

The Sovereign and the Scroll

Revelation 10:1-11

Dennis Johnson begins his discussion of this chapter by quoting a poem by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats entitled *The Second Coming*, written in 1920. Europe was reeling from the devastation of WWI, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was claiming millions of lives, and Yeats expressed his sense that civilization was unraveling with these words:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”¹

One hundred years later, those words seem freshly relevant. Anarchy seems to be the driving passion of social progressives. Created norms are scorned and cast down. The ceremony of innocence is drowned in a flood of sexual perversion and confusion.

I read an article this week written by a mother who found that her 5th grade daughter had been assigned a book she described as a “primer on how to hook up,” which included graphic depictions of sexual encounters by a young teenage boy. She asked the teacher if she could possibly have her daughter read some alternative resources. She was denied by the teacher, and scorned by the school board. She did a little research and found that turnout for school board elections are extremely low. She gathered a few Christian friends together and three believers ran for election on the school board. They knew that if they could motivate local Christians to vote, they could easily win. What they found was very discouraging. Their local Christians were afraid of being ostracized and weren’t willing to vote. And so they lost. And the school board continues to require 5th grade girls to be indoctrinated in hook-up culture – no exceptions allowed. The center isn’t holding. “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

However, while Yeats wrote truth – it isn’t the whole truth. That’s how things appear to us, from our earth-bound perspective. The great blessing of the book of Revelation is that Jesus has given us a view of things from his heavenly perspective; the view from the throne of God. And from the perspective of heaven we can see that the center is absolutely holding, because the center is King Jesus. Yes, the Devil and all his hosts are full of passionate

¹ William Butler Yeats, “*The Second Coming*” in *Modern American and Modern British Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 491. Quoted from Dennis Johnson, *The Lion and the Lamb*, 155

intensity. But every ounce of that evil intensity is under the full sovereign control of King Jesus. The ordering principle of human history is not inevitable human decay, but invincible, divine sovereignty. From our perspective, human history seems to be a stage upon which the Devil wreaks his havoc and does his worst. But in this letter, Jesus shows us that human history is actually a canvass upon which the Living God is working all things according to his good and glorious sovereign will.

Chapter 10 is an interlude in the vision of the 7 trumpets. We studied the first 6 of the 7 trumpets and saw God's partial judgements in human history: wars, diseases, and natural disasters. We noted that every partial judgement in the world is a reminder of the Final Day of judgement and a call to the world to repent. But as we see at the end of chapter 9, the world does not repent.

This is the world we live in today – a world without excuse, rushing headlong towards its rendezvous with divine wrath. But in this world, the church has a mighty Lord and a gospel mission! And that's the purpose of this interlude. There are two main things to see here in chapter 10: a *Sovereign* and a *scroll*.

I. The Sovereign

10:1 *Then I saw 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.*

A. His Identity

There is some debate amongst the commentators as to the identity of this mighty angel. Is this truly an angel, or is it King Jesus himself? I think it is clearly Jesus, our Lord.

- Why is he called an angel? The word *angel* means *messenger*. And in the OT, we find that Jesus is commonly called "the angel of the Lord."
- Coming down from heaven – Jesus is the ultimate One who came from heaven to earth. It is a critical part of his mission and identity as the incarnate Son of God.
- Wrapped in a cloud – This is clearly a reference to the vision of Daniel 7:

Dan. 7:13–14 *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

Jesus was taken up into heaven wrapped in a cloud, and told us that he will return in the very same way.

- There is other Divine imagery
 - a. A rainbow over his head – covenant faithfulness
 - b. Face like sun and legs like pillars of fire – Revelation 1

This is our Lord Jesus himself!

B. His Stance

Notice where He stands.

10:2 *He set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land.*

This is Jesus clearly, intentionally, and unequivocally claiming all authority and power over all created reality.

His right foot is planted on the sea – the realm of chaos and death.

His left foot is planted on the land – the realm of man’s rebellion.

“All authority and power have been given unto me”

We easily fail to appreciate the full reality of Jesus’ absolute sovereignty. We tend to think that it means Jesus is somehow able to take evil and unexpected things and turn them ultimately to good. We tend to think of Jesus like a Marvel superhero: Jesus and the Devil are in a mighty contest and while Jesus may lose some battles, he ultimately wins the war.

But that is simply not how the Bible describes Jesus’ authority and sovereignty. The authority of Jesus is absolute – the Devil only does what Jesus allows. We’ve noted this already in this book. The four horsemen of the apocalypse are sent, by the authority of Christ, to bring devastations on the earth. The four angels are given authority, by King Jesus, to carry out his purposes. The sovereignty of King Jesus is absolute and total.

Nothing ***happens*** apart from his sovereign command.

That means that Jesus ordains hard, painful, things to happen - even to those he loves. When his good friend, Lazarus, died suddenly of an illness, Jesus explicitly said that it happened for God’s ordained purposes. That’s a hard truth. Some of you have experienced devastatingly hard things. Some of you are in the midst of extremely painful things right now. I don’t know why Jesus is ordaining these hard things. Some would say that he isn’t ordaining them at all. All that he has promised is to make it turn out for our good.

But let me say two things:

1. What would we rather have: a life in which Jesus is desperately trying to make the best of the evil and pain we experience, or a life in which absolutely nothing can touch us apart from the sovereign hand of God? A life in which Jesus is picking up after the Devil, or one in which Jesus, in every single detail, is sovereignly working out his good purposes, even though it is painful and hard?
2. Remember, though Jesus ordains hard things for his children, he is not untouched by the grief. He ordained the death of his friend Lazarus, but he wept at the grief of it and gave his own life to restore it. We have a High Priest who sympathizes with our sorrows and gave his own life to restore our losses in such glory that they will seem light and momentary.

Jesus has given us this vision so that we understand our lives and experiences correctly. Our good and glorious King is not striving to help us make the best of what this world and the Devil may throw at us. He stands with one foot on the realm of chaos and death and the other foot on the realm of human rebellion – and he rules.

C. His Work

In verses 3-8 we have this interesting description of a revelation John was not allowed to reveal. King Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “like a lion roaring”:

10:3-4 When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.”

Again, there are different interpretations of the meaning of this. Some suggest that this is similar to Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 12:4, where Paul says that he had a vision of heaven and “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” The sense of it is that there are things too high for us, too glorious, too holy, too much.

The context of the 7 thunders suggests that the message John was forbidden to write was related to the judgements of God on earth. Possibly, the things to come are simply too difficult for us to know. But rather than try to peer into what God has not revealed to us, we need to see and believe what he **has!**

What IS revealed in verse 5-7, is that “there would be no more delay” (v. 6).

10:5-7 And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land 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 and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the

seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

“No more delay” means that we are living, right now, in the “last days.” There is nothing in redemptive history that needs to be accomplished before Christ returns. “No more delay” means that King Jesus is, right now, accomplishing his purposes as he moves this world to its final day. Jesus is at work so that “the mystery of God” will be “fulfilled” in the day of 7th trumpet. So, what does THAT mean? Let me quickly explain.

- The 7th trumpet is the final trumpet of Judgment Day (11:15ff).
- The “mystery of God” is the gospel! Paul speaks of the “mystery of God” as the great revelation that God, in Jesus Christ, is reconciling the world to himself – Jews and Greeks and barbarians, all being brought together as one new humanity, one body, under one Lord.
- This mystery has been “announced” to his servants, the prophets. The word “announced” comes from the word “gospel, good news.”

In short, Jesus wants us to see and know that he is exercising his sovereign power in this world to fulfill the gospel mission. He is not about other things. Christ’s sovereignty is all vested in the interest of the gospel and the welfare of his bride. Everything that happens is to this end, this purpose – the fulfilling of the mystery of God, the gathering in of sinners from every tongue, tribe, and nation to stand rejoicing before the Throne of the Lamb.

Divine sovereignty is, at its essence, King Jesus at work to redeem his people and to bring them into his eternal presence in a new heaven and earth. Kingdoms will rise and fall. Nations will make war. There will be earthquakes, disasters, and diseases. But through it all and in it all, Jesus is gathering his church and fulfilling his gospel mission.

And that’s the context of the church’s call.

II. The Scroll

10:8-9 Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, “Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.”

In verse 2 we read that the Mighty Angel had a little scroll in his hand. I don’t believe this is the scroll of chapter 6 – the scroll of God’s divine purposes for this world, the scroll that no one could open except Jesus. This scroll is specifically called a “little scroll.” It is an opened

scroll. Its contents are visible and readable. And I believe it is the scroll of the revelation of God, specifically the gospel.

John is commanded to take it and eat it. The prophets of old, specifically Ezekiel, were given an identical command. In Ezekiel 2 and 3 we read that he was given a vision of a scroll and told to eat it. It was God's message for Israel. It was a message of judgement for those who did not repent and a promise of grace for those who did. Consequently, the scroll is both bitter and sweet.

A. The Sweet

There is an unparalleled sweetness in God's word, discovered by those who take it up and "eat it." Take it in. Believe it. Let me share some of the sweetness of the word with you:

- "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). That's a sweet word.
- "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:1-3a). That's a sweet word.
- "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). That's a sweet word.
- "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Is. 55:1). That's a sweet word.
- "And behold, I am coming soon" (Rev. 22:7). That's a sweet word.

There are untold examples of such words in Scripture. They are sweetness to the soul. And the Spirit will direct you to them as you listen to sermons and take up the word and read.

B. The Bitter

But these sweet words have a bitterness to them. They will bring pain. These sweet words are not meant only for our own soul-consolation but for our proclamation. John is told, "You must again prophecy." He is commanded to speak, to proclaim the gospel.

That was the specific charge given by Christ to the apostles: "Go and tell." And it remains the call for the church today. It is through the preaching and proclaiming of the gospel that

Jesus carries out His mission in the world! We have been caught up in the mission of Christ, we have a part to play.

But this glorious mission will have a bitterness to it. The mission always comes with a cost. Jesus plainly told his disciples, "The world will hate you." Persecution is not an anomaly for the church – it is a design feature.

There are millions of our brothers and sisters around the world today experiencing bitterness because of these sweet words. Friends, I am convinced that we will increasingly experience the same. If we take a stand for the truth of God and his gospel, as revealed in Scripture, we will be scorned and hated.

The church has only three choices:

- Change the word of God to make it more palatable. The mainline churches have adopted this approach. They celebrate what God declares an abomination: abortion, homosexuality, and the sovereignty of self. They denounce what Paul celebrates as glorious: the atoning death of Christ for the justification of sinners. The world doesn't hate them, it just ignores them.
- Stay silent about the word. Become stealth Christians. Just don't tell the truth about what you believe. Don't let your fellow workers know that you are a follower of Christ. This is, by and large, the approach taken by most believers today. We would rather have our comfort than pursue our mission. We avoid the bitterness – but at the cost of faithfulness.
- Take up the mission: taste the sweetness, embrace the bitterness, and rejoice in the fact that we have nothing to fear.

That's the point of this vision. If Jesus is absolutely sovereign, no harm can possibly come to us. There is some bitterness – but there's no harm. We don't need to be afraid of anyone or anything.

Dennis Johnson highlights the unique place of the church in the world:

"On the one hand, Christian believers will be targeted for attack by those who hate our King, his purity, and even his mercy; on the other, God calls us to stay involved in the broader community even as it rushed pell-mell toward its rendezvous with God's wrath. Can God keep Jesus' little flock safe as they stand, it seems, defenseless in the cross-fire?" (156)

Yes, friends, he can. The repeating message of Scripture is that God doesn't have friendly-fire casualties. When he brings judgement to his enemies, he protects and provides for his own (e.g. Noah, Lot, the Exodus).

2 Peter 2:4ff *For if God...⁵ did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶ if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to extinction...⁷ and if he rescued righteous Lot... ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials...*

We have nothing to fear. Take that home with you today. Whatever circumstance you are facing, you have no reason to fear. Let's look at this life from the perspective of heaven. The Jesus who gave His life for us now exercises all his sovereign authority on our behalf, for his glory. Let's believe it.