is the purpose of the interlude in Revelation 10 and 11, between the blowing of the 6th and the 7th trumpet?
2. What is the meaning of the oath of the angel (see the verses 6-7) for us? Think of expressions like: *there will be no more delay*, and: *at the 7th trumpet call the mystery of God will be fulfilled*.
3. What does the symbolism of eating the scroll, as John is told to do in verse 9, mean for us? Read also Ezekiel 2:1 – 3:11.
4. Eating the scroll (verses 9 and 10) comes with the message that it will taste as sweet as honey, but that it will make John's stomach bitter. What does that tell us about the sweet and bitter things we will experience when the church will faithfully reach out into this world with the message of salvation by grace alone, the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Chapter 17 – Revelation 11:1-14

1. Read Zechariah 4. Why was this an encouraging vision for Israel after the exile? And how does it help us to see the encouragement for the church today in the vision of the two witnesses in Revelation 11?
2. In what way do the two witnesses resemble Moses and Elijah (see the verses 5 and 6)? Where else in the New Testament are these