

Revelation week #22

Revelation 9:13-21

Satanic Slaughter

I. Introduction

- a. Mankind lies between two powerful opposing spiritual spheres, each seeking to conform people to itself.
- b. No one is neutral in the cosmic battle; everyone is either part of the “domain of darkness” or of the “kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son” (Col. 1:13).
- c. As they yield to one sphere or the other, people become the companions of God, or the companions of Satan; the companions of holy angels, or the companions of demons; the companions of saints, or the companions of sinners.
- d. To doubt that reality is the gravest mistake any person can make, because making the wrong choice results in eternal disaster.
- e. God offers people the life-giving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ; Satan and the forces of hell lure people to their destruction by dangling before them the “passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25).
- f. The loud voices of hell have always tried to drown out the preaching of the gospel.
- g. There is coming a day when the siren call of hell will be so loud as to be all but irresistible.
- h. The people of that time will ignore the repeated, powerful preaching of the gospel and the warning conveyed by terrifying, devastating judgments from God.
- i. Having rejected all offers of grace and mercy, they will see death come upon mankind through the trumpet and bowl

judgments, which will deliver death on a scale unprecedented in human history.

- j. Yet even then they will not repent; in fact, they will curse God (cf. 9:20–21; 16:9, 11).
- k. People at that time will have made the irrevocable choice to side with the forces of hell.
- l. While there will be divine judgments throughout the seven-year Tribulation, they will escalate during the last three and one-half years—the time Jesus called “the great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21; cf. Rev. 7:14).
- m. As has been discussed in previous chapters, those judgments will unfold sequentially in three telescoping series: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. Out of the seventh seal comes the seven trumpet judgments, and out of the seventh trumpet comes the seven bowl judgments.
- n. Like the fifth trumpet (9:1–12), the sounding of the sixth trumpet heralds another, more severe demonic attack on sinful mankind.
- o. This attack, unlike the previous one, brings death.
- p. It unfolds in three stages: the release of demons, the return of death, and the reaction of defiance.

II. **The Release of Demons.**

- a. Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” 9:13-14
- b. In his turn, at the appointed moment, the sixth angel sounded his mighty trumpet.
 - i. Immediately, John heard a voice. The Greek text literally reads “one voice,” stressing that John heard a single, solitary voice.

- ii. The voice is not identified, but it is possibly that of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - iii. He was pictured earlier standing near the throne (5:6), when He took the seven-sealed scroll from the Father's hand (5:7) and broke its seals (6:1), thus unleashing the series of judgments of which the sixth trumpet is a part.
 - iv. Or this could be the voice of the angel whom John had seen standing near the golden altar of incense (8:3).
- c. While identifying the source of the voice is not possible, its location is: it came from the four horns (small protrusions on each corner) of the golden altar which is before God.
- d. John had already seen this altar, the heavenly counterpart to the Old Testament altar of incense, twice before in his visions.
 - i. In the tabernacle and temple, this altar was a place where incense was burnt, symbolizing the peoples' prayers for mercy rising to God.
 - ii. But in John's vision the golden altar became an altar of imprecatory intercession, as the martyred saints pleaded there with God for merciless vengeance on their murderers (6:9–11).
 - iii. Then in 8:5 it became an altar of judgment, as an angel took his and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth."
 - iv. His action set the stage for the trumpet judgments, which followed shortly.
- e. The original altar of incense is described in detail in Exodus 30:1–10:
- f. The incense altar was located in front of the veil that separated the Holy of Holies, where God's presence dwelt, from the Holy Place.
 - i. No one but the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and he only on the Day of Atonement.

- ii. But the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy Place, and was commanded to burn incense on the incense altar morning and evening.
 - iii. While sacrifices were not normally offered on the incense altar, the high priest was required to offer a sin offering on it once a year.
 - iv. That illustrates the important biblical truth that atonement provides the basis for prayer, worship, and communion with God.
 - v. No one whose sins have not been atoned for has access to God.
- g. Shockingly, from the altar associated with mercy came words of judgment.
 - i. God is a merciful, gracious, compassionate God, yet His “Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3).
 - ii. When this trumpet judgment occurs, the time for mercy will have passed; the altar of mercy will become an altar of judgment.
 - iii. Sinful men will have finally and completely rejected God’s gracious offer of salvation.
 - iv. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Hebrews 10:28-31
- h. The voice coming from the surface of the altar between the four protruding corners explicitly commanded the sixth angel

who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”

- i. That the four angels are bound indicates that they are demons (cf. 20:1ff.; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), since holy angels are nowhere in Scripture said to be bound.
 - i. Because holy angels always perfectly carry out God’s will, there is no need for Him to restrain them from opposing His will.
 - ii. God’s control over demonic forces is complete—they are bound or loosed at His command.
 - iii. The perfect tense of the participle translated bound implies that these four angels were bound in the past with continuing results; they were in a state or condition of bondage until God’s determined time came for them to be released to execute their function as instruments of divine judgment.
- j. The site of the four angels’ imprisonment is familiar—the great river Euphrates (cf. Deut. 1:7; Josh. 1:4).
 - i. Rising from sources near Mount Ararat in Turkey, the Euphrates flows more than seventeen-hundred miles before emptying into the Persian Gulf.
 - ii. It is the longest and most important river in the Middle East, and figures prominently in the Old Testament.
 - iii. It was one of the four rivers into which the river that flowed out of the Garden of Eden divided (Gen. 2:14).
 - iv. It was near the Euphrates that sin began, the first lie was told, the first murder was committed, and the tower of Babel (the origin of an entire complex of false religions that spread across the world) was built.
 - v. The Euphrates was the eastern boundary of the Promised Land (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 23:31; Deut. 11:24), and Israel’s influence extended to the Euphrates during the reigns of David (1 Chron. 18:3) and Solomon (2 Chron. 9:26). T

- vi. The region near the Euphrates was the central location of three world powers that oppressed Israel: Assyria, Babylon, and Medo-Persia.
- vii. It was on the banks of the Euphrates that Israel endured seventy long, bitter, wearisome years of captivity (cf. Ps. 137:1–4).
- viii. It is the river over which the enemies of God will cross to engage in the battle of Armageddon (16:12–16).
- k. The use of the definite article suggests that these four angels form a specific group.
 - i. Their precise identity is not revealed, but they may be the demons that controlled the four major world empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Daniel 10 provides insight into the warfare between holy angels and the demons that influence individual nations.
 - ii. In verse 13 a holy angel told Daniel that “the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.”
 - iii. Then in verse 20 he added, “Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and behold, the prince of Greece is about to come.”
- l. Whoever they are, these four powerful fallen angels control a huge demonic army set to wage war against fallen mankind when God releases them to do so.
- m. Satanic forces, imagining they are doing the work of their leader the devil and aggressively thwarting the purposes of God, are actually God’s servants doing exactly what He wants done.

III. **The Return of Death.**

- a. Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying

to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”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.¹⁶ The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths.¹⁹ 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 (9:15–19)

- b. Death, which had taken a holiday under the fifth trumpet (9:5–6), now returns with a vengeance.
- c. The four angels (the ones bound at the Euphrates River; v. 14) who had been prepared by God for this exact hour and day and month and year (cf. Matt. 24:36) were released.
- d. At the precise moment in the predetermined year, the month, and the very day and exact hour called for by God's sovereign plan, He will release these four high-ranking demons so that He can use them in His ongoing judgment of the world.
- e. The shocking, terrifying purpose for the release of these demon leaders and their hordes was so that they would kill a third of mankind (“those who dwell on the earth”; 8:13).
- f. The judgment of the fourth seal killed one quarter of the earth's population (6:8); this additional third brings the death toll from these two judgments alone to more than half the earth's pretribulation population.
- g. That staggering total does not include those who perished in the other seal and trumpet judgments.

- h. The repeated emphasis throughout the trumpet judgments on one-third (cf. 8:7–12) demonstrates convincingly that these are controlled, precise divine judgments and not mere natural disasters.
- i. The terrible slaughter will completely disrupt human society.
 - i. The problem of disposing of the dead bodies alone will be inconceivable.
 - ii. The sickly stench of decaying corpses will permeate the world, and it will take an enormous effort on the part of the survivors to bury them in mass graves or burn them.
 - iii. How these demons inflict death is specifically revealed in v. 18.
- j. To slaughter well over a billion people will require an unimaginably powerful force.
 - i. John reported that the number of the armies of the horsemen was an astonishing two hundred million.
 - ii. This is likely an exact number, or more general specifications, such as those used in 5:11 and 7:9, would have been used.
 - iii. Then, as if anticipating that some skeptical readers would doubt that huge number, John emphatically insisted on the precision of the number, testifying “I heard the number of them.”
 - iv. In addition to the demons who have roamed the earth throughout history, the “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12) recently cast to earth (cf. 9:1; 12:4), and the innumerable bound demons released from the abyss at the sounding of the fifth trumpet comes a new demon army two hundred million strong.
- k. The use of the plural armies may imply that the attacking force will be divided into four armies, each commanded by one of the formerly bound demons.
- l. Some have suggested that this is the human army referred to in 16:12 and led by “the kings from the east,” noting that the

Red Chinese army reportedly numbered 200 million during the 1970s.

- i. But no reference is made to the size of the army led by the kings of the East.
 - ii. Further, that army arrives on the scene during the sixth bowl judgment, which takes place during the seventh trumpet, not the sixth.
 - iii. Though there may be at that time an existing standing army of two hundred million, the impossibility of marshaling, supplying, and transporting such a vast human force all over the globe also argues against this army being a human army.
 - iv. The figurative language used to describe this army's horses suggests that this is a supernatural rather than human force, as does the fact that it is commanded by the four newly released demons.
- m. Before describing the horses, the actual agents of destruction, John briefly described those who sat on them.
- n. He noted that the riders had breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur.
- i. The color of fire is red; that of sapphire, dark blue or black like smoke; that of brimstone, a sulfurous yellow, describing the rock which, when ignited, produces a burning flame and suffocating gas.
 - ii. Those are the very colors and features of hell (cf. 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8), and they paint a terrifying picture of God's wrath poured out on the sinful world by these demons.
 - iii. These colors are reminiscent of the destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the nearby cities (Gen. 19:24–28).
- o. Horses are frequently associated with warfare in Scripture (e.g., Ex. 14:9ff.; Deut. 11:4; 20:1; Josh. 11:4; 1 Sam. 13:5; 2 Sam. 1:6; 8:4; Ps. 33:17; Prov. 21:31; Isa. 5:28; Jer. 6:23;

Ezek. 23:23–24; 38:4, 15; Dan. 11:40; Hos. 1:7; Joel 2:4; Nah. 3:2–3), but it is clear that these are not actual horses.

- i. Using the descriptive language of his vision, John noted that the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions.
 - ii. Like lions these demon forces fiercely, relentlessly, determinedly stalk and slaughter their victims.
 - iii. John noted three ways that the demon horses killed their victims, all of which picture the violent, devastating fury of hell.
 - iv. They incinerated them with fire, and asphyxiated them with smoke and brimstone.
 - v. John saw that the devastating result of this deadly demonic assault was to be that a third of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which proceeded out of their mouths.
- p. It may be noted that the word plagues will appear frequently in the remainder of Revelation (11:6; 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18) as a term for the destructive final judgments.
- q. As if the description he has already given were not frightening enough, John sees more about the deadly power of the demons.
- r. He is made aware that not only is the power of the horses in their mouths, but also in their tails.
- i. Having likened the horses' heads to savage lions, John notes that their tails are like deadly, venomous serpents and have heads, and with them they do harm.
 - ii. The horse's tails were not actual serpents, because the horses were not actual horses.
 - iii. The horse was anointed with war force, the lion with vicious, deadly power, the serpent with deadly venom.
 - iv. These images describe the supernatural deadliness of this demon force in terms that are commonly understood in the natural realm.

- s. Unlike the scorpion stings inflicted during the previous demonic assault (9:5), the snakebites inflicted by this host will be fatal.

IV. **THE REACTION OF DEFIANCE.**

- a. 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. 9:20-21
- b. The death of one-third of the earth's remaining population will be the most catastrophic disaster to strike the earth since the Flood.
- c. Yet in an amazing display of hardness of heart, the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent.
- d. It is unimaginable that after years of suffering and death under the terrifying judgments from God, coupled with the powerful preaching of the gospel by the 144,000 Jewish evangelists (7:1–8), the two witnesses (11:1–14), an angel in the sky (14:6–7), and other believers (Matt. 24:14), the survivors will still refuse to repent.
- e. Like those who rejected Jesus despite seeing His miracles, hearing His powerful preaching, and the preaching of His resurrection, they will “fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ‘He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them’ ” (John 12:38–40).
- f. Having failed to heed the Bible's warning, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 4:7), they will perish (cf. Rev. 16:9, 11).

- g. Tragically, they will choose to worship the dragon and the beast (Antichrist) instead of the Lamb (cf. 13:4–8).
- h. As he concludes his account of this amazing vision, John lists five sins representative of the defiance of those who refused to repent.
 - i. First, they did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk (cf. Deut. 4:28; Pss. 115:5–7; 135:16–17).
 - 1. Ever since the Fall, men have practiced idolatry, worshiping the works of their hands.
 - 2. That phrase is used throughout Scripture to refer to idols (cf. Deut. 27:15; 31:29; 2 Kings 19:18; 22:17; 2 Chron. 32:19; 34:25; Ps. 135:15; Isa. 2:8; 17:8; 37:19; Jer. 1:16; 25:6, 7, 14; 32:30; 44:8; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:13; Hag. 2:14; Acts 7:41).
 - 3. In ancient times (and even in some cultures today) people actually worshiped idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk (see God’s scornful denunciations of such sinful folly in Ps. 115:1–8; Isa. 40:19–20; 44:8–20; Jer. 10:3–5; Dan. 5:23; cf. Rom. 1:18–32). But to worship any idol or false deity is in fact to worship demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37).
 - 4. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) rendering of Psalm 96:5 reads, “All the gods of the peoples are demons.”
 - 5. The apostle Paul declared that “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons” (1 Cor. 10:20). When people worship idols, gods that do not exist, demons who do exist will impersonate those gods and hold those idolaters captive to their demonic power and deception.

6. False religions are not void of the supernatural; they are full of it—because they are the best opportunities for demons to capture souls.
 7. They are the fortresses of 2 Corinthians 10:4–5 which must be assaulted with the truth if souls are to be delivered.
- ii. At that future point in world history, idolatry, mysticism, spiritism, satanism, and all other forms of false religion will become pandemic, as demons lead people into more wicked and vicious behavior.
 - iii. Unbridled, unrestrained, escalating wickedness will run amuck as never before in human history (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1–5, 13).
- i. Second sin, As a result, in addition to idolatry, violent crimes like murders will be rampant.
 - i. Lacking any sense of morality, evil, unrepentant people will imitate the demon horde’s murderous blood lust.
 - ii. Believers in the true God will no doubt be their prime targets, as they lash out seeking revenge for the disasters God has brought on them.
 - j. John describes a third sin his vision revealed will characterize that tragic time as sorceries, a Greek word from which the English words “pharmacy” and “pharmaceuticals” derive.
 - i. Drugs were and still are believed to induce a higher religious state of communion with deities. (For a discussion of such practices, see Ephesians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1986], 229–34.)
 - ii. Pharmakōn can also refer to poisons, amulets, charms, séances, witchcraft, incantations, magic spells, contacting mediums, or any object that is tied to pagan idolatry to elicit lust or to seduce.
 - iii. People will dive deeper into the satanic trappings of false religion.

- k. The fourth sin from which the unregenerate will refuse to turn away is immorality.
 - i. Porneia (immorality) is the root word of the English word “pornography.”
 - ii. It is a general term describing sexual sin of every variety, including fornication, adultery, rape, and homosexuality. Indescribable sexual perversions will be running rampant in that day.
- l. Finally, people will refuse to repent of thefts.
 - i. Like morality, honesty will be nonexistent, as people compete for the increasingly scarce supplies of food, clothing, water, shelter, and medicines.
- m. Under the influence of the massive demon forces the world will descend into a quagmire of false religion, murder, sexual perversion, and crime unparalleled in human history.
- n. It is sobering to realize that the Lord will one day come “to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (Jude 15).
- o. In light of that coming judgment it is the responsibility of all believers to faithfully proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, thereby “snatching them out of the fire” (Jude 23).

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¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 265–275.