

The book of Revelation is intended to help the church to endure in the face of persecution and other challenges that it must face in the period of history between the first and second comings of our Lord Jesus Christ. It makes it clear that God's plan for the defeat of sin and evil involves conflict between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness and that being followers of Jesus means being caught up in that conflict in various ways. There is the fight against sin that is part of every Christian life, but there is also enduring the hatred of the enemies of God and his people and there is also living in the midst of the judgments of God upon those who refuse to repent. In the last two chapters we have considered how natural disasters as well as the suffering that is the natural result of sinful lifestyles are God's judgment upon those who refuse to repent.

Christians suffer in natural disasters as well as the enemies of God and we also suffer because of the sin that remains in our lives, but the meaning of that suffering is different. The meaning of suffering in the Bible is multifaceted. There are many different insights that the Bible gives and even then there is still much mystery. Even for enemies of God, one of the purposes of suffering is to call people to repentance and salvation. But one of the reasons for suffering in the Bible is the just punishment of the wicked who refuse to repent. And there is quite a lot about that in the Bible. There is quite a bit about that in the book of Revelation.

But there are also passages in the book of Revelation which focus on the church. The book of Revelation has a lot to say about the church. We have seen how God seals his people to protect them in the God's judgments upon the wicked. We have considered descriptions of the saints who are now in heaven before the throne of God. Their suffering is over and God has wiped all the tears from their eyes. We have seen that there is a relationship between the prayers of the saints and the judgments of God upon the wicked.

One of the amazing truths about God and his way of pursuing the salvation of the world is that God's people are given a very significant role to play. Even though God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is the great saviour of the world and even though human beings have no strength or power on their own, yet there are many ways in which God works through his people to implement the victory that Jesus has won through his death and resurrection. And that contributes greatly to the significance of our lives and our service in church and kingdom.

Now our text today is one of the passages that speaks about the role of the church. This text is about the church's assignment to proclaim the word of God in the world. In the last verse of the chapter, John is told "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." John, of course, was to prophesy, but prophesying is part of the calling of the church as well. And so what we have in this chapter is some of the significance of the prophetic calling of the church in the plan of God for salvation and judgment.

So John sees "another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire." This angel has a "little scroll open in his hand." That scroll is very important in this chapter.

We are meant to understand this little scroll in the light of chapter 5 where we first read about a scroll in the book of Revelation. In chapter 5 we are introduced to a very important scroll. It is the scroll of the plan of God for the rest of history. It is in the right hand of God. And there we read of a mighty angel who is described in a way that is similar to the mighty angel of chapter 10. Revelation 5:2, “And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’” It turns out that the only person in heaven and earth who was able to open the scroll and break its seals was Jesus. Revelation 5:5 says, “Weep no more; behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” These are all OT ways of referring to Jesus. By his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has won the victory over sin and death and because of that he alone is worthy to take the scroll of the plan of God and open its seals. The rest of the book of Revelation describes what is written on that scroll and what happens when Jesus opens the seals. And the point of it all is to show the church how Jesus Christ is directing history towards the new heavens and the new earth. What we read in the book of Revelation helps us to understand how Jesus Christ is implementing the victory he has won and that clearly includes both the salvation of his people and his judgment upon the wicked.

Now in chapter 10 we see another mighty angel and this one has a little scroll open in his hand. The fact that it is described as a little scroll indicates that it does not contain everything that is in the scroll of chapter 5. This little scroll contains some of what is in the big scroll indicating that it reveals some but not all of God’s plan. Some things are on that scroll, but some things are not. We are not given to know everything about the plan of God. And this scroll is open. The seals have been unsealed. The Lamb has opened them and their contents have been revealed in chapters 6-9.

Now this little open scroll is going to be taken from the hand of the angel by John. And John will be told to eat it and then prophesy. We will get to that in a moment.

But first we need to consider some more of what we read in verses 1-7. The mighty angel is closely associated with the reigning Lord Jesus Christ. Some commentators think it is Christ, but most think it is an angel who represents Christ and so reflects something of his awe-inspiring majesty, power, and glory. All of the various descriptors are found in the OT or earlier in Revelation referring to some aspect God’s or Jesus’ glory or his plan of salvation. “Coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud....” Earlier in Revelation Jesus is described as one who “is coming with the clouds” In Daniel 7:13 the son of man, who ends up being Jesus, is described by saying, “[B]ehold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man.”

In Ezekiel 1:28 a rainbow describes something of the glory of God. “His face like the sun” reminds us of the glory of Jesus at the transfiguration. “His legs like pillars of fire” are similar to the description of the glorified Christ’s feet in Revelation 1:15, “[h]is feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace.” So whether this is Christ himself or an angel that reflects the glory of Christ, the impression here of power and glory is the power and glory of Christ.

But there are also important reminders of two OT instances of salvation that are closely related to acts of judgment. The rainbow is a reminder of the flood where God saves his people and judges the wicked. The reference to pillars of fire remind of the story of the wilderness journey where God leads his people in the wilderness with a pillar of fire by night. God's salvation of his people in the exodus story also involves salvation through God's judgment upon Israel's enemies. And that is a huge part of the message of Revelation.

As we have seen before there are many links in the book of Revelation with the story of the exodus where God delivered his people from the slavery in Egypt and led them to the promised land. The exodus story is a foreshadowing of salvation in Jesus Christ and the NT, and in particular the book of Revelation, often uses the exodus story to help us to understand the salvation that Jesus has accomplished and is pursuing as he directs all things to the goal of the ultimate promised land.

This description of the mighty angel with the little scroll in his hand is making the point that Jesus is with his people just as God was with his people in the pillar of fire in the exodus story. One of the key truths of the exodus story is that God saved his people through judging their enemies. That is one of the key truths of the book of Revelation as well. We have just come through two chapters that taught us about God's judgment upon people who refuse to submit to him. Here we encounter a description of this mighty angel who reflects the glory of God and of Christ who has legs like pillars of fire. We are meant to think of ourselves as people whom Jesus has delivered and is delivering from our enemies and as people who are being led by Jesus through the wilderness to the promised land.

The greatness of the angel is meant to comfort us in the difficulties of the journey. "And he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring." Ephesians 1:22 says of the exalted Jesus Christ, "And he put all things under his feet." The idea of having the sea and the land under his feet is that Jesus is the Lord of all – the whole world, symbolized by the sea and the land, is under his feet. The symbol of a lion roaring has to do with God's judgments upon the wicked. Amos 3:8 says, "The lion has roared, who will not fear?" This imagery of a lion roaring in Amos is closely connected with prophecy. God through his prophets roared words of warning and judgment. There is a lot of that going on in the book of Revelation.

This whole description of the mighty angel is intended to comfort God's people in the light of the judgments of God that are described in many places in Revelation. We can think of natural disasters. We can think of the power of evil at work in our world. And we can think of this mighty angel who represents Jesus and reflects his power and glory who is leading his people through the wilderness to the promised land.

Next we have 4 verses about 7 thunders. In the book of Revelation we have the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls all of which are largely about God's judgment upon the wicked. Here John hears seven thunders, but he is told "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." This seems to indicate that there are parts of God's plan that are not revealed to us.

And then the angel “raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea that what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.” These verses emphasize the greatness of God as the creator of all things. The angel swears that there will be no more delay when the seventh trumpet sounds and that at that time the mystery of God would be fulfilled. The mystery of God is God’s plan for the defeat of sin and evil and the salvation of sinners in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 3:9 Paul writes that the purpose of his preaching “the unsearchable riches of Christ, was “to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things.” So what the angel in our text is saying is that when the seventh angel blows his trumpet the delay will be over and God’s plan in Christ for the salvation of the world and the defeat of evil will be fulfilled.

The key here is that this mystery has been revealed in the gospel. It had been announced in the OT through the prophets and revealed through Jesus and the apostles. This is related to the little scroll which was open in the hand of the angel. The little scroll is what God has revealed about his plan for salvation and judgment in the book of Revelation and the book of Revelation brings together the message of the whole Bible. That is why almost every phrase in the book of Revelation is rooted in the OT or other parts of the NT. The little scroll is God’s revelation of his plan of salvation and judgment to his people in the Bible. And in the Bible God has revealed that at some point the delay will be over and Jesus will return to wrap up history and fulfill all the promises and warnings of the Bible. The seventh trumpet is about the end. Revelation 11:15 says, “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’”

So the focus in this chapter is on the little scroll open in the hand of the angel. It symbolizes God’s revelation of his plan of salvation and judgement to his people which is caught up and summarized in the book of Revelation. The Bible throughout speaks of the future in its promises and in its warnings. The Bible throughout is looking forward to the unfolding of the plan of God both in salvation and in judgment. And the book of Revelation sums that all up in a powerful way. The fact that the scroll is open indicates that it contains the part of the plan of God that has been revealed to his people.

So this chapter is about the fact that God has revealed parts of his plan of salvation and judgment to his people in the Bible. And in the rest of this chapter we see that acted out in symbolic form. John is told to take the scroll from the hand of the angel. John tells the angel to give him the scroll and the angel tells him, “Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.”

This language of eating the scroll comes from Ezekiel in the OT. Similar language is found in the book of Jeremiah. The imagery of eating has to do with internalizing the message. The fact that it was tasted sweet but made John’s stomach bitter refers to the fact that the message of the plan of God for the world has both

delightful and difficult parts to it. It is a message of salvation for those who turn to the Lord, but also judgment for those who refuse to turn to the Lord.

And then John is told to “prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” That is what John does in the book of Revelation. And that prophetic ministry is given to the church in that the church has been called to bring the message of the plan of God to many peoples and nations and language and kings.

Now the fact that the scroll was sweet in John’s mouth but bitter in his stomach is very significant. We experience this all the time. There are parts of the message of God’s plan that are sweet. It is wonderful to hear and to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. There is incredible sweetness in being reconciled to God through faith in Jesus. There is great sweetness in the Christian life. Psalm 19 says that the law and the precepts of the Lord, are “sweeter ... than honey and the drippings of the honey comb.” In the context of the book of Revelation, there is much sweetness in God’s care for his people and in the worship of God and in the hope of the new heavens and the new earth. There is sweetness in the victory that Jesus has won over sin and evil and in contemplating his power and glory.

But there are also parts of the message that are more difficult to deal with. The wrath of God against sin and the punishment of unrepentant sinners is an important and necessary part of the message, but it is not sweet in the sense that the good news of reconciliation with God is sweet. The Bible itself is making the distinction between different aspects of the message. God’s judgment upon the wicked is part of his glory, but it is not sweet in the same way that his salvation of sinners is sweet. This is the Bible’s own teaching.

Ezekiel 33:11 makes it clear that this distinction is found in God himself. There we read, “As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” God himself tells us that he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. We see the heart of God reflected in Jesus when he wept over Jerusalem. Matthew 23:37. Jesus cries, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” 2 Peter 3:9 has this sweet word about the Lord, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

The judgment of God upon the wicked is an integral part of God revelation. It is part of the message that the church is to proclaim to the world. It belongs to the victory that Jesus has won over sin and evil. It is necessary for the glory of God. But it is not sweet in the way that salvation is sweet. God tells us that he does not delight in the death of the wicked. But he does delight in saving sinners. And indeed the lengths that he went to secure our salvation is a testimony to the greatness of his love for sinners. That is the message of the cross. Romans 5:8 says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

This love is shown in the enthusiastic and passionate invitation of the gospel message. The church is sent into all the world with the message that there is salvation in Christ. The invitation is made all. Among the last words of the Bible is the invitation, "And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." That is the sweet part of the message.

This contrast between sweetness and bitterness in our text shows us that we reflect God's own character when we find some parts of the message sweet and some parts of the message bitter. But the bitter parts are there and they are part of the message that the church is to proclaim. They may not be sweet, but they are part of the good news because the defeat of evil is part of the good news. We do not relish God's judgment upon the wicked, but we do proclaim it and warn people to flee the wrath to come.

So in this passage, we have an interlude between the first 6 trumpet blasts and the seventh trumpet blast. When the first four angels blew their trumpets, judgments of natural disasters fell upon the earth. When angels five and six blew their trumpets, the hordes of hell were unleashed to cause untold suffering upon the earth. God's people live in the midst of all that even though they are protected by God so that they cannot be harmed in any ultimate way. Then we have this chapter with the mighty angel and the scroll. The mighty angel represents Jesus who leads his people through the wilderness to the promised land. This is going on as the judgments are raining down upon the wicked. And in this context the little scroll is given to John who represents the church. It is the message of salvation and judgment. It is to be digested by the church and proclaimed to the world.

The sweetness of the message sustains and encourages in the struggles, but the bitter parts of the message are also sustaining and encouraging even though they are not sweet. We do not delight in God's judgments upon the unrepentant world, but it is part of our hope because it is part of the way that God is dealing with evil in the world.

And we are called to proclaim that message. All of it. The sweet parts and the bitter parts. God includes us in the fulfillment of his plans for the world. The proclamation of the message by the church is an important part of the way that God is fulfilling his plan for the world. Sometimes that proclamation bears fruit in the salvation of sinners. Sometimes it stirs up hatred and resentment and persecution as the claims of Christ and the call to repentance are rejected. There is sweetness and bitterness here as well. The book of Revelation, including this passage, is about enduring in the spiritual warfare that is leading to the renewal of all things. It helps us to deal with the suffering that is part of the Christian life. It is the sweetness of salvation that helps us to endure the bitterness of suffering. May God use our study of this book to help us to endure in the spiritual warfare that belongs to God's plan for our salvation.

Table Meditation

The Lord's Supper fits into this perspective in a number of ways. One of the great themes of the Bible which is prominent in the book of Revelation is the close relationship between the salvation of God's people and God's judgment of the unrepentant. God's judgments are falling on the unrepentant, and that belongs to the way that God delivers his people. This theme is part of the celebration of the Lord's Supper because the Lord's Supper is a memorial of the death of Christ on the cross. Here too there is an intimate relationship between judgment and salvation because on the cross Jesus experienced the judgment of God for our sins so that we might be saved. Over and over again in the Bible we see this close relationship between salvation and judgment and that includes the cross. At the Lord's Supper we remember that Jesus took upon himself the judgment of God for our sins so that we might experience salvation in him.

The sweetness and bitterness of the message is also involved in the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper those who are trusting in Jesus and living the life of repentance are warmly invited to take part. But faithfully administering the Lord's Supper also involves warning against eating in an unworthy manner. 1 Corinthians 11:27, "Whoever, therefore, eats and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord." Verse 29 "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself."

To eat and drink in an unworthy manner is to take part in the Lord's Supper without faith in Jesus and without living the life of repentance. To discern the body of the Lord is to either be trusting in Jesus' sacrifice or seeing fellow believers as members of the body of Christ. Whatever it means exactly, it is clear that it means participating while looking to Jesus for forgiveness and seeking to live the life of loving obedience that we are called to live.

Part of that life of loving obedience is membership in the church which is why we require that those who take part are members of a faithful evangelical church. There is both invitation and warning in connection with the Lord's Supper. But the invitation is not for perfect people – it is for sinners who are looking to Jesus alone for their acceptance with God and who are seeking to live lives that are pleasing to God even though there are many failings. All such are warmly invited to come to the table to receive by faith the tokens of bread and wine which point to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that Jesus obtained for us by his death and in that way to be nourished in faith and obedience.