

“As Sweet as Honey”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 16

Texts: Revelation 10:1-11; Ezekiel 2:1-3:11

Even as God’s wrath is poured out upon the earth during the last days through the seven trumpet judgments, and as non-Christians must now face the wrath of the demonic hordes released from the abyss, what is it that we as Christians are to be doing during this time of great tribulation, known as the last days? John will speak to this subject in Revelation 10 and 11.

In several of the previous sermons, we discussed the seven trumpet judgments found in Revelation chapters 8-11. We have already covered at Revelation chapter 8 and the first four of the seven trumpets in which God’s judgment comes upon one third of the earth. We have also covered Revelation chapter 9 and the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments. We now come to Revelation 10, where we will turn our attention to the interlude which follows the sixth trumpet and in which John details the mission of the church upon the earth during the last days. Lord willing, we will continue this theme next time as well as we look at the two witnesses and the seventh and final trumpet judgment in Revelation 11.

A brief bit of review is in order to bring everyone up to speed before we tackle our text in Revelation 10. Recall that the seven trumpet judgments in Revelation echo the seven trumpet blasts of the priests of Israel which brought down the city of Jericho as recorded in Joshua chapter 6. As the fortified city of Jericho blocked the way so that Joshua and the people of God could not enter the promised land, so too, in the Book of Revelation, the city of man (Babylon the Great) which is depicted in Revelation 18, stands in the way of the New Jerusalem, which even now is coming down from heaven. Once the seventh and final trumpet sounds, says John, the city of man will be destroyed and the kingdoms of this world will finally become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

But there are other allusions in the trumpet judgments to the Old Testament as well. One allusion, which we have not yet mentioned, may be to the destruction of the infamous city of Sodom. When the angel sounds the first trumpet, hail and fire rained down upon the earth. When the sixth trumpet sounds, a demonic horde looking like horses appears, breathing smoke and fire and sulphur.¹ All of these elements were present in the fire and brimstone which rained down from heaven, destroying the wicked city of Sodom and all of its inhabitants.

Then, we have also seen how six of the seven trumpets clearly echo the plagues which God sent upon Egypt. The point is that through these seven trumpet judgments, God will display his glory and power upon the earth, even as he humbled the arrogant Pharaoh and exposed the fact that his court magicians were worshipping nothing but their own vain imaginations.

But not only must we look to the Old Testament to find the meaning of the dramatic symbols John uses throughout the trumpet judgments, we must also look to the historical background of them so as to understand what John’s original audience would have understood John to be saying. We have spent a fair amount of time doing just this so I won’t belabor the point, except to remind us that this is apocalyptic literature and we must not attempt to understand John’s highly symbolic language literally.

¹ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 156, n. 2.

The key to understanding the Book of Revelation is not the ability of the interpreter to correlate current events to John's symbolic language, but to see how the symbols are used throughout the Old Testament and now reinterpreted by John in the light of the coming of Christ.

It might also help to be reminded of the fact that in many ways the seven trumpet judgments reiterate the seven seal judgments of Revelation 6-8:1 since they cover the same period of time, this present age which lies between the first advent of Jesus Christ and his second coming. Not only do the first four trumpet judgments describe judgments very much like those ascribed to the four horsemen of Revelation 6—although the ferocity of the trumpet judgments is greater, extending to one third of the earth—but the fifth seal describes peace and safety of the martyred souls in heaven, while the fifth trumpet describes the fate of unbelievers upon the earth. While God's people cry out, "How long, O Lord" in anticipation of the resurrection at the end of the age, the tormented people upon the earth who reject Christ, are now subject to the wrath of demonic forces. They cry out to be spared from such torment, longing to die, but such relief is not given to them. The irony in this should not be overlooked. Non-Christians long to die so as to end their torment, while the Saints in heaven long for the resurrection and their inheritance.

Then, in the sixth trumpet judgment, John sees army of 200 million soldiers—a reference to the demonic horde which brings havoc upon the earth through a series of seemingly endless wars and conflicts in which death and destruction come upon one third of the earth. At the end of these six judgments, you would think that the world's inhabitants would have had enough, that they would be ready to repent. But no, says John, the people of the world still would prefer to worship demons, create idols and they trust in the works of their own hands. Seeing no need for the blood and righteousness of Christ, one more woe is coming upon the earth, a woe which takes the form of the seventh trumpet judgment, which is the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. This is the day all non-Christians fear, but is that glorious day when God's salvation comes to the earth in its consummate glory.

Recall that after the sixth seal judgment, there was an interlude in Revelation 7, in which John describes the church upon the earth during the great tribulation—the 144,000 who are sealed with the name of Christ and thereby protected from God's wrath—and the church in heaven, that great multitude before the throne, a multitude so vast that no one could number them. The point of this particular scene is to remind the suffering church that even though we must face the wrath of the beast, we will never face the wrath of God. And now here in Revelation 10 and 11 after the sixth trumpet, we find another such interlude, only this time the vantage point (or "camera angle") is that of the church on earth, whose mission is to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth during the last days.

The great irony is that while unbelievers upon the earth face the wrath of God, they also face the wrath of Satan. Those who worshiped the beast and his image are not sealed by God with the name of Christ, so they are left unprotected. Now they encounter the demonic legions pictured in the fifth and sixth trumpet judgment who come to torment them. Satan who is a thief and a liar, who comes to destroy, mercilessly turns upon and betrays those very same people who serve him and who worship the beast and his image.

Although I didn't have time to say much about this previously, the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments give us much information about how we as Reformed Christians should understand the demonic. To begin with, John has made it clear that Christ's people are protected from his wrath, as well as from all demonic assaults. Therefore, Christians cannot be demon possessed or in any way tormented by demons like unbelievers, as we saw in our text last week. Furthermore, John describes Satan being cast down to the abyss during this present age, unable to release his demonic legions unless given permission to do so by God. Luther had it absolutely right when he said, "the Devil is God's Devil." Despite his great power

and his rage, Satan is a creature (a fallen angel), already defeated by Christ, but filled with anger and wrath because he knows his final doom is sure. This means he is a vicious, deceitful and fierce foe, but his fate is certain. His head has already been crushed by Jesus Christ. Jesus has already turned him into a public spectacle, triumphing over him while dying for our sins upon the cross (cf. Colossians 2:15).

Since neither Satan nor his demonic horde can attack Christians directly, he will do so indirectly. One way mentioned by John is when Satan empowers the beast to wage war upon the saints. As we have seen in the letters to the seven churches, this occurs when Satan empowers the state to persecute the church. In many of the cities mentioned in Revelation 2-3, Christians were prevented from buying or selling, and some were even put to death because they honored Jesus Christ as Lord, and refused to do of the state or its leaders. Another way Satan attacks the church is through seduction, like that depicted in the seven letters and through the efforts of the harlot as described in Revelation 18.

Therefore in our present age, Satan works through the point of the sword of an anti-Christian government, or through the introduction of false doctrine into the church, through false religions like Islam or non-Christian cults and paganism, or when he entices Christians to compromise with any of the above so as to escape persecution. Satan does not make people's heads spin around, nor does he make them blaspheme at the sight of a crucifix. He is a robber and a liar, who brings destruction upon the earth. We oppose him with the truth of the gospel and with our prayers, which, as John tells us in Revelation 8, ascend before God's throne where God answers them with the trumpet judgments we have just seen. While Christians are to flee from temptation, we are commanded to resist the Devil. Our best weapon against him is the truth of the gospel, bathed in prayer, which ascends before the throne of God.

In the interlude which follows the sixth trumpet judgment, there are two scenes describing the church on earth during the great tribulation. The same struggles we have seen in the letters to the seven churches are also described in Revelation 10 and 11, this time in terms of the church's witness to the world during the present age. This morning we will focus upon the scene in Revelation 10, and John's vision of an angel with a little scroll.

To make sense of the change of subjects beginning in Revelation 10:1, we need to go back to the opening verse of this book, Revelation 1:1: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John."* Through the actions of the angel who now appears to John, John's commission as the prophet to whom this full revelation from Jesus Christ now comes, is complete.² Everything has been revealed to him. In light of the fact that this entire section of Revelation has allusions to Daniel 10:5-6 and Ezekiel chapters 2-3, John is hereby commissioned to bring the bitter and sweet words of the Lord to God's people, only this time in light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the dawn of the Messianic age. It is John who will reveal that which lay hidden from the Old Testament prophets, Daniel and Ezekiel. John can do so because Jesus Christ has come and redeemed his people with his precious blood, conquered death and the grave, earning the keys to death and Hades, and because Jesus Christ has ascended on high, taking his place as Lord of his church. He is the Lamb who was slain, and alone worthy to open the scroll.

In verse one of Revelation 10, John describes what he sees. *"Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars."* The identity of this mighty angel is the subject of much debate.

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 157.

Some hold that it is Christ,³ while others, including most Reformed commentators, believe that the angel is a messenger of Christ, who reflects his master's glory.⁴ In Revelation 5:2, John has already spoken of a "mighty angel," who asked the question which caused John so much anguish, "who is worthy to open the scroll?" In Daniel 10:5-6, the prophet describes how "*I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.*" This sounds very much like the being who appears here. When we consider the fact that this same angelic being later tells Daniel that the prince of Persia prevented him from successfully completing his mission until he was assisted by Michael the Archangel (cf. Daniel 10:12-14), it becomes clear that this not Christ, but an angelic messenger sent to John, from Christ.⁵

According to John's testimony, [the angel] "*was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand.*" This little scroll, or a more literally, a book, is the same one previously opened by the Lamb in Revelation 5, who then proceeded to open its seven seals. The angel "*planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion,*" the reference to the sea and the land, most likely refer to the two areas of the earth directly impacted by the first two seal judgments. The voice like that of a lion echoes the earlier testimony of the prophet Amos, who once declared, "*Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?*" Indeed, by giving John the scroll which had been unsealed, God reveals to John his sovereign purposes for the present age. And so having revealed these purposes to John, how can John not prophesy? That is, how can John *not* proclaim these things to God's people which the angel is now revealing to him.

But while John must proclaim certain things to God's people, other things are to remain sealed. "*When [the angel] shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.'*" Though at first glance it is somewhat perplexing that God would reveal this vision and the scroll to his prophet John, and then forbid him from proclaiming everything in it, there is a larger principle here. As a general rule, the secret things do indeed belong to the Lord, and his prophets must reveal only what God commands them to reveal.

But there is probably something else going on here as well. The sealing of the seven thunders, which are not be written down, most likely means that there will **not be** yet another cycle of judgments occurring after the seven trumpets, but that the seventh trumpet will bring all things—including the horrors depicted in the fifth and six trumpet judgments brought about by human rebellion, the worshiping of demons, the refusal of men and women to reject the works of their hands so that they might seek the righteousness of Christ—to an end when Jesus Christ returns to earth in judgment on the last day.⁶ We see this elsewhere in the New Testament, such as in 1 Corinthians 15:52, where Paul speaks of the last trumpet as the herald

³ Most notably Beale, Revelation, 522-526.

⁴ See Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 157-159; cf. the discussion in Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy, 253-254.

⁵ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 158-159

⁶ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 161.

of the second coming of Jesus Christ and the resurrection.

But it is the solemn oath uttered by the angel which now captures John's attention. According to verse 5, *"Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, 'There will be no more delay!' But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."* The seven thunders will be sealed and not written down, and there will be no delay before judgment comes. When the seventh trumpet sounds, that is it! There will be no more time to repent, no more chances for unbelievers to renounce their own righteousness. Judgment day will come. The angel has sworn to it, and all of the mysteries of God's eternal decree will have finally unfolded in human history. Everything revealed in type and shadow to the prophets of old will be accomplished. God will punish all evil-doers, destroy the Devil and all of his minions, vindicate and reward his people, and usher in the glories of the age to come. This, of course, would have been of great encouragement to suffering Christians in the first century. It is equally comforting to us. Everything will turn out in the end just as God has promised. There will be no cosmic surprises.

But this scene in Revelation 10 ends with a dramatic turn of events, which harkens us back to the prophets of old.

In verse 8, John informs us, that *"then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.'" Doing as he is instructed, John says "I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.'"*

This scene is similar to Ezekiel's commissioning the opening chapters of his prophecy, as we read in our Old Testament lesson (Ezekiel 2:1-3:11). Ezekiel had been commanded to prophesy against the people of Israel after they had rebelled against God. He was to take the scroll and eat it—symbolic of internalizing God's word to his people—so that he might proclaim the word of blessing and curse in his office as God's prophet. The eating of the scroll, which the prophet says was as sweet as honey, also involved the proclamation of bitter words of lament, warning and woe. The symbolism seen in the sweetness of the scroll and the words of blessing and curse it contained, is that Ezekiel is commanded to preach the blessings and the curses of the covenant to God's covenant people, Israel. He is to preach that which is sweet—the promise of blessing and the gospel—as well as that word of woe, lament and warning, which is the Law and the threatened covenant curses for continued disobedience on the part of the nation and its people.

Much the same thing holds in John's case here in Revelation 10, only John is to preach from the vantage point of fulfillment, since Christ has now come and revealed himself to be worthy to open the scroll, since he has, in fact, died for our sins and fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of the Law. But the bittersweet message found in the scroll that John is to eat is to be proclaimed to all of the nations. This means that John's mission is extended from that mission given earlier to Ezekiel. Ezekiel was to preach to God's disobedient covenant people, Israel. John, on the other hand, is to preach to the nations and to their kings, who are in the Book of Revelation almost always depicted as allied with the beast or at least,

doing his bidding.⁷ Furthermore, John is to preach his bittersweet message to all kinds of people, in many different languages, which, of course, is a picture of the missionary endeavor of the church.

As in the case of Ezekiel, the scroll is to be eaten by John and tastes sweet at first, but soon turns sour in his stomach. Why is this? There are two lines of explanation we need to flesh out. The first, which we have already discussed, is that the message John is to internalize and to preach is bittersweet in nature. That is, the message given John and which he is to pass on to the churches contains both the word of blessing (the sweetness of the gospel), and a word which turns bitter (the demands of the Law and the sanctions which result when God's law is broken). And since the message is given by the angel to John specifically so that it might be revealed to God's people, the application for us becomes very clear. While the seal and trumpet judgments roll across the earth during the last days, intensifying in ferocity as we get closer to the return of Jesus Christ, the church is to be about the business of proclaiming the Law and the gospel. Therefore, our divinely-appointed mission is to take the gospel to the nations. We are to proclaim this bittersweet word of law and gospel to everyone within our sphere of influence. It is one of our primary weapons against Satan, the beast, the harlot and all those who serve them. For the best way to expose the works of the Devil and frustrate his purposes is with the light of the truth.

But John's message is bittersweet in a second way. John must reveal God's word to the churches that the wrath of God is indeed coming upon the whole world through a cyclical series of judgments which culminate with the return of Jesus Christ. Although God's people are sealed with the name of Christ and protected from his wrath as well as from those demonic forces unleashed from the abyss by the fallen angel, at times Christians will indeed face the Satanically empowered beast who wages war upon the Saints. Christians must also be on guard for the seductive ways of the harlot, who seeks to entice Christians away from their Lord. As we have seen, in addition to proclaiming the bittersweet word of law and gospel, God has reminded us that his judgments come forth against the earth, because he hears the prayers of his suffering Saints upon the earth. And when these prayers ascend before his throne, God acts to vindicate his people. Indeed, when the beast takes their lives from them, John says, the martyred saints come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. Therefore, we cannot be defeated, even if God calls us to suffer for Christ's sake.

There are a number of texts elsewhere in the New Testament which speak of these same matters in ways we are more used to considering. The apostle Peter speaks to this matter in his second epistle when he writes, "*For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment*" (2 Peter 2:4-9).

Paul also speaks of this same struggle in Ephesians 6:10-18, when he describes the Christian life in terms of proclaiming the gospel and the power of prayer. "*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For*

⁷ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 164.

our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

As the seal and trumpet judgments are brought against the earth during the days of tribulation, God's people are to be about the business of preaching the Law and the gospel and praying that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. God not only knows how to protect those who are his, he has given us the weapons we need to face the Devil and all those allied with him—namely the Law and the gospel, along with prayer. In Revelation 10, John gives us a message of hope, all the while the nations rage and Satan seeks to do us ill. For the mighty angel with the scroll reminds us that not only does God protect us during the time of tribulation, he equips us to do battle. For he has given us his gospel, which John says, tastes as sweet as honey. For in Jesus Christ, God will never count our sins against us. And in Jesus Christ, God has sealed us as his own, ensuring that we need never fear his wrath. Amen!