

“Trumpets: Tough Pill to Swallow”

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Revelation 10:1-11

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We continue this week in our look at a part of the Book of Revelation, specifically chapters 8-11, which are often known as the “trumpet judgments.” If you were here last week and you still came this week, congratulations you made it through the heaviest part. Last week featured giant grasshopper monsters torturing people and two hundred million nightmare horses destroying a third of humanity. I won’t say we’re out of the woods completely, but it’s a tad less troubling from here on out.

That’s important to remember as we approach a book like Revelation because I hope you won’t shy away from approaching it on your own either—and this applies to the Old Testament prophets too. If you read something that you find troubling, maybe some confusing imagery or a troubling judgment, keep reading. Keep reading. Because there’s always good news embedded within and around anything we might perceive to be harsh.

John’s vision appears to hit a small interlude in what we come to today, but with it a message of hope and sweetness, even along with words that are challenging. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

10 And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. ² He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³ he gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded. ⁴ 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.’ ⁵ Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶ 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: ‘There will be no more delay, ⁷ but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets.’

⁸ 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.’ ⁹ So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, ‘Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.’ ¹⁰ So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

¹¹ Then they said to me, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.'
Revelation 10:1-11

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

O God who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, we praise you in your power and majesty, and for how you have made your glory known. We pray for your Spirit to be with us, opening your Word to us, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sermons are quirky things. Sometimes the ones you feel most strongly about seem to fall completely flat. Sometimes the ones you feel the worst about will surprise you because they'll seem to resonate deeply with folks. Sometimes a person will come up to you afterward and say, "That really challenged me," or "That really encouraged me," or "That really made me think," or just "Thank you for that sermon," and it never really feels right to say something like "You're welcome," but it's appreciated nonetheless. Sometimes a person will come up and say, "I loved it when you said, this and that," and you're thinking, "I didn't say anything like that. What sermon did you listen to?" But all of that's okay because when it comes down to it, ideally it shouldn't entirely be me or Janna or Ben or Mark speaking, but rather the Spirit through the Word.

A theology of the Word proclaimed is a sermon for another day, but the main point I'm getting at is that it's challenging sometimes gauging just how that Word is landing. I mean I know it's going well when I notice a number of people very deep in prayer, but that aside, you just never quite know.

But I never had to guess when it came to a man named Barry who lived in Germantown, TN. Barry was a member at my previous church, and a wonderful thing about Barry was that he was an eager student of Scripture. He was a great Bible teacher too. He could do the big picture surveys; he could do the deep dives; he could do topical; he could do word studies; you name it. I'd add that we're blessed to have some folks like Barry in our church too.

But another thing about Barry, which maybe was wonderful in its own right, was that he did not mince words nor did he like wasting his time, and that applied to Sunday sermons too. So what he would do when he got to church was swing by the church library, pick up a Bible commentary he hadn't read before, and go up to the sanctuary balcony. And if he didn't like the sermon in the first few minutes, he was cracking open that commentary, and he was going to read that instead until the sermon was over.

So I knew within the first few minutes of any sermon I gave, if Barry had his head down in a book, the sermon was not going well. I never had to guess.

I suppose now isn't the best time to share my own gratitude to Linda Haynes and Connie Greene for all the work they've done in updating our own church library and encourage folks to go take a look. It's a wonderful resource, but don't get any ideas. (That's a horrible thing to say about a library—don't get any ideas.)

But I suppose if Barry were here to defend himself, he'd say, "Hey, one way or another, I want to get fed." And that's a valid point, because it is a rather humbling responsibility upon every preacher to presume to interpret the Word of God to a church, therefore let it be readied with care and intention. But perhaps to counter that, which is totally fair since Barry's not here, as followers of Christ, we should feel compelled to hear the Word of God even and especially when it is difficult to hear. Because the Word is almost never as simply digestible as it might appear.

It is the Word, the message, of God that features in this part of the Book of Revelation today. If you were keeping score at home, you'll remember that of a total of seven trumpets, six of them have been blown. So you might be thinking, wow, already done with six? We could wrap this up today and just go out for ice cream the next two weeks. Not quite folks. John's vision seems to take a pause, or least casts his gaze to something else, technically in the middle of the sixth trumpet judgment.

He sees a mighty angel coming down from heaven, holding what is termed a "little scroll." This angel seemingly straddles the earth and the sea, swears by the eternal one who created the heavens and the earth and, as it says in v. 6 and 7: "There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets."

It warrants noting here some of the language the angel is using surrounding the seventh trumpet. It's language of fulfilment—and if you've ever done any study on biblical numbers, you'll know already that if you hear the number seven, it often signals a full cycle or completion. Think seven days of creation in Genesis 1, for example.

And that's important when it comes to this part of Revelation because sevens pop up a decent amount. We've got seven trumpets that we're in the middle of, but just before this there were seven seals, and then later there will be seven bowls, all with visions and interludes all interspersed. Some look at all of it sequentially, as in first there will be seven seal judgments, and then there will be seven trumpet judgments, and the whole book of Revelation is meant to signify a chronological advancement through the end times.

What I'd offer to you, and what others would offer to you, is that when you see a seven, consider how it might be a vision of the whole thing, a full cycle, just approached in different ways. As in, the cycle of seven seals being opened, which we looked at two years ago, is painting

a similar picture as the cycle of seven trumpets being blown. Some may remember from the Book of Genesis, a man named Joseph is called upon to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh. One dream has seven fat cows being consumed by seven thin cows, then the next dream has seven plump ears of grain being consumed by seven blighted ears of grain. And they're meant to signify seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, but the point is, both dreams are pointing to the same reality, not two different, consecutive cycles. Same sort of premise here.

But in the midst of this proclamation of fulfillment of the mystery of God, a voice calls upon John to take the little scroll that the angel is holding, so he does. Then the angel tells him to eat it, but adding that it would be "bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." John takes the scroll, eats it, and it was exactly like the angel had said.

That's a powerful image of this little scroll, or symbolically, the prophecy, the message given to John, or more broadly, the Word of God. It has echoes of the prophets like Ezekiel, which we read earlier. But why reveal this? Why is this here? Surely more attention should be given to literally earth-shattering visions like earthquakes, or stars being blotted out, or 200,000,000 cavalry, that sort of thing.

Revelation has this tendency—or perhaps I should rather say that we have this tendency when it comes to Revelation—to lose sight of what's important. We're reading along, and we get to the juicy stuff like prophecy and the end of the world and all that, and then Revelation seems to take a break to talk about stuff like this, like John eating a little scroll, or earlier a vision of heavenly worship. Those sorts of things pop up throughout the book, these breaks to catch a glimpse of heavenly glory or a commissioning of the prophet. Maybe we think, well come on fast forward to the main programming, why didn't I just pony up and get the ad-free subscription here, on to the main event, the "what's gonna happen next" parts. That's our tendency.

But maybe when we do so, we're flipping what Revelation puts forward as the most important parts. What is depicted as happening in these trials and tribulations is important, don't get me wrong, but what's *really* going on? This worship of the Most High God, and this blessing of his revelation to humanity—*that's* the important stuff.

Maybe the message here in what feels like an interlude, or even a distraction, for John to be given this little scroll, is really the sort of thing we should be more concerned about. Even with all the trials and tribulations swirling around us, are we taking on the message of God, the Word of God?

It's not easy to do. This vision doesn't depict it that way. How does John describe it? Bitter to the stomach, yet sweet as honey. If ever there was a perfect phrase capturing the majesty and challenge of something like the Word of God, and even the charge to carry and share that Word,

that message. Unsettling, to be sure. You read Scripture thoroughly, you dispense with the cookie-cutter, post-it note daily calendar Bible verses pretty quickly. Those are great, but you read Scripture a lot you quickly find out, hey this is kind of challenging. And yet, you read Scripture thoroughly, it's not just unsettling, but sweet as honey.

Maybe the message here is that for John, and by extension, for the church, this charge to be in the Word, to digest the Word, so to speak, to carry that Word in all of what can feel like bitterness and sweetness, and to bear witness to it in a troubled world is precisely the sort of thing that will carry you through the trials and tribulations of the world in the first place.

I love something that Sarah Ashby shared with us last week. She, Mark Lampley, and some of our senior high youth went to Montreat Youth Conference a few weeks back, and she shared something our youth did, really of their own initiative. They felt led, as a group, to read Scripture together, inspired by the Spirit moving over the course of the week. I mean, Tate Carty even read Scripture like that guy Barry did, reading the Bible during the daily keynote.

And what did they read? Did they go to the Gospels, perhaps the Sermon on the Mount? Did they go to one of Paul's letters, perhaps Paul's teaching about the nature of love in 1 Corinthians or justification in Romans and Galatians? No they went to the Old Testament and read together the Book of Esther.

If you know Scripture well, you may already know why that is both a surprising and perfect book of Scripture to read in such a context.

Esther is about exiled Jews trying to survive under an often hostile empire. It's probably best known for the courage of the title character, Esther, who though Jewish becomes queen to the Persian emperor. Then when the Jewish people are threatened, she courageously advocates for her people to the king: "For such a time as this," is probably the best-known phrase in the book, as Esther had been placed in such a position and such a time precisely for this purpose, and she steps up to the plate and saves her people.

But that's not where the story ends. After Esther advocates for her people to the king, the second half of the book deals with how the Jews in exile then turn the tables on those who were seeking to kill them, leveraging the king's favor and getting permission not only to defend themselves but also to seek out and kill those who had sought to kill them. It hits an unsettling note; it can come across as vindictive or vengeful. On one hand the people of God are delivered, due to the bravery of this woman Esther. On the other, it shows how dangerous and murky it can be when the people of God get too cozy within the halls of power.

Then here's another little tidbit about the book: the name of God is not mentioned once.

And that's what our youth read together. Unsettling to the stomach, and yet sweet as honey.

But you know something else that happened there that week? In the middle of this week of faith and fellowship, one of the youth commented, even while they're diving in deep and reading Esther, she said, "I didn't know the church could be so loving."

Maybe the angel's charge to John, that charge to take and eat this little scroll that was bitter to the stomach yet sweet as honey to the taste, maybe it comes like reading Esther at a youth conference. A time away from the trials and tribulations we might face week in and week out, and we seek out a time apart, a time of faith and fellowship, and we feel a pull to the Word of God. And when we do, we find it unsettling yet strangely sweet. Because a Christian and, really, a church will always feel unmoored, unanchored without that pull into the communal life around the Word of God.

And why was it sweet up there in the mountains? Well it's sweet of its own account, to be sure. But maybe also because it is surrounded by the love of the church, in it together. Maybe John knew that too. And you might know it too, if you hear this invitation to seek Christ, to know Christ, to be in his Word, no matter how unsettling it might seem.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.