

# **A Bittersweet Message**

**Scripture: Revelation 10:1-11:14**

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People of God: As I mentioned, our scripture reading for this evening is an interlude, a pause in the proceedings. Just as there an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal, in which we have a focus on the 144,000 and the multitudes before the throne—two different images of the church, so now between the sixth and seventh trumpet, we have another interlude. Another pause, in which we again have a focus on the church. Here we have a reminder of the church's task in the midst of the sounding of the trumpets.

After all, the trumpets focus on the unbelieving world. They describe God's judgment upon the rebellious forces against his rule. While believers are affected by these things, the goal of the trumpets is to produce repentance on the part of sinful humanity. So what is the church's role in all of this? Are we just to sit back and watch in joyful glee, as evildoers get their just desserts?

No. While believers can delight in the victory of God over the forces of darkness, we do not delight in the destruction this causes to the creation, nor do we take pleasure in the torment of unbelievers. Instead, our desire is for unbelievers to repent and be saved. The church is called to bear witness to the bittersweet message of the gospel.

That's the basic point of this interlude. It serves as a reminder for the church to carry out her task of proclaiming the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Of course, the Book of Revelation does not present this point as simply and straightforwardly as I just put it. In keeping with the nature of this book, John uses images of a little scroll, a measuring rod and two witnesses to get his point across.

Why? Perhaps we need to remind ourselves why John, as an instrument of the Lord, uses such strange and wild images. Because while

the reality of judgment and the need to proclaim the gospel can be stated quite straightforwardly, sometimes we need to examine something familiar from a different perspective in order to gain a deeper insight into the matter.

Surely, the bizarre descriptions of the trumpets ought to impress upon us how frightening and terrifying the judgment of God really is. In the same way, this interlude reminds the church that the proclamation of the gospel is not as simple or as easy as some “evangelistic methods” suggest, especially not in a hostile environment. But it does call us to be a faithful witness, even if we might not be too successful, even if the cost may be high.

John gets that point across by telling us about a little scroll, a measuring rod, and two witnesses.

This little scroll is in the hand of a mighty angel. The previous time we encountered a “mighty angel” was in 5:2, when we heard him ask: Who is worthy to open the scroll? Perhaps it is the same angel. But this time, the angel comes down from heaven to the earth. And not in the form of a man, but with this dominating presence: one foot planted on land, another on the sea. A giant.

When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke—an image that echoes Psalm 29, with its seven reference to the voice of the Lord, thundering over creation. But when John wanted to record those words, he was not allowed. They are never revealed to us in this book. So instead of having another potential series of seven words to consider, we are simply left with the fact the seven thunders spoke.

It is a reminder that there are some things about God’s plan of salvation that we do not know about. Even if the Book of Revelation was a blueprint for the future, which it isn’t, the content of the seven voices would leave a huge gap in our knowledge. As we interpret this Book, as we proclaim the ways of God, we need to stick to what we know. Some things about the ways of God, we simply do not know. We need to stick to what we do know.

And what we do know is sufficient for our salvation. What we do know has been given to us in the Bible. This is God’s revelation to us. This is an open book for us to read. This revelation of God is symbolized in the “little scroll.”

John is called upon to take this little scroll, and not merely to read it but eat it. What a strange command. But it’s not the first time a prophet was called upon to eat the Word of God. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah are given commands to eat parts of God’s Word. Why? This actual physical eating of a book symbolizes the need to internalize that word.

After all, don't we have the expression "to devour a book?" Don't you ever start reading a novel and get so caught up in it that you just lose all sense of time; you get so engrossed in it that you can't put it down. You devour it. Some books are merely meant to be read for information and instruction. Other books are savored and enjoyed, like a good meal. The Bible is like that.

If we are what we eat—and we are constantly told to eat good and healthy food—we are also what we read. What we read shapes and directs us. What we read can inspire and motivate us. That's why we must do more than simply read the words of the Bible, we need to internalize them. Let them shape and mold us. We need to eat this book.

And it will be as sweet as honey. Psalm 119:103 puts it this way: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" Is that not to be expected? After all, this is a word from God. A word of salvation. A word of grace and mercy. A word that centers upon Jesus Christ—our Savior and Lord. Surely, it will be as sweet as honey for those who read these words in faith.

But John is warned that as he eats the scroll, it will become sour in his stomach. And indeed, it does become bitter. Why this sour aftereffect? Because when John preaches the Word, it is not always received by others as something sweet. In fact, some reject the message of the Word. That's why John was in exile. What a bitter result.

The Book of Revelation never hides the painful reality of suffering for the Christian faith. While proclaiming the Bible has its sweet results, of people coming to faith, of people being transformed by the Spirit, it also has its bitter results. Some reject the message, becoming down right hostile to it. As a result, being a witness to the Word can result in a sour aftertaste. But that does not stop John from prophesizing.

Nor can it stop us. The church continues to be a witness to the Word. We eat it, as sweetness to our lips. But we are realistic enough to know that others will simply ignore and reject its message. A sour result. But one that should not stop us.

But if we are discouraged by this result, we should be encouraged by the next image John uses: the measuring rod. It's a short reference between the little scroll and the two witnesses, but it provides a word of encouragement. John writes:

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshippers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it was been given to the Gentiles.

This temple is not the temple we read about in the days of Jesus. That temple was already completely destroyed by the Romans before the Book of Revelation was written. Nor is it some future temple that might be built on the site of the old one. Instead, in the NT, the temple of God becomes another image for the church. As Paul writes, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple?” (I Cor. 3:16)

So what does it mean that the temple is measured and the worshippers counted, while the outer courts are trampled upon? Just as in the previous interlude, with the sealing of the 144,000—assuring God’s people that they are secure in the hands of God, so this image is intended to reassure us that believers are secure in God, despite facing opposition. The forces of evil may be trampling outside the door of the church, but the church itself is secure. We’ve all been counted. Not one will be lost.

And so, we have this word of assurance. Despite facing opposition, which can be severe at times, there is safety and security in being the temple of God. That doesn’t mean we won’t be spared suffering or tribulation for the sake of the gospel, but it does mean, no matter what happens to us on earth, we will sing our songs of victory in heaven and upon the new earth.

The two witnesses are a case in point. What do these witnesses represent? While some think this passage describes two actual people, who will witness to the gospel just before Christ returns, I take them to symbolize all those who witness to the faith, not just in the future, but throughout history.

In the way these two witnesses are described here, we have echoes of Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah are the two key figures of the OT, representing the law and the prophets. It is these two figures who appear on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, giving witness to Jesus as the Son of God. And now, the two witnesses, based on these figures, give witness to Jesus in the midst of a rebellious world.

There is power in their testimony. Like Elijah, who could stop the sky from sending rain. Like Moses, who could turn water into blood. So the testimony of the Word comes with power. But the two witnesses are also utterly humiliated. They are attacked and killed, with their bodies left unburied—a great insult in the ancient world. It looks as if the opposition wins, but in the end, their testimony is vindicated, as they are resurrected and taken to the Lord in glory, as Moses and Elijah did in their own lives, as on the Mount of Transfiguration.

The story of these two witnesses is reproduced, to some degree, in every act of witness. There is power in our witness to our world. It’s not the power of economic strength. It’s not the power of a full array of weapons.

Instead, it is the power of the cross. Because through the cross, sinners become saints. The weak become strong. Through the power of the cross, this broken, sin-stained world will be transformed and renewed into a place of wonder and beauty, never to be plagued by evil again.

Yes, there is opposition in our witness to our world. Perhaps most of that opposition will come in the form of simply being ignored. Many Canadians are simply indifferent to the Christian faith. They may have grown up in the church, or their parents did, and now it simply does not fit their lifestyle. They don't want the commitments of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Others are more hostile to the faith. Especially, when pressed with the claims of the gospel. Today, we face our toughest challenge with the rise of Islam—another religion that has universal claims, like Christianity, but one whose founder used the sword to push his point of view, unlike Jesus who renounced the use of the sword to advance the Kingdom of God. As a result, there are plenty of places in the world today, where believers face death like these two witnesses. (By the way, the Greek word for witness is where we get our martyr.)

But despite this opposition, our witness to the world will be vindicated. The seventh angel will blow the trumpet and the victory song will be sung in heaven: The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

What's is the church's task in the midst of the sounding of the trumpets? It's a call to be a witness. To bear testimony to the conquering Lamb. It's a message sweet to our ears, though it may at times be experienced as something bitter, because of the opposition. But in the end, the sweetness will over take the sour feeling. And we'll be left with songs of victory and thanksgiving. Amen.