

The Glory of God in Humble Witness

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[0 : 00] Well if you would take the Bible out that's in the seat you might have to share with some very lovely person next to you and turn to Revelation 10 and 11, 1033 and 1034 in the Bible.

When we finish today we're halfway through Revelation and I've been thinking when we finish it we should go back and do it again. There's so much we're missing. Revelation 10 and 11.

Last week we came to the end of chapter 9 and it seemed like nobody was going to repent. Nothing was getting through and the only thing left for God to do was to finish creation, bring judgment and take his people to glory. Seemed as though there was no hope left. You remember last week we looked at the first six blasts of the trumpet, environmental disaster, spiritual darkness and we were given a kind of a spiritual x-ray into the hearts and lives of those who don't worship the true God and they were tormented by these warrior-like locusts, horse-sized locusts consuming everything and leaving this smoky darkness in their waste.

And I think our hearts were moved, certainly stirred to compassion as we join God's people at the beginning of chapter 8 in praying and longing for the repentance of friends and family.

And now at the end of chapter 9 we expect everything to stop for Jesus to come and that's not what happens as you've heard. We have another interlude, two chapters. And chapter 10 and 11 of Revelation are about a great big communication operation that God interposes before the judgment of the world.

[1 : 55] It is a spectacular drama based on the mercy and kindness of God where God gives to his world one more gift. It's his church. As we'll look at in just a moment. When my youngest son turned 18, one of the things we did together is we went to a theme park and we rode a thing called the Tower of Terror. It's a giant L-shaped device and one moment you're sitting strapped in quietly talking to the person next to you, wondering if you've lost your mind. And the next you're blasted to 160 kilometres an hour in seven seconds. You run out along the track, you go straight up 100 metres in the air and you hang there for a moment, no brakes, and then you drop back backwards hoping that the brakes work at the bottom. And the crazy thing is that after you get out of it, you buy, you purchase a very expensive photo of yourself, taken a microsecond after the first blast off and it looks like your face is a piece of squashed fruit. At least mine does. Coming back to Revelation each week is a little bit like that, I think. You know, we're sitting here quietly enjoying the gathering and we're taken up not 100 feet, not 100 miles, but to heaven and back down to earth. And when we come to church, we're usually pretty focused on our own self, on our own problems, aren't we? You know, why am I so grumpy this morning? Why aren't people more interested in me and my problems?

And some of us bear deep disappointment and there's been plenty of pain to share. I mean, this week, yesterday, there was a funeral for a Letitia Reimer, the young 13-year-old who was murdered in Abbotsford, Christian girl, stabbed to death. And it's a year since the Paris attacks killed 90.

And what do we do with this up and down? And I think what Revelation 10 and 11 do is they bring heaven and earth together for us in a way where they give us a profound sense of purpose.

And I think there are, I want to make three points, so the chapters make these three points. They talk about the message, the messenger, and the mission. So let's look at these chapters under those three headings. Firstly, the message, chapter 10, verses 1 to 7. Chapter 10 focuses and centers on a little scroll of extraordinary power in the hand of this mighty angel. And the scroll is the gospel.

It's the good news of salvation. If you just go down to verse 5 to 7, the angel raises his other hand to heaven and swears a most solemn oath by God himself.

[4 : 56] He says that at the end of verse 6, there would be no more delay. Literally, when the seventh trumpet is blown, no more time. Time is no more, he says, because that's the end of

opportunity to turn back to God. Verse 7, in the days of the trumpet called to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

The word announced is preached the gospel, evangelized. In other words, the content of the scroll is the gospel. It's the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the fact that we may find life and forgiveness and reconciliation with God through him. It's the gospel. And it's a mystery because you'd never make it up. We can never discover the gospel by our own investigation and cleverness. It's inaccessible to us until God reveals it to us, and it's inaccessible to the world until God sends witnesses. We keep coming across this, don't we, again and again and again.

When we look to 2 Corinthians, everything is, almost everything, is in reverse of the way we put life together. You know, Christians, we receive life by giving it away. We receive meaning by giving meaning to others. We receive forgiveness by relinquishing control, joy through sacrifice, forgiveness through surrender. You'd never make this up. The scroll comes from heaven. God himself stands behind it, and I think that's the point of the description of the angel in verse 1. He is literally a mega messenger, mighty angel, mega angel. And he comes down from heaven in a cloud because he's closely associated with God, surrounded with a rainbow because his message concerns creation and God's connection. His face is like the sun because he bears this little scroll which reveals God's words, and he's got legs of fire, pillars of fire, which remind us of a time in the Old Testament when God was leading his people through the terrible wilderness, and he made his presence dwell with them in a pillar of fire at a time when they had no resources of their own, and they had to learn to live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God. And everything about the angel is about communication. Did you know the word angel simply means message, tell someone something?

And since this scroll is from the eternal God, and since it comes through this angel, it's not just for Christians. It is for all the world. He has one foot on the land and one foot in the sea. He straddles just about everything. And since the gospel is for every creature in every place, I think that's very encouraging to us as a church, very encouraging to small churches around the world, very encouraging to the churches who first received it. Here a colossal, powerful angel who has this gospel in his hand, a word of ultimate significance and of universal importance. This is the message God gives to his servants. But there's one curious thing in this message description before we head to the messenger. And that is in verse three. And I think what it means is this, that the scroll, the gospel doesn't give us all the answers. So look down at verse three, the angel calls out in a loud voice like a lion. And then seven thunders speak. And John, like the good scribe he is, begins to write it down. And then another voice says, no, no, no, stop, stop, stop, stop, don't write it down, seal it up.

Now what's in those seven thunders? What do they say? You might be interested, you might not be interested to know there's been endless speculations in the commentaries. And I think the reason it's here is because although God has revealed himself to us, he has not given us all the answers. [9 : 05] In the gospel, he's given us a saving relationship with himself, but not the answers. Very important for a church that is given the task of communicating God to the world. We've not been placed in a position as experts as though we have it all together, or as if we know everything. We don't.

And we would be insufferable if we did. The very nature of the gospel is given to break hard hearts and then to mend and bind up wounded and bleeding hearts. It's transformative because God comes to us through the gospel. It's about repentance and bringing glory to God and trust in him. And our problem is we keep wanting to put God in a neat, tidy box. Very understandable. You know, we do this all the time because it gives us some semblance of control. It makes us feel secure with what we know.

But the gospel is not there to make us experts. The gospel message is not advice that we give to others. It's not, you know, it doesn't put us above other people. It's a heavenly message delivered to us by God of great power because God stands behind it.

And he wants it made known to the world because there's a limited time to respond. That's the message. Secondly, let's look at the messenger. Chapter 10, verses 8 to 11. And we focus on the messenger because John here is a picture of us.

You might expect John to take the scroll and begin to read it out. But what happens to him is far more personal and intimate. In verse 8, he's commanded by another voice from heaven to take the

scroll from the angel's hand.

[10:55] And only after he has taken the scroll, he is told, he's given a new command to eat it. He approaches the angel, he takes it, and the angel says in verse 9, devour it.

Literally, eat it down. Take it into yourself. It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet. And he takes it and he eats it. And it is exactly as the angel says.

And only after he's eaten it, in verse 11, is he commanded, now again you must prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings. Or you might be, you prophesy to them.

This is, it's like a second commissioning for John. A bit like, as happened in the Old Testament.

Two of the prophets in the Old Testament were given a scroll to taste that was very sweet.

But this is not just about John. And the reason I say that is that the work of prophecy in the book of Revelation is the responsibility of every individual Christian and of every church community together.

[12:04] The way in which God has chosen to communicate the gospel to the ends of the world is through us, his people, as we prophesy. You may not have thought of yourself as a prophet.

It's a democratic gift God gives to all his people. It's a work of the Holy Spirit through the church where God announces his purposes for the world. It's synonymous with witness.

Now why does it become bitter to the stomach? You know, I think it's probably easy for us to understand why it's sweet. I mean, the gospel is sweeter than honey because it's through God's word we come to know, as we read in the psalm this morning, that God delights in us.

You know, we taste and see that the Lord is good. His spirit comes to us through the gospel. We learn of his constant supply of grace and his forgiveness.

happiness and life, it's incalculably sweet. But I think it can be bitter to the tummy and I think it can be bitter for three reasons. Firstly, because the word of God and the gospel does not always say what we like.

[13:16] The reason the gospel, one of the reasons the gospel is transformative for us is because it says what we don't like. You know, I hear this word of the Bible is very challenging.

Actually, no, the Bible is rebuking and correcting and exhorting. It comes from God and the more you take it into yourself and eat it as John does, it doesn't always tell us what we want to hear but the more we realise our need for grace and mercy and grace and mercy.

That's why every time we meet together, we pray, Lord, have mercy on us. Christ, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us. And you know what, it's like you're reading God's word or you're in fellowship with others and you're meditating, you're thinking about what God is saying in the gospel and God puts his finger on an attitude or an action in your life and he says, that is sin, you've got to let it go.

I have a friend who says that when he, when the Lord does this to him, he sits in his room and he says to the sin, leave through the window, go out, I never want to see you again and just before the sin gets down the street and goes around the corner, he calls out to it, but leave me a forwarding address.

But there's a bitterness where we have to let go of certain things. Secondly, I think if you, the second bitterness is that if you live by the gospel, you will suffer.

[14:38] The nicest, kindest and most educated of your friends who love you for all sorts of reasons just would shake their heads if they knew what you believed and they would rather you never speak about it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has never fitted the current cultural assumptions. It didn't in the first century, it didn't in the 10th century, it doesn't in the 21st century.

If you hold to the gospel you will suffer, we will suffer. And thirdly, I think it's bitter, it turns bitter in the stomach because of the judgments that are part of it for those who reject it.

We've heard a lot about judgment in Revelation and we're going to hear more. We know, don't we, from the scriptures that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they would turn from their wickedness and live.

and you would need a heart of stone, I think, not to feel grieved about your friends and your family who have no interest in Christ, no hope in this world or in the next.

[15:40] That is why this is a picture of us. We need to take the gospel into ourselves, to assimilate it into the depths of our heart. You can't be a witness to others unless the gospel is good news to you.

I mean, have you ever found yourself talking about hope to someone when you don't have that hope yourself? It won't do any good to stand outside it. We have to internalise it.

I don't mean we have to just change some external behaviours. This is the picture of taking it into our deepest being. That's what it is to be a messenger of God. And thirdly and finally, we've looked at the message and the messenger.

We come to chapter 11 and this is the mission, the mission of the church. Very important. This is not the church at worship. This is the church in the world.

And it's a tale of two witnesses. Verse 3 in chapter 11. I will grant authority to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1,260 days clothed in sackcloth.

[16:43] And I said in the earlier service that if you have any questions about any number in the book of Revelation, you ask Dan afterwards. Now, someone told me between the services that they didn't follow me on this point at all.

So, let me try and make this as clear as I can. This is a picture of us, the church. And the reason I say that is because in verse 4, the two witnesses are two olive trees which come out of an Old Testament book called Zechariah.

And there are two lampstands in verse 4 and they're also called two prophets in verse 10. And as we come to this, I think we need to feel the weight of the big context because the church was sealed by God through the Holy Spirit.

Remember a few chapters ago. But we weren't sealed just for our own protection. We were sealed so that we could be given to the world to witness to his gospel.

And as we came to the end of chapter 9 last week, all the darkness and defiance toward God, all the pain of history and all the judgments of God in history do not lead to repentance.

[17:59] And so God gives to the world his two witnesses, a church which is weak and suffering and witnessing. That's why this tale is a tale of success and failure at the same time.

Because everywhere, every church is both weak and strong. Both powerful and being killed.

Conquering and conquered. They dress in sackcloth because they're aware of their own sin and weakness depending on the Holy Spirit. And if you look down at verse 13, the astonishing thing, at the end of verse 13, is that God brings many to salvation through the witness of the church around the world.

Despite the weakness, brokenness of the church, despite the hostility of many to the witnessing church, many come to repentance and give glory to God so that their witness is ultimately successful even though it doesn't look like it.

see, that explains the pictures of power and success in verses 5 and 6, all these Old Testament miracles of plagues. They're images of when the church goes forward in its witness and when it goes forward in its witness, there's absolutely nothing that can stand in its way.

[19:21] The church is indestructible. In verse 7, when the witness is finished, the beast arises, will meet him again, and kills the witness, kills the witnesses and leaves their bodies in the street and it's the cause for a great big party and people give presents because it silences the gospel that's been such a torment to so many.

Then three and a half days later, God raises them from the dead, takes them to heaven. People are terrified and give glory to God. This is heavenly, heavily symbolic.

You see, if you look at verse 8, the place where they're killed is, I read, the great city symbolically called Sodom and Egypt where the Lord was crucified. Egypt isn't even a city.

It's a symbol. And the point is that the church in its witness lives a Jesus-shaped life. You see, there are times in the mission of the church where the mission goes forward, where our prayers are answered, where it seems like nothing can stand in the way, where people come to faith in Christ and numbers are added.

No harm comes to us before it's completed. And there are other times when Satan rises and God's people are persecuted and all but annihilated, certainly in parts, geographic parts of the world.

[20:48] And after a time, the Lord raises the church again and many come to faith and the point is that this cycle happens all the time. The churches in Syria are suffering one end of that.

The churches in Africa are experiencing a different end of that. And the point is that we live a Christ-shaped life. We are living and we are witnessing where our Lord was crucified, which means that our power comes through our weakness.

Our strength comes through our suffering. We are dying and yet we are raised, just like Jesus. And the reason Jesus is so important here is because when he was introduced and throughout the book of Revelation, he keeps being referred to as the faithful and true witness.

That's what he did during his life and that's why he was killed. And this work continues through his people. It got him killed, it's gotten many Christians killed. Now, my fear is, and I need to finish, but my fear is that this word witness has become a narrow, individualistic, guilt-laden word in churches. Witness is, it means two things. It's a deliberately legal word. And think about this for a moment. It's as though God has summoned the whole world into a court gathering to decide this question, is God alone the true Lord?

[22 : 16] And the world has witnesses and God has witnesses who come forward. And the role of the church there is not to win an argument, but to be faithfully, to faithfully represent God, to continue the work that Jesus did in witnessing.

But it's not just a legal word, it's a deeply personal word. Because when you give witness, you are telling the truth about your own personal experience.

You have to publicly state what you've seen and what you've experienced. And if you've taken and eaten the gospel of God and it's begun to transform you and to change you, you'll be called on to answer for your fundamental betrayal to the West Coast dream.

That's what it means to be a witness. So our city has been summoned by God to make a decision about him. They may be unaware that he is the Lord of all.

Many are worshipping other gods, but God has placed us here in Vancouver to testify to his eternal gospel so that men and women and boys and girls might have a chance to come to know him as Lord of all and enjoy his glory.

[23 : 28] One more thing before I finish. The legal case has already been decided. We don't have time to look at it but I think that's the point of the seventh trumpet where we hear these words, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.

So that every world view and every person that is not so centered on Jesus Christ as king is superficial and swept away and temporary.

The kingdom of God will come on earth as it is in heaven by God's power in his time through his church as we witness to him. I love these two chapters.

They give us such a clear view of what we're doing of our task and our mission of witness in the midst of great brokenness not just the world's brokenness but our own brokenness.

We've got to continue to internalize the gospel and bear witness to him. It's why we gather week by week. Our services are deliberately designed to walk us through the gospel. When we hear the gospel we're not trying to get things right.

[24 : 39] We're not trying to appeal to some demographic. We're hearing again the transforming words of Jesus Christ the message of heaven seeking to take it in to inwardly digest it.

So that as we leave the weight of witness to the glory of God in all we do comes to us for the sake of others. We're meant to be a church for the sake of others.

This week my wife and I watched a movie called The Martian starring Matt Damon. It's said in the future NASA sends a mission to Mars.

I missed most of the movie but I saw some key parts so I won't ruin the plot for you. The team accidentally leave Matt Damon on Mars and he thinks he's about to die and so he dictates a letter to his dictates a recording to his parents and he says to them I am now I'm dying for something big and beautiful and I can live with that.

That's a great line because there's nothing bigger and more beautiful than the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and living and dying for that will bring hope to the world.

[26 : 00] So let's now pray that the kingdom of God would come on earth as it is in heaven. Thank you.