

Homiletics Analysis: Revelation 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Revelation 9 unfolds the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, representing a dramatic escalation in the seal and trumpet sequence that began in chapter 6. The fifth trumpet (vv. 1–12) releases a swarm of locust-like demonic creatures from the Abyss, commanded by their king Abaddon/Apollyon, commissioned not to kill but to torment — for five months — those who do not have the seal of God. The torment is so severe that men will seek death and not find it. The sixth trumpet (vv. 13–21) releases four bound angels at the Euphrates, who command a vast cavalry force of two hundred million; this force kills a third of mankind through fire, smoke, and sulfur. The chapter closes on a devastating note: despite the catastrophic scale of these judgments, the survivors did not repent of their idolatry, sorcery, sexual immorality, or murder.

This Text — Intent

God is pressing two simultaneous claims through this chapter. First, He is demonstrating the horrifying, self-destructive nature of life under demonic dominion — showing what it actually means to be outside His protection and subject to the powers that govern the kingdom of darkness. Second, and most urgently, He is confronting the hardness of the unrepentant human heart: judgment on this scale does not, by itself, produce repentance. The text drives toward an urgent question for every reader — not “what is happening to the world?” but “what is happening in your heart?” The chapter is simultaneously a terrifying portrait of divine patience run to its limit and a sober warning that the human capacity for self-deception and stubborn idolatry is deeper than any external catastrophe can correct. Only grace, not judgment, breaks the idol-loving heart.

Subject Sentence: Escalating divine judgment exposes both demonic devastation and the heart’s terrifying capacity for unrepentance.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every reader with the bankruptcy of a life given to idols — showing that even the most severe judgments cannot compel a heart that has refused to turn, and that only His mercy, not His wrath, can produce the repentance that leads to life.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the locust army (vv. 1–12): A major interpretive fault line runs through this passage. Dispensational interpreters commonly read the locust army as a literal demonic force that will be physically unleashed during a future seven-year tribulation period, tormenting physically unsaved Gentiles while supernaturally protecting sealed Israelites. This reading imports a rigid Israel/Church distinction into the passage and presses symbolic imagery toward mechanical literalism in ways the genre does not support. The five months, the scorpion-like sting, the human faces and women's hair — these are clearly stylized, composite imagery drawn from Joel 1–2 and Old Testament theophanies, not a field guide to future demonic biology.

Idealist interpreters read the whole passage as a symbolic portrayal of ongoing spiritual warfare across all of church history, with no specific referent. This reading has the advantage of taking the symbolic genre seriously but tends to drain the passage of its forward-looking eschatological force. The text does seem to be moving somewhere — the seals give way to trumpets, the trumpets give way to bowls — and the escalation is purposeful.

The preferred Reformed (redemptive-historical, modified preterist/progressive) reading understands the trumpet judgments as covenant judgment language — drawn from Exodus, Joel, and Isaiah — signaling God's real judicial activity in history, culminating in and anticipating the final judgment. The locust army represents demonic powers already operative in the world (Luke 8:31; Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4) unleashed in increasing measure when God withdraws restraint. The "five months" (the lifespan of natural locusts) is a temporal boundary — judgment is real but bounded by divine sovereignty. The sealing of God's people (Rev. 7) is the controlling pastoral assurance: the demonic assault cannot reach those who belong to God.

The identity of Abaddon/Apollyon (v. 11): Some commentators suggest a specific historical referent — Nero, the Roman Emperor, whose name in Hebrew gematria yields 666 — but the text names the figure as an angelic king of the Abyss, not a human ruler. The double naming (Hebrew and Greek) suggests universal dominion over destruction — not a historical individual but the personal head of demonic power operative in both Jewish and Gentile spheres. The Reformed reading holds this as a genuine supernatural figure, the angelic prince of the Abyss, not a symbolic abstraction.

The non-repentance refrain (vv. 20–21): Arminian and Wesleyan interpreters sometimes read the non-repentance refrain as implying that repentance was available to these survivors if only they had chosen it — underscoring human freedom and responsibility. This is not entirely wrong as an application. The text does address human responsibility directly. However, the Reformed reading presses deeper: the text is not merely reporting a missed opportunity but diagnosing a condition. The idols, sorceries, immoralities, and murders are not isolated behaviors — they are expressions of a heart comprehensively organized around false saviors. The passage thus corroborates Romans 1:18–32, where idolatry is

the root and moral collapse is the fruit, and Romans 8:7, where the carnal mind is enmity against God and cannot be subject to His law. External judgment, however catastrophic, cannot penetrate this kind of heart. Repentance is not withheld by stubbornness alone — it requires a work of grace that judgment alone does not produce. The Wesleyan reading helpfully preserves human accountability; the Reformed reading adds the necessary diagnosis of radical depravity and the need for regenerating grace.

Key Canonical Support

- **Joel 1–2** — The original locust judgment text that John’s imagery draws upon directly; the swarm as covenant curse for unfaithfulness, with the trumpet alarm calling for repentance before the Day of the LORD arrives.
 - **Exodus 10:1–20 (The Plague of Locusts)** — The Exodus plague pattern underlies the entire trumpet sequence; Pharaoh’s repeated hardening after each plague prefigures the non-repentance refrain in Revelation 9:20–21, demonstrating that judgment hardens as well as warns.
 - **Romans 1:18–32** — The most direct canonical parallel to the non-repentance dynamic: idolatry is the root of all moral disintegration; God’s giving people over to their idols is itself a form of judgment; external consequence cannot reverse the inward condition of a suppressed knowledge of God.
 - **Luke 8:31 / 2 Peter 2:4 / Jude 6** — The Abyss as the place of demonic confinement, corroborating Revelation 9’s cosmology; the bound demonic forces await their appointed release under divine sovereign governance.
 - **Revelation 7:1–8** — The sealing of God’s servants, which functions as the direct counterpart to chapter 9’s torment: those sealed are explicitly protected from the locust assault (9:4), establishing that the judgments discriminate between those who belong to God and those who do not.
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Aim: To confront readers with the deadly self-deception of idol-worship and the grace of God that alone can produce the repentance that judgment cannot compel.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9:1	The fifth angel sounds; a star fallen from heaven receives the key to the Abyss	“Fallen” star likely refers to a previously cast-down angelic being (cf. Luke

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		10:18); not Satan per se but a commissioned agent; key = delegated authority
9:2	The Abyss is opened; smoke like a great furnace rises, darkening sun and air	Smoke imagery echoes Exodus plague and Sinai theophany; the darkness is both literal and symbolic of the chaos released
9:3–4	Locusts emerge; given power like scorpions; commanded not to harm vegetation but only those without God’s seal	Reversal of natural locust behavior underscores the supernatural character of this army; the seal of Rev. 7 is operative protection
9:5–6	Permission to torment but not kill for five months; men seek death and cannot find it	“Five months” = natural locust season (April–August); suffering so severe that death is preferred — a portrait of hell-on-earth; cf. Job 3
9:7–10	Detailed description of the locust army: like war horses, gold crowns, human faces, women’s hair, lion’s teeth, iron breastplates, wings, scorpion tails	Composite imagery drawn from Joel 2; not intended as literal description but as overwhelming, terrifying accumulation of power; the assembly of human, animal, and supernatural features signals a force beyond natural category
9:11	Their king is the angel of the Abyss — Abaddon (Hebrew) / Apollyon (Greek): “Destroyer”	The double naming is significant: demonic destruction operates in both Jewish and Gentile spheres; this is not chaos but organized evil under a personal king
9:12	First woe past; two more woes still to come	The narrative itself pauses to announce the eschatological structure; the reader is warned: it gets worse
9:13–14	Sixth angel sounds; a voice	The altar links judgment to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	from the golden altar commands release of the four bound angels at the Euphrates	the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8:3–5); the Euphrates is the eastern boundary of Israel and the traditional origin of invading armies (Assyria, Babylon)
9:15	The four angels were prepared for this hour, day, month, and year — to kill a third of mankind	The specificity of the timing is crucial: this is not accident or chaos; God has appointed this exact moment; sovereignty is total even in catastrophic judgment
9:16–17	Cavalry force of 200 million; horses with heads like lions, fire/smoke/sulfur from their mouths	The number is beyond any ancient or modern military force — hyperbolic to signal the inexorable, unstoppable nature of this judgment; the three plagues mirror the Egyptian plagues
9:18–19	A third of mankind killed by fire, smoke, and sulfur; the horses' tails like serpents with heads that wound	The “third” throughout the trumpet sequence signals partial judgment — not yet the full, final judgment; room remains for repentance, which makes the closing verses more devastating
9:20–21	The rest of mankind — those not killed — did not repent of demon-worship, idols, murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, or theft	The climax and crux of the chapter; the non-repentance refrain is not an afterthought but the theological destination; judgment has not produced its hoped-for fruit

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	9:1–2	The Abyss Opened: Darkness Unleashed

Division	Verses	Label
2	9:3–12	The Fifth Trumpet: The Locust Army and the First Woe
3	9:13–19	The Sixth Trumpet: The Cavalry of Destruction and the Second Woe
4	9:20–21	The Theological Verdict: Judgment Without Repentance

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Escalating divine judgment exposes both demonic devastation and the heart’s terrifying capacity for unrepentance.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every reader with the bankruptcy of a life given to idols — showing that even the most severe judgments cannot compel a heart that has refused to turn, and that only His mercy, not His wrath, can produce the repentance that leads to life.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that idolatry is not a minor religious error — it is an organizing allegiance that restructures the whole person. (*Mind/belief*)

The list in verses 20–21 — demon-worship, murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, theft — is not a random catalogue of sins. It is a portrait of a life comprehensively reorganized around false lords. The idol does not merely occupy one corner of the heart; it reorders priorities, relationships, and behaviors around itself. The reader who thinks idolatry is a problem for bronze-age pagans and not for sophisticated modern people has not yet understood what Paul means in Colossians 3:5 when he calls covetousness idolatry. Ask not “Do I bow to statues?” but “What does my life actually orbit around? What am I depending on to deliver what only God can give?”

2. Stop expecting the world’s pain to do the gospel’s work. (*Mind/belief*)

The survivors in verse 20 have just watched a third of the human population die. They have personally endured demonic torment so severe they wished for death. And they did not repent. This should permanently cure the preacher — and the believer — of the assumption that if people just suffer enough, they will eventually turn to God. Suffering clarifies; it does not convert. Catastrophe strips away comfort but cannot replace the idol with a Savior. Only the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God produces the new birth

that issues in genuine repentance. The church's calling in a suffering world is not to wait for people to hit bottom — it is to bring the gospel to people at every depth.

3. Let the bounded nature of these judgments move you to worship the God who restrains. *(Affections/worship)*

The five months of verse 5, the third of mankind in verse 18, the four angels prepared for a specific hour and day and month and year (v. 15) — none of this is chaos. The Destroyer himself has a leash. The cavalry of two hundred million operates within sovereign limits. The God who holds the key to the Abyss (v. 1) has not handed it to the Enemy — He has delegated it for specific, bounded, purposeful ends. If you have been living in fear of demonic power, political collapse, or civilizational disintegration, this chapter calls you to reframe: you are not watching chaos unfold. You are watching a Sovereign execute a plan, on a timetable, with precision. Worship the God who holds the key.

4. Examine whether your daily patterns are forming you toward repentance or toward the hardness described in verses 20–21. *(Will/behavior)*

The non-repentance of chapter 9 is not a sudden decision made in a crisis moment. It is the outcome of a life of accumulated formation — of habitual idol-worship that has made the heart progressively less responsive to the voice of God. The question is not only “Will you repent when disaster comes?” but “Are you being formed right now into the kind of person who repents — who is sensitive to sin, quick to return, practiced in confession?” Daily Scripture reading, regular corporate worship, consistent use of the means of grace, honest accountability in community — these are not additions to the Christian life; they are the formational practices that keep the heart soft. The person who neglects them is practicing, slowly, the hardness of Revelation 9:20.

5. Bring the gospel urgently to people you know who are outside the seal of God's protection. *(Will/behavior)*

The contrast between those with God's seal (v. 4) and those without it is not a theological abstraction — it is the most consequential distinction in the universe. The sealed are untouchable by the locust army. The unsealed are exposed to its full force. This contrast should create in the believer a holy urgency for the people in their lives who do not know Christ. Not a fearful, panicked urgency, but the urgency of someone who knows where the shelter is and wants to bring others inside. Name one person in your life who is currently unsealed. Pray for them this week. Look for one concrete opportunity to speak.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Revelation 9 teaches the total sovereignty of God over demonic powers, the graduated nature of covenant judgment, and the radical depravity of the unregenerate heart. God does not merely permit the disasters of this chapter — He commands, times, and limits them with precision. The four angels are prepared for a

specific hour (v. 15); the locust army operates within a five-month boundary (v. 5); the Destroyer himself is a subordinate, commissioned agent (v. 11). This is not a chapter about evil running wild — it is a chapter about God executing judgment through structured, purposeful means. Simultaneously, the non-repentance refrain (vv. 20–21) establishes that God’s judicial activity does not bypass human responsibility. People sin because they choose their idols. The text holds divine sovereignty and human accountability in full tension without resolving the tension artificially.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter powerfully corroborates the Reformed doctrine of radical depravity — the teaching that sin is not primarily a behavioral problem but a condition of the heart that external pressure cannot correct. The survivors of the most catastrophic judgment sequence in human history do not repent. This is not because repentance was impossible or unavailable — it is because a heart organized around idols is, in its natural state, impervious to the voice of God (Romans 8:7). The only thing that produces genuine repentance is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit applying the grace of the gospel — not the severity of divine judgment. This reading is deeply Calvinistic: grace is not merely helpful to repentance, it is necessary for it. Furthermore, the protection of the sealed (v. 4) is a direct expression of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: those who belong to God are sovereignly preserved through the very judgments that destroy those without His seal. Revelation 9 does not make Reformed theology more comfortable — it makes it more urgent.

Main Takeaway

The most terrifying thing in Revelation 9 is not the locusts or the cavalry or the death toll. It is the last two verses. After everything — after the Abyss, after the torment, after a third of humanity dead — they still did not repent. That is what an idol-shaped heart looks like from the inside: it cannot feel how lost it is. You need more than a wake-up call. You need a new heart. And God, in His mercy, is the one who gives it — which means the most important question this chapter presses on you is not “What is God doing to the world?” but “What is God doing in you?”

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning the chapter into a speculative eschatological map.** The most common failure in preaching Revelation 9 is spending the bulk of the time identifying the locust army, the 200 million cavalry, the four angels at the Euphrates, and Apollyon with contemporary geopolitical or military forces. This turns a prophetic-pastoral

text into a puzzle to be solved rather than a claim to be submitted to. The chapter's rhetorical destination is verses 20–21 — the non-repentance refrain — and every element in the chapter serves that destination. A sermon that spends forty minutes on the locusts and two minutes on idolatry has missed the chapter's entire intent.

- **Preaching the judgments without preaching the protection.** Verse 4 is not a footnote — it is the pastoral lifeline of the entire passage. Those who bear God's seal are explicitly exempt from the locust assault. A sermon on Revelation 9 that leaves the congregation only frightened and not assured has failed to preach the whole text. The terrors of the chapter are real; so is the shelter. Both must be preached, and the shelter must be preached as the ground for the warning.
- **Treating the non-repentance refrain as merely descriptive rather than diagnostic.** Verses 20–21 can be preached as though they are simply reporting what happens — bad people get worse under pressure. But the Reformed reading pushes harder: this is a diagnosis of the human condition without regenerating grace. The preacher who does not connect the non-repentance of the survivors to the idol-structures of his own congregation's lives has preached about ancient figures rather than present sinners.
- **Inferring from the survivors' non-repentance that repentance was available if only they had chosen it.** This is the Arminian over-read referenced in the Interpretive Evaluation. It is not wrong to press the responsibility dimension — the text does hold people accountable. But stopping there misses the deeper diagnosis: radical depravity means the heart in its natural state does not possess the capacity to simply choose repentance when prompted by external stimulus. The gospel application must include not just "repent" but "God must give you what He commands, and He gives it through His Word and Spirit — so come to Him now."
- **Conflating the Destroyer (Apollyon) with Satan.** The text does not identify Apollyon with Satan. The fallen star of verse 1 receives a key and opens the Abyss — it does not reside there. Apollyon is the king of the Abyss, a distinct demonic figure. Collapsing these figures flattens the passage's cosmology and misses the chilling implication that demonic evil is organized, hierarchical, and purposeful — not merely chaotic. The kingdom of darkness has a structure. The kingdom of God has authority over it.
- **Preaching the chapter without connecting it to the intercessory context of the altar (v. 13).** The voice that releases the sixth trumpet comes from the four horns of the golden altar — the altar from which the prayers of the saints ascended in Revelation 8:3–5. This is not incidental. The judgments of the trumpet sequence are, in part, God's answer to the prayers of His persecuted people for vindication and justice. A sermon that disconnects the trumpets from the prayers loses the profound pastoral logic of the book: God hears, God acts, and the suffering church's prayers are among the causes of the events that unfold in history.

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