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 Revelation 10:1-11
 Sixteenth Message
 Bernard Bell
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SWEET AND SOUR

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week we saw that the first six trumpet blasts announced God's terrifying judgment upon a rebellious world. In John's visions he saw that God poured out these judgments in response to the prayers of his people: the prayers of the martyrs under the altar who cried out, "How long, O Lord?" (6:10), and the prayers of the saints still on earth who cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). The martyrs appealed to God for justice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" They had been killed for their faithful witness. If measured by death, the good guys had lost and the bad guys had won. This is a dilemma which has troubled people down through the ages. Why do the wicked seem to prosper? It troubled Asaph the psalmist. He begins Psalm 73 with a statement of faith, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1), but immediately admits that it does not always look this way.

**But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
 I had nearly lost my foothold.
 For I envied the arrogant
 when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
 They have no struggles;
 their bodies are healthy and strong.
 They are free from the burdens common to man;
 they are not plagued by human ills.
 Therefore pride is their necklace;
 they clothe themselves with violence.
 From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
 the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
 They scoff, and speak with malice;
 in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
 Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
 and their tongues take possession of the earth.
 Therefore their people turn to them
 and drink up waters in abundance.
 They say, "How can God know?
 Does the Most High have knowledge?"
 This is what the wicked are like—
 always carefree, they increase in wealth. (Ps 73:2-11 NIV)**

Asaph is simultaneously attracted by the prosperity of the wicked and appalled by their arrogant and callous evil. They thumb their nose at God and seem to get away with it. He wonders if he has made the right choice. If the bad guys win, why has he chosen the side of good?

**Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;
 in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
 All day long I have been plagued;
 I have been punished every morning. (73:13-14)**

It is only when Asaph lifts his eye above the visible world that he is able to find composure:

If I had said, "I will speak thus,"

**I would have betrayed your children.
 When I tried to understand all this,
 it was oppressive to me
 till I entered the sanctuary of God;
 then I understood their final destiny. (73:15-17)**

With his eyes heavenward he finds rest amidst the grievous things happening in the world around him:

**But as for me, it is good to be near God.
 I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
 I will tell of all your deeds. (73:28)**

Who has not experienced that same emotional and spiritual turmoil? Who has not envied the prosperity of those who pay no attention to God? Who has not wondered if they have made the right choice, following God's way? The motto of my boarding school in England (St Lawrence College, Ramsgate, Kent) was *in bono vince*, "conquer with good," drawn from the Latin translation (Vulgate) of Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Vg *noli vinci a malo sed vince in bono malum*). It's a noble sentiment, but the opposite so often seems true. All over the world people overcome with evil, and, to add insult to injury, they seem to get away with it.

We naturally long for justice. We are outraged when immoral or unjust people get away with it. We want the Enron executives to go to jail. We want the power companies to give money back to California. We want the camera to catch the red-light runner. We want the police to show up when motorcycles race down our street at 2 am. We want justice to be done, and when it is not done we get agitated. We also agitate: the world is full of people crusading for justice. The law courts are full of people demanding justice.

The first six trumpets have been all about justice and judgment. It was in response to the cries of his saints for justice that God poured out his judgments upon the earth. The Scriptures are clear that God is a God of justice, who will not allow evildoers to get away with their wickedness for ever. Without divine justice this would be a very sorry world. Without divine justice, evil would proliferate. The clear testimony of Scripture and of history is that humanity left to its own devices does not advance to greater and greater good, but descends into greater and greater evil. For his own reasons, God tolerates wickedness in his world up to a certain point, until he steps in to restrain the spread of evil. Divine justice is necessary if God is to extend his own holiness to earth.

But if justice were the only side to God's character then hell would be full and heaven empty. We want the camera to catch the other red-light runner, not us. We want the CHP to catch the other speeders, not us. If we're honest, we have to admit with Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us." If obedient submission to God be the standard, then we are all guilty. Nor do we respond well to our own errors being pointed out. The judgments unleashed by the first six

trumpets brought only limited devastation; they were not yet final. They carried an implicit call to repentance, but the world failed to repent (9:20-21).

Both the presence of evil and the divine response to it are popular targets for those who wish to discredit God. If God is pure and holy, why does he allow evil, why does he allow bad things to happen, why does he allow the wicked to prosper? Materialists conclude there is no god. Others suppose that there must be good gods and bad gods competing for control. Some Christians come dangerously close to this mindset, but the Bible in general and Revelation in particular never allow that option. God is sovereign even over the forces that agitate against him. Skeptics ask, If God is kind and loving, why does he condemn people? Why doesn't he just save everyone? But in that case his justice would mean nothing.

The much-discussed problem of evil is actually not hard to understand: we need only look into our own hearts. Peter France was a convinced agnostic who prided himself on his rational skepticism and hard-nosed realism which showed that "nice guys in our world finish last." But he was finally forced to conclude that "the Problem of Goodness is far harder for the agnostic to handle than the more publicized Problem of Evil is for the believer."¹ If we're honest, it's not hard to understand how hell gets full. What is hard to understand is how heaven gets populated. The seventh trumpet will proclaim that God's kingdom has come to earth as it is now in heaven. Will that kingdom have many residents, or will everyone have been banished to destruction?

The sixth trumpet, which is the second woe, is not over until 11:14, by which point there has been a change in the response of humanity. The rest of humanity which had refused to repent (9:20-21) now gives glory to God (11:13). What brings about this change? An interlude in the action gives us the answer. Interrupting the drama of the sixth trumpet, John is given a vision of an angel with a scroll and of two witnesses. Today we'll look at the angel and the scroll, next week at the two witnesses.

In chapter 10 John is shown an angel holding a scroll. He is told to eat the scroll and that he must prophesy. The imagery is drawn primarily from two Old Testament prophets: Ezekiel's instructions to eat a scroll (Ezek 2:9-3:3) and Daniel's instructions to seal a scroll (Dan 12:4-7).

A. The Little Scroll (10:1-3a)

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. He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He 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. (10:1-3a)

Revelation is full of angels, but only three of them are described as mighty. It was the first mighty angel who asked, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" (5:2). Now a second mighty angel descends from heaven. Though he is still only an angel, he appears in the splendor that is normally used to describe God himself. He is robed in a cloud and his legs are like fiery pillars, reminiscent of God's presence with his people during their wilderness wanderings, when he accompanied them as a cloud and as a pillar of fire. When they were settled he dwelt in their midst in the cloud of his glory which filled the tabernacle and the temple. The angel has a rainbow above his head, reminiscent of the rainbow that encircled

the divine throne (4:3). His face is like the sun, reminiscent of John's vision of Jesus (1:16). No other angel in Revelation appears in such splendor. Clearly this is an important angel who has come from very close to God's presence. Who is he?

An angel is a messenger. This angel is a messenger sent from God to John. This book is "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, who testifies to everything he saw... Blessed is the one who reads...and blessed are those who hear" (1:1-3). Notice the chain of revelation. It all begins with God. God gives the revelation to Jesus, Jesus gives it to an angel, the angel gives it to John, John writes it in a book, the book is read in the seven churches in Asia, where it is heard by the saints. The angel, John, the reader, the hearers, are the servants of God. The angel whom John sees here in 10:1 is the angel who brings him the revelation from God and Jesus. He will be referred to again at the close of the book in the epilogue. The angel who shows John the New Jerusalem tells him, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6). Jesus himself tells John, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches" (22:16). Recognizing the identity of this angel explains why he is more splendid than any other angel in the book, and helps us understand this difficult chapter.

The first mighty angel asked a question concerning a scroll which lay sealed in God's hand. This mighty angel carries an open scroll in his own hand. Commentators disagree as to whether these are the same scrolls. Increasingly I side with those who identify them as the same. The scroll which once lay closed in God's hands now lies open in the angel's hand.

The angel planted one foot on the sea and one foot on the land, indicating that he is addressing all the earth. He then shouted with a shout so loud it is compared to the roar of a lion, perhaps a reference to Amos, where the word of the Lord through his prophet is likened to the roar of a lion (Amos 3:8).

B. The Seven Thunders (10:3b-7)

When he 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."

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." (10:3b-7)

We're not told the content of the angel's loud roar, but we are told the response: the seven thunders roar back. Probably the imagery is drawn from Psalm 29, with its seven-fold reference to the voice of the Lord which thunders throughout the world.

**The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars...**

The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.
 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert...
 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.
 And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" (Ps 29:3-9)

We are not told what the thunders say, but we can hazard a guess. Seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, all proclaiming God's judgments upon a rebellious world. Seven thunders would fit into this sequence. The seven seals brought devastation to a quarter of the world, and the seven trumpets to a third. The seven bowls will bring total devastation. Might the seven thunders not have pronounced judgment upon half the world? We don't know, for John is told to seal the message of the seven thunders. The reason for doing so is given by the angel's subsequent actions.

Referring back to the source of the imagery in Daniel helps understand what is happening here. Daniel was told to seal up the scroll containing the matters revealed to him "until the time of the end" (12:4). In response to the question, "How long will it be?" (12:6), the angel who had given Daniel the revelation lifted his hands to heaven and swore "by him who lives forever," "It will be for a time, times and half a time" (12:7). The time of the end would be marked by a period identified as "a time, times and half a time." It was because that period had not yet arrived that Daniel was told to seal the scroll.

In John's vision this is all turned upside down. Whereas Daniel was told to seal up his scroll because the end had not yet come, John is told to seal up the message of the thunders because they represent a delay in the arrival of the end. Instead the angel declares, "There will be no more delay!" The end is at hand. The seventh trumpet blast is imminent. The angel's authority to issue this declaration lies in "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," the one who has sovereignty and authority over all realms.

The blowing of the seventh trumpet will bring the mystery of God to fulfillment. The angel tells John that God has already revealed this to the prophets. This is probably a reference to Amos 3:7, "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets." It is significant that John has rendered "revealing his plan" with "announcing his mystery."

The mystery of God is not his judgments. These judgments, which are God's response to wickedness, have been writ large in the pages of Scripture since Genesis 3. The Old Testament is full of God's response to rebellious humanity. God permits humanity to have its own way, up to a certain point, but then he steps in to restrain the spread of evil. The mystery is not how anyone ends up in hell, the mystery is how anyone ends up in heaven. The mystery is not how God brings judgment but how he brings salvation. The mystery is not how humanity persists in its rebellion, but how it is brought to the point of giving glory to God. The blast of the seventh trumpet brings the declaration of God's universal reign, of the transfer of all sovereignty to him. The mystery is how that can be good news not bad news, of how rebellious humanity can be the beneficiary of that rule rather than the condemned. Good news it is, for the verb "announce" is *euangelizō*, "proclaim good news," from which we get evangel, "the gospel," and evangelize. What is being announced is not just the sobering news of judgment but also the good news of salvation.

C. John Eats the Scroll (10:8-11)

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."

So 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." (10:8-11)

The voice which had told John to seal the message of the seven thunders now instructs him to take the scroll from the angel. As John does so, the angel further instructs him to eat it, but warns that it will be bitter-sweet. Though it taste sweet in his mouth, it will turn his stomach bitter. Here we are back to the imagery of Ezekiel's commissioning. Ezekiel was told to take a scroll and eat it. Though the scroll contained "words of lament and mourning and woe" yet he found it to be "as sweet as honey" in his mouth. Why would a document so obviously full of judgment against God's own people taste sweet? The scroll was sweet to Ezekiel presumably because its message of judgment meant that God was no longer willing to allow the flagrant disobedience of his people to go unpunished. God was about to restore justice.

For John, just as for Ezekiel, the eating of the scroll functions as a call to prophetic ministry. Each is to absorb the message of the respective scroll and then pronounce it. Having eaten the scroll, each is told to prophesy, to speak the word of the Lord. In John's case he is told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." This is John's second commissioning to prophetic ministry. In chapter one, after receiving an overwhelming vision of the risen Jesus, John was commissioned, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). Now John is commissioned again. What he must prophesy is presumably the content of the open scroll which he had taken from the hand of the angel, the scroll which the Lamb had opened.

D. The contents of the scroll

John's recommissioning to prophetic ministry is immediately followed by a description of the work and fate of two prophetic witnesses (11:1-13). Their faithful prophetic witness costs them their life. No matter your opinion on whether or not the scroll John eats is a second scroll, all agree that this account of the two witnesses explains why the scroll is bitter-sweet. But those who see this scroll as the same scroll opened by the Lamb see that the proclamation of the scroll goes far beyond chapter 11. Indeed, the account of the two witnesses in chapter 11 introduces the scroll in brief. The full proclamation of the scroll begins in 12:1. This helps explain why there is such a sharp disjuncture between chapters 11 and 12. All agree that 12:1 marks a major step back in time; fewer can explain why. The declaration of the contents of the scroll cover more than ten chapters (12:1-22:6), giving a comprehensive sweep through history from the rebellion of Satan through to the new heavens and the new earth.

The Book of Revelation can be divided up in several different ways. One is to divide it into two halves, each of eleven chapters, and each building to a climactic declaration. The first declaration is, "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). There's

no mystery about that. God's holiness, justice and truth require it. The second declaration is, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That's the mystery. That the declaration of God's kingdom in 11:15 is good news not bad news. That once-rebellious people will be included in that kingdom. That the universal reign of God brings salvation not just judgment. That the extension of God's holiness to earth embraces once-unholy people. That the story ends not with a hell that is full to overflowing, but with a new heavens and a new earth where God dwells with his people.

John is commissioned to bear prophetic witness against "many peoples, nations, languages and kings." This four-fold phrase implies all humanity, four being the number of universality. It is surely not accidental that this and similar four-fold phrases occur seven times in Revelation. Subsequent chapters will show that the beast is given authority over all humanity (13:7), that Babylon the world-city spreads herself over all humanity (17:15), and that all humanity gloats over the death of God's faithful prophets (11:9). The whole world is sinful and worthy of God's judgment. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But that's not the whole story. A few chapters later John will be shown an angel who has "the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people" (14:7). It is from precisely this sinful humanity that the Lamb redeems a people for God to gather before his throne (5:9; 7:9). That's the astonishing scandal of the gospel. It's not the righteous whom God saves, but the rebels. In the memorable words of Robert Capon, it's "the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the dead"² whom the Lamb saves.

E. Bitter-sweet

The scroll is sweet indeed. But it will also prove to be bitter. In accomplishing his purposes, his mystery, God chooses to allow his saints to suffer. No, it's more than that: God specifically employs the suffering of his saints in his plan to spread his kingdom. Chapter 11 shows that it is a costly thing to be a faithful witness. Remember that this is a pastoral letter. The seven churches are called to just this sort of faithful witness. Some of the churches are already experiencing the cost of faithful witness: Antipas of Pergamum has been killed for his witness; the saints in Smyrna and Pergamum are already suffering, and martyrdom is just around the corner. Others of them are in peril for they are diluting their witness in order to avoid suffering. Revelation calls the faithful to endure and the wavering to repent.

The suffering of God's people is not a surprise; it is encompassed within his very purposes. He himself has set the pattern. The Lord Jesus Christ was killed for his faithful witness, but God raised him from the dead as the conqueror. God's people are to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, through death and into new life, emerging victorious. It is in apparent weakness that God triumphs over the powers of this world. That is the astonishing thing about the gospel! That's why only the slain but victorious Lamb can open the seals. The mystery is that the conquering Lion is the slain Lamb. If it were only the conquering Lion who opened the seals then there would be only judgment. But the seals are opened by the Lamb, who with his own blood has redeemed people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). The trumpets proclaim God's terrifying judgment, but judgment is not his last word. The story ends not with an overflowing hell, but with a new heaven and earth where God dwells with his people. Thanks be to God!

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,

and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay him?

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

1. Peter France, *A Place of Healing for the Soul: Patmos* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2002), 148.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.