From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
Meadowbrooke Church
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The Second Woe: The Road to Armageddon

Revelation 9:13-21

Introduction

Nearly six months ago, we began our journey through the first cycle of judgments looking at the seven seals. That was a long time ago! Before we consider the sixth trumpet, I want you to see a theme connected to the seals and trumpets—one that should leave us both encouraged and alarmed.

These are not disconnected visions; together, they reveal a fallen world under judgment, the stubbornness of the human heart, and the security of those who belong to the Lamb. As the judgments intensify, we see God handing rebellious humanity over to its wickedness, much like He hardened Pharaoh's heart while unleashing the plagues upon Egypt.

The Seals

In Revelation 6, the Lamb opens the first four seals, revealing a world marked by conquest, violence, famine, and death—the very birth pains Jesus warned about in Matthew 24. The white horse reveals humanity's lust for conquest, the red horse the bloodshed that follows, and the black horse the scarcity and exploitation that turn human need into an opportunity for human greed. Then comes the pale horse, ridden by Death, with Hades following behind. This is the world east of Eden—God's creation groaning under sin's curse as it awaits freedom from corruption (Rom. 8:21–22). But do not miss this: the horsemen ride only because the Lamb opens the seals. Their authority is limited, and they remain subject to Him!

But what happens to those who belong to Jesus? The fifth seal shows us Christians who were killed for their faith. They are now beneath the altar, clothed in white and told to rest as they await God's vindication. Evil men had taken their lives, but they could not separate them from God's love! This is the assurance of Romans 8: neither persecution, famine, sword, nor even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31–39).

The First Five Trumpets

Now consider the trumpets. The first four strike the land, the sea, fresh water, and the heavenly lights—the created order upon which human life depends. With the fifth trumpet, demonic locust-like powers are released from the bottomless pit. They are forbidden to harm the grass, plants, or trees. Instead, they torment those who do not have God's seal upon their foreheads. They are permitted to torment, but not to kill, and those who belong to the Lamb are protected from this particular judgment.

Throughout the seals and trumpets, we see the unraveling of the world God created. War, famine, death, and devastation portray a kind of "de-creation"—the undoing of creation's order under the consequences of mankind's sin and God's judgment. We, the redeemed, groan over that devastation too, but we groan with hope as we await the liberation of creation and the redemption of our bodies just as God has promised in His word.

Do you see the assurances God gives His people along the way? Before the seals, the rainbow surrounding His throne reminds us that He keeps His promises (Rev. 4:3; Gen. 9:12–17). Before the trumpets, the prayers offered before His throne assure us that He hears His people (Rev. 8:3–5). Then, with the fifth trumpet, He forbids the demonic horde from harming those who bear His seal (Rev. 9:4). The martyrs show us that belonging to Jesus does not mean escaping suffering or death (Rev. 6:9–11). But even as the world around us unravels, those who belong to the Lamb remain His (Rev. 7:1–4, 9–17; Rom. 8:35–39).

Now we come to the sixth trumpet—the second woe.

The Sixth Trumpet

As my sermon title suggests, the sixth trumpet gives us a picture of where all this is heading—the conquest of nations, the violence, the suffering, and the terrible loss of human life. I believe these verses point us toward the battle of Armageddon. We will see more of this judgment in Revelation 14:14–20, the gathering of the nations in Revelation 16:12–16, and their defeat by Jesus Himself in Revelation 19:11–21. Like the seals, trumpets, and bowls, these visions show us more clearly where a world in rebellion against God is heading.

We will explore these connections when we get to Revelation 14. For now, notice what the sixth trumpet reveals about God.

God Hears the Prayers of His People

After the sixth angel blows his trumpet, John hears a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God: "**Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates**" (v. 14). This is the golden altar of incense we saw in Revelation 8:3, and I understand it to be the altar beneath which the martyrs cried out in Revelation 6:9–11. Their prayers, together with those of all the saints, are answered through God's judgments as He brings history toward Christ's return.

Do not miss this! The incense is offered with the prayers of ALL the saints! The apostles, Polycarp and Augustine, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Missionaries such as William Carey and Hudson Taylor. Christians from every generation—and the prayers you have prayed!

Douglas Kelly writes: "The control chamber behind what happens in this case of terrible wars, insurrections, and other large or small breakdowns of society, must be traced to the unseen realm

of the heavenly altar of a sovereign God."[1] Do you see the connection? The command comes from the very altar associated with the prayers of God's people. Their cries have not been forgotten!

God's Timing is Always Perfect

The four horns of the altar are significant. Horns in Scripture often represent power (Ps. 75:10), and once a year, the high priest applied the blood of the sin offering to the horns of the altar of incense to make atonement for it (Exod. 30:10). Think about what this points us to! Jesus is our great High Priest, and because of His blood, we can approach God with our prayers. As Douglas Kelly explains, the blood on the horns pictures atonement protecting God's people as judgment proceeds from the altar.[2] Our prayers are not heard because we are perfect, but because we belong to the One whose sacrifice is perfect!

I believe the four horns also remind us that Christ's intercession reaches His people everywhere—east, west, north, and south. No Christian is beyond His reach or care. Now, from the altar associated with their prayers, a voice commands the release of the four angels. What this means, and what John is being reminded of, is that God has not forgotten His people! This does not mean we escape suffering—the martyrs beneath the altar have already shown us otherwise. It means that suffering and death cannot separate us from Christ, and we will not share the final condemnation of those who have not been redeemed by the Lamb.

The four angels bound at the Euphrates are released, but do not miss that they had been prepared for this very moment—not one moment sooner or later! Look at verse 15, "**the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released**...". Their release was appointed by God. They are released to kill a third of mankind, but they cannot act independently of God. The God who hears His people's prayers also determines when and how He will answer. His timing may not be when we want it to be, but His timing is always perfect.

God's Plans are Sound

Like the demonic forces of the fifth trumpet, I believe these are four unholy angels (demons) God uses to accomplish His purposes. We are told little about their identity, but we are told who controls their release!

The Euphrates brings to mind the direction from which enemies of God's people such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians came. God used Assyria to judge Israel, Babylon to judge Judah, and the Medes and Persians to judge Babylon. What is the point? God uses even the wicked to accomplish His purposes without excusing their wickedness. Those nations were not beyond His authority, and neither are these four angels!

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[1] Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, A Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2012), 180.
[2] *Ibid*., 182.

So, what are we to make of this army of 200 million mounted troops? I do not believe John is describing a literal number of ordinary horses and riders. I understand this as a picture of demonic power working through wicked nations. Like the locust horde, this army brings judgment—but where the locusts tormented without killing, these horses bring death.
The horses' appearance reveals the nature of their destruction. Their lion-like heads convey ferocity, and their serpent-like tails inflict harm. But do not miss what kills a third of mankind: fire, smoke, and sulfur coming from their mouths; these are the three plagues John identifies in verses 17–19. The fire and sulfur recall God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24). Yet even this destruction is limited to a third of mankind, not all of mankind. These forces are terrifying, but they are not in control. God is!

I believe Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 gives us a historical example of the kind of judgment pictured here. Douglas Kelly describes demonic forces working through the violence that tore the city apart before the Romans completed its destruction.[3] While I understand Revelation to have been written after those events, I believe Jerusalem's destruction illustrates where unchecked rebellion can lead. But this is not limited to Jerusalem! Revelation 16:13–16 describes demonic spirits gathering the kings of the world for battle on the great day of God Almighty. Just as God handed Jerusalem over to its rebellion, the nations are heading toward judgment as they gather to oppose Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11–21). Yet even in their rebellion, God will accomplish His purposes as they march toward Armageddon![4]

The clock is ticking! A time is coming when God will judge the nations for their wickedness, perversion, and rebellion. His patience must not be mistaken for indifference, and His people's prayers have not been forgotten! The release of these four angels reminds us that His judgment comes at His appointed time—not one moment sooner or later.[5] Yet the sixth trumpet is not the final judgment. A third of mankind is killed, and those who survive still have opportunity to repent. But like Pharaoh, they refuse! Do you see the problem? Neither witnessing God's judgment nor being spared from death guarantees a repentant heart. John leaves us with this sobering description: "**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, nor did they**

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[3] *Ibid*., 182.

[4] The cross provides the clearest example: Jesus was delivered up according to God's definite plan, yet those who crucified Him remained responsible for their wickedness (Acts 2:22–24; see also Luke 22:3–6).

[5] Even today, the nations are plotting and planning for some type of event. Although household emergency-preparedness advice is longstanding, its renewed emphasis across multiple governments is noteworthy. The European Commission's March 26, 2025, preparedness strategy encouraged at least 72 hours of essential supplies; the Netherlands announced a similar household campaign booklet on November 17, 2025. The Pentagon announced FORTRESS America on September 30, 2026, emphasizing military installations' independence from civilian infrastructure; subsequent reporting described a 90-day self-sufficiency goal for major continental U.S. installations. These initiatives illustrate concern about infrastructure vulnerability, not proof of an imminent catastrophe or a particular prophetic fulfillment. See European Commission, March 26, 2025; Government of the Netherlands, November 17, 2025; and The War Zone, October 26, 2026.

repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (vv. 20–21).

The Problem of the Heart

How can people witness the judgments revealed in the seals and trumpets and still worship what cannot save them? Is this not what we see throughout human history?

Cain lived with the consequences of his parents' rebellion and had likely heard from them of both God's judgment and His mercy. God Himself warned him about the sin threatening to master him: "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7; BSB). Yet he murdered his younger brother.

Pharaoh and his nation experienced not one, but ten plagues brought upon Egypt by Yahweh. Even after the death of his firstborn son compelled him to release the Israelites, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued them with his army (Exod. 12:29–32; 14:5–9). Ecclesiastes describes the problem: "The hearts of the children of man are full of evil" (Eccl. 9:3). Neither witnessing God's judgment nor receiving relief from it guarantees a repentant heart.

But do not think we are immune to the deceitfulness of sin! Jesus' calls to repentance in five of the seven churches should keep us from reading this passage as though the danger is for everyone else but ourselves. Today, the seven churches that Revelation was originally sent to encourage no longer exist, as their witness had come to an end long ago. If we are honest about the dangers that lurk within our own hearts, then we know something of what Robert Robinson expressed in his hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing":

> O to grace how great a debtor
> Daily I'm constrained to be!
> Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
> Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
> Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
> Prone to leave the God I love;
> Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
> Seal it for Thy courts above.

In closing, permit me to leave you with one final application. For those of us who bear God's seal because we have been redeemed by the Lamb: we do not need to fear that the judgments pictured in the trumpets and bowls will undo our salvation. This does not mean we will escape suffering or even death. It means that we will not share the final condemnation of those who refuse Jesus.

Before the first woe unfolds, God forbids the demonic locusts from harming those who bear His seal. That protection belongs to this particular judgment, but it reminds us of something we must not forget: God knows those who belong to Him! Throughout these judgment cycles, we see a

kind of "de-creation" as God judges a world under sin's curse. Yet His purpose culminates in making all things new. And those who have been redeemed by the Lamb already have this assurance: "**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come**" (2 Cor. 5:17).

What is the point? No hurt, sorrow, disease, tribulation, persecution, famine, or sword can undo what God has begun in you. These things can wound your body and even take your life, but they cannot separate you from Jesus. Your suffering is real, but it is not beyond His redeeming purposes. There are no wasted tears or hurts for the redeemed of the Lord!

This is why Paul's words to the Philippians give us such hope: "**And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ**" (Phil. 1:6).