

The first four trumpets in the previous chapter showed the great power that God has over all the things of this world, especially over the false idols of this world. By taking them away, by bringing them to nothing, God showed that they are no gods at all, and that he alone is the Lord. But now, as the three woes begin to blow, the judgment of God now falls upon the people themselves. And this one in particular, the fifth trumpet, the first woe, shows that the very source of their suffering comes from the things that they worship. The very source of all of their troubles comes from the very things that they sought to find help. God is pouring out judgment upon them in this way.

And so John begins, then, in verse 1 of our reading: "And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit." Just like in the third trumpet which we heard before, this star falling down from heaven is a symbol of a king. But in this case it's not an earthly king. This is an angelic power, or I would actually argue a demonic one. And I say that for a couple of reasons. First of all because of his name. His name is Abaddon in Hebrew, which means "destruction," and it's Apollyon in Greek, which means "the destroyer," so he is the one who has come to bring destruction. He is the one who has come to destroy. And the other reason is because of how Jesus talks about Satan in the gospel of Luke, when he says in chapter 10 that "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." So for this star to fall from heaven, then, probably shows that he was cast out of heaven, and that this is a demonic power.

But at any rate, this star-king is given the key to the bottomless pit, or a different way to translate that is the "abyss." And in the Bible, Christians, the abyss is always the place where demons are. But it's not their home. The abyss is their prison. I say that for a few reasons. First of all, because you'll notice the star-king has to actually unlock the abyss. He has to open it up, which shows that it had been closed before. And also because when he opens it up, smoke comes billowing out, showing the judgment that is happening. And on top of that, the demons themselves don't actually want to be there. When Jesus was casting out a group of demons that called themselves "Legion" in the gospel of Luke, "they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss." They don't want to be there. It is the place of their judgment. And on top of that, seeing the smoke go up into the sky like the smoke of a great furnace recalls the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, because in Genesis chapter 19 we are told that Abraham "looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace." So all of these things together, then, show that the abyss is a prison. It is the place where the demons are judged. But now it has been opened up.

And we are told that out of the abyss, out of the smoke which comes forth from the abyss, comes some very fearsome creatures, terrible to behold. Of course, we do have to remember at this point that, again, this is all symbolic language. John is not describing literally what he sees. I think the best way to understand it is to take all of these different pictures, to take how we feel about these different pictures and to pile them all on top of each other, so that we get one, giant impression from all of these different pictures together. And so that's what John wants us to do here, so that we understand just what it is that he saw.

And the first way that he describes these fearsome creatures is by comparing them to locusts. And of course, locusts are a lot like grasshoppers. We all know perfectly well how destructive

grasshoppers can be. We've had a kind of a difficult year for them this year. I bet if you just go out to the parking lot right now, you'll probably walk past a dozen of them just on the way to the car. There's a lot of grasshoppers this year. We know how destructive they can be. But the thing about grasshoppers is they tend to go by themselves. They just go off and do their own thing, even if there's a lot of them around. And for the most part, locusts will do the same thing. But in the right conditions, locusts will begin to swarm, and they will form gigantic swarms, billions and billions of insects all together. It's like a giant cloud miles wide. There's been reports of locust plagues that were forty miles wide of nothing but insects. And these insects are going and destroying everything that is in their way, because they're not just hopping along through the land. They are flying. Not the way that grasshoppers will fly for short distances, but flying like birds, actually flying through the sky. And they are destruction for everything that they come in contact with.

In fact, this is why it's connected to the eighth plague of Egypt, which was also a plague of locusts. And we're told in Exodus chapter 10 that the locusts "covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt." So you can imagine how terrifying it would be to see this great cloud of locusts coming as far as the eye could see on either side of you, and you know that as they come they're going to destroy everything. And if you depend on the harvest even just to survive, you know that you're in for some very hard times indeed. And these demons, then, are like these locusts. They are flying throughout the earth, seeking to devour.

But they're not after plants, but rather men, and they are seeking to cause them to suffer. That's why John piles picture on top of picture to describe what these creatures are like. He says that they are like horses prepared for battle. I know that we don't use cavalry anymore, but we can all understand just by imagining what it would be like to have a horse galloping towards you with the intent of running you over. To say nothing of having an entire cavalry unit doing the same thing. A very fearsome picture indeed! And they have something like a crown of gold on their heads, a crown of victory. They have come to conquer. But notice that they keep these crowns on their heads. They think that they deserve them, unlike the elders in heaven who cast them before God in their worship of him. These demons are arrogant and proud, which makes them especially dangerous.

And they're said to have human faces. That shows that they are cunning. They are clever. If they just had an animal face, we might not think anything of it. When we see a grasshopper, for example, we don't think of them as being especially smart. They're just bugs. But if they had a human face, that'd be something very different. They have come to deceive. They have come to act like men. They're said to have hair like women, which I think is just a way of saying that they had long hair. And I also think that's another symbol of their strength, because sometimes men in the Bible had long hair, especially Samson who was the strongest judge that Israel ever had. He had long hair, and that was the source of his strength. And I think that would fit the best with all of these other pictures.

They also have teeth like lions, because they are seeking to devour. They're prowling around like a lion. They are dangerous. They have breastplates like iron, which I think again shows just how unstoppable this force really is. Because back in those days, Christians, armor was expensive.

Only the very rich could afford to have armor in battle. All the rest of the army just had to make do with whatever they had. But if the whole army was encased in armor, how would anybody be able to stop them? How would anybody be able to stand up against them? They're also described as having wings of the noise like chariots, which again is extremely terrifying. Because these chariots were the most powerful weapon of their day. Can you imagine having a group of tanks running towards you, and you're standing on foot? It's the same kind of fear.

So all of these things together, then, Christians, picture upon picture upon picture, describe these fearsome creatures. They're showing their terrifying power. And they have come to hurt and to kill and to destroy.

But the worst part about this is that men still worship them as gods. They worship the demons. They follow after them. Because the Bible is very clear that any false worship is actually the worship of demons. Paul says very clearly in 1 Corinthians 10: "I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons." The idols that they're worshipping here on earth might be just gold or silver or stone or wood or whatever, but the things that they are serving through these idols are demonic powers. That's why we can't participate in false worship, even just to be nice or just to be neighborly. It is turning away from God. And what makes it especially dangerous, Christians, is that these demons are seeking to deceive. They are seeking to lead away from God, and they may even use great displays of power to do it. The magicians of Egypt, for example, were able to imitate some of the plagues that Moses brought. They were able to turn water into blood by means of their secret arts, because they were consorting with demons. And witchcraft, for example, in the Bible is never condemned because it's fake, but rather because it is seeking power apart from God. It is seeking to work with demons. But despite all of this, men still follow them, even though the demons are seeking to hurt them, because they are convinced that their power is legitimate. They are convinced that they are in fact gods, but they suffer because of it.

Because the last detail that John tells us is that these creatures have tails like scorpions. And scorpions, of course, were very common in that part of the world. They live in the desert. And their sting, of course, is very, very painful. Now, I've never personally been stung by a scorpion, and I kind of doubt any of you have either, seeing as we don't have them here, but I have heard from people who live near them that their sting is a lot like the sting of a bee. I'm sure that we all know, more or less, what it feels like to be stung by bees. And yes, it is painful. It is not fatal, but it is painful. And that pain is very intense for the short time that it goes on. It's usually gone within a few minutes, if not within under a day. But the torment of these creatures goes on for five months. Five months of torment without relief, five months of suffering. Five months, because on the one hand, that's how long the dry season was when the locusts would normally come out, and also five months, because that's how long a locust typically lives. So in other words, God puts a limit on these things. He's not to let them go on forever. But this pain is still very real. The very thing that they're seeking comfort from brings them pain instead. The very thing that they seek to get direction from, to find meaning from, brings them only sorrow. Because apart from God, Christians, there can be no peace.

And don't we see that at work in the world today? Because so many people have turned away from God, and yet they're still seeking some kind of happiness. They're still seeking some kind of fulfillment in their lives. And yet they only feel empty. They feel hollow and depressed,

because they have nothing for which to live for. But they still try to fill up that void somehow, either by listening to voices that promise them something good, that promise them some kind of happiness, or that at least promise that they'll make life bearable. But in reality, it only makes it worse. That's why, for example, Christians, in this country, drug abuse is a real problem, even within this community. People turn to drugs looking for some kind of comfort, some kind of happiness. And sure, it feels good at first, but it leaves them feeling empty, and they're never able to find that same kind of pleasure again, even as they keep coming back to it over and over. And some people turn towards endless entertainment as a way of filling up that void. If they're always watching something, always laughing at something, then they don't really need to think about how they really feel. But that doesn't work either. It eventually comes to nothing. And some people also look to some new fad which promises to fix everything, to give them direction for their lives, to solve all of life's problems. But it also comes to nothing. Fads come and go, and often leave people worse off than they were before.

But Satan wants us to continue doing these things, Christians. Satan wants us to keep chasing after anything other than God, not because he wants to help us, not because he has our best interests in mind, because he wants to destroy us. He knows that it is empty. He knows that it is pointless. And yet he wants us to chase after these things, because that's exactly what he wants. People run after him, thinking that he will give them something, and he ends up hurting them in the end.

But the saddest part of it all, Christians, is that people will still choose that rather than God. They'd choose something knowing that it is empty, knowing that it will hurt them rather than following after God, because they are still trapped in their sin. And that's exactly why God sends the judgment.

But true happiness, true fulfillment is found in God alone. As St. Augustine put it so beautifully: our heart is restless until it finds rest in God. Because God has come to set us free from the power of sin. God has come to set us free from the things of this world which are empty and which will give us nothing. We find purpose for our lives, we find direction for our lives in God alone. And when we know the Lord, we will have true peace, true rest, and that is something that the world can never give. Yeah, I know that we struggle with it still. We are still in this flesh. We still struggle with sin. Even someone like Paul could cry out, wanting to be free from this body of death. And yet, we can still find peace in God, and we will have full peace, we'll be fully at rest, when we are with God in heaven. And just knowing that can help us through all things. Just knowing that gives us peace in the midst of our suffering. And that is something that the world can never have.

So Christians, turn away from the empty promises of this world. They can't help you. They'll only hurt you in the end. But turn to God and his promises, and you will find true satisfaction, because he comes to give you a joy which will never come to an end through Jesus Christ his Son!

Let us pray. Great are you, O Lord, and worthy of all praise, because you have made us, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Give us that true rest that comes through your Son, so that we may praise you in eternity in everlasting joy and peace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.