

Revelation 10–11 — Sweet, Bitter, and Still Standing

Introduction

The sixth trumpet has sounded, but the seventh does not come immediately. Once again, John is made to wait. Revelation does this to us repeatedly. Just when we expect the next judgment or the escape for which we (then) have been awaiting, the scene changes and we are shown something else that helps us understand what is really going on, and why we must continue to wait. Chapter 10 gives us a mighty angel and a little scroll. Chapter 11 gives us a measuring rod, two witnesses, a beast, death, resurrection and finally the sounding of the seventh trumpet. These chapters are filled with strange images, but the message underneath them is remarkably consistent.

God has not lost control of His world. Do you know that the word *throne*, referring to God's 'throne' is used in this book 47 times. His people are called to bear witness in it, and that witness will not always be welcomed. The Word of God is sweet but carrying that Word into a hostile world can become bitter. The witnesses may even appear to be defeated. Yet what looks like defeat is not the end of the story.

That is something John's first readers desperately needed to know. They lived in a world dominated by Rome, where emperors claimed authority that belonged to God and followers of Yeshua could pay dearly for refusing to give it to them. Revelation does not promise them an easy life. It promises them something much better: God remains God, His witnesses are not forgotten, and His kingdom will prevail.

1. The Mighty Angel — Revelation 10:1–7

John sees “another strong angel” coming down from heaven. He is clothed with a cloud, a rainbow is over his head, his face is like the sun and his feet are like pillars of fire. The description is magnificent enough that some interpreters have wondered whether this is Yeshua Himself. I don't think we need to make that identification. John knows how to call Him the various titles: King of Kings, Lamb, Lion, in all His majesty. Here John calls this one an angel, and the point seems to be his authority and the One whose authority he represents.

The angel has a little scroll open in his hand. This is not presented in the same way as the sealed scroll of Chapter 5, which only the Lamb was worthy to open. This scroll is already open. More importantly, the angel places his right foot on the sea and his left on the land.

That is quite an image. It reminds me a little of the Colossus of Rhodes, that enormous figure of the ancient world, but John's picture is larger than that. Land and sea together

encompass the world. The angel's stance tells us that what is being announced is not some little local matter. The message concerns the whole earth.

Then the angel cries out with a loud voice, "as when a lion roars," and seven peals of thunder answer him.

Throughout Scripture, the roar of a lion can announce approaching judgment. Amos asks, "A lion has roared! Who will not fear?" (Amos 3:8). Thunder likewise makes us stop and pay attention. It announces something beyond our control.

I remember being with my wife, Patty on safari in Botswana. During the day, driving through Chobe National Park in an open ute along with our guide and the dozen others. Many of us were photographing the animals; it was wonderful. Then night came and we all retired to sleep in tents. Suddenly I remembered that we had not left the animals in a locked-up zoo. We were sleeping in their front yard. Through the night, I could hear a lion somewhere out there in the darkness. I had to pay attention. There is authority in that sound.

John hears something even more extraordinary. The seven thunders actually speak, and he prepares to write down what they say. Then a voice from heaven stops him: "Seal up the things which the seven peals of thunder have spoken, and do not write them."

That is worth noticing. Revelation reveals many things, but it does not reveal everything. And we must live in the reality of ignorance. I often say that there is great comfort in knowing two things: that we don't know everything and that God does know everything. Humility and trust.

We sometimes approach this book as though God has given us enough information to construct a complete chart of everything that has happened or will happen. Yet here John himself hears something and is specifically forbidden to tell us what he heard. There are mysteries God has chosen not to explain.

That ought to produce a measure of humility in anyone interpreting Revelation.

The angel then raises his right hand to heaven and swears by the One who lives forever and ever, the One "who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it" (10:6). The language takes us back to the creation story and to the commandments of the Torah. The God who is bringing history toward its conclusion is the same God who created heaven, earth and sea in the beginning.

One of the names of God in Hebrew is the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, traditionally associated with the Hebrew verb "to be." He was, He is, He will be. Some Bible versions have rendered the name with language emphasizing God's eternal being. The One who was there at Creation is the same One bringing history to its conclusion here in Revelation. As

Hebrews says, “Yeshua the Messiah is the same yesterday and today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Then comes the announcement that there will be no further delay. Some older English translations rendered the phrase as though “time shall be no more,” which has led to some imaginative ideas about eternity and the disappearance of time itself. But the point here is not that clocks stop ticking. The point is that God's purpose is moving forward. The delay is ending.

When the seventh angel sounds his trumpet, “the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets” (10:7).

The biblical word *mystery* does not mean something spooky or unknowable. It describes something once hidden that God has now made known. Paul uses the language for the good news of Messiah, for Messiah dwelling among His people, and for Gentiles being brought into God's purposes alongside Israel. What God promised through the prophets and unfolded through Yeshua is moving toward its completion.

History is not wandering aimlessly. God has an intention for His world. For our world.

2. Sweet in the Mouth, Bitter in the Stomach — Revelation 10:8-11

The voice from heaven now tells John to take the little scroll from the angel. John approaches the angel and asks for it. The response is unusual: “Take it and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.”

When was the last time you went to a library and were told to eat the book? But John is standing firmly inside the world of the Tanakh. Ezekiel was given a scroll and commanded to eat it before speaking God's words to Israel. “Then I ate it,” Ezekiel says, “and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth” (Ezekiel 3:3). John now repeats the experience. He takes the scroll, eats it, finds it sweet in his mouth and then discovers its bitterness in his stomach.

That combination matters.

The Word of God is sweet because it comes from God. The psalmist says His words are “sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb” (Psalm 19:10). We delight in God's promises, His mercy, His forgiveness and His faithfulness. But the word we receive is not always an easy word to carry.

Sometimes the message we must proclaim includes judgment. Sometimes it tells people things they do not want to hear. Sometimes obedience to it will cost us something. Sometimes what tastes sweet when we first receive it becomes bitter when we discover what faithfulness requires.

There has always been a temptation to make prophecy merely exciting. Announce a prophecy conference and people want to know what is going to happen next. Who is the beast? Which nation is represented by this symbol? How close are we to the end?

That can be sweet. It can also become very shallow.

John is not eating the scroll so that he can satisfy people's curiosity. He eats it because he is going to have to speak. "You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings" (10:11).

There is that worldwide (group of four) language again. Revelation is not merely about one nation or one people. John's message concerns the world. And he is not free to remove the bitter portions and serve only the sweet ones. If we are going to bear witness to God, we have to tell the truth about both redemption and judgment.

I was taught that the right hand of God is the hand of mercy. The left hand of God is just. We don't have a one-handed God. But there is an order of preeminence. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13) Jewish tradition, in the Shulkhan Arukh, teaches us to dress by putting on our right shoe before our left. We shake hands with right hands. Some personal bathroom matters are only performed by the left hand. Sheep are on the right hand; goats on the left.

His mercy is real, and His justice is real. Without judgment, redemption loses its meaning. Without redemption, judgment leaves us without hope. The good news is good precisely because God confronts what destroys His creation and provides the way of reconciliation through Yeshua.

John must eat the whole scroll. So must we.

3. Measuring What Belongs to God — Revelation 11:1-2

John is next given a measuring rod and told, "Get up and measure the temple of God and the altar, and those who worship in it." Again, the imagery sends us back into the prophets. Ezekiel sees a heavenly figure measuring the Temple in his great vision of restoration in chapters 40–48. Zechariah also sees Jerusalem being measured. Measurement can signify evaluation, possession and the setting of boundaries. Something is being marked out as belonging to God.

John is even told to measure the worshipers. Obviously, he is not determining whether someone is too tall or too short, 170 or 190 centimeters tall. The image is doing theological work. God knows those who belong to Him. We use an expression about religion and those who try to fit in—they measure up.

Meanwhile, John is told not to measure the outer court because it has been given to the nations, and they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months.

Here we encounter another of Revelation's limited periods: forty-two months, 1,260 days, or elsewhere “a time and times and half a time.” It is tempting to reach immediately for a calendar and begin calculating. But we have already seen how Revelation uses these types of data points to represent limited periods. The important thing is precisely that whatever else they might mean, the big story is that they are limited.

Opposition has a boundary. The nations may trample. God's people may suffer. The experience may seem terribly long to those enduring it. But evil is never given forever.

4. The Two Witnesses — Revelation 11:3-6

God then says, “I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” Immediately people want names.

Are they Moses and Elijah? Elijah shut the heavens so that rain did not fall. Moses turned water into blood and brought plagues upon Egypt. Those two actually showed up at the Mount of Transfiguration with Yeshua. Then again, perhaps the two are Elijah and Enoch because neither of them experienced death in the ordinary way. Through the years, various individuals have even appeared in Jerusalem claiming that they themselves are one of the two witnesses.

I think that misses the more important question. What does John want us to see? He calls them “the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.” That takes us directly to the prophet Zechariah Chapter 4. Zechariah sees a golden lampstand accompanied by two olive trees and eventually hears the great word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6).

There is also a deeply biblical reason for two witnesses. Torah required that every matter be established by two or three witnesses. (Deuteronomy 17:6) One witness alone was insufficient. Testimony requires confirmation. So rather than spending all our energy trying to discover the witnesses' names, we should pay attention to what they do.

They testify. They stand before the Lord of the earth and speak His Word in a world that does not want to hear it. Their clothing is sackcloth, traditionally associated with mourning and repentance. This is not triumphalist witness. These witnesses carry something of the pain of the message they proclaim.

The imagery surrounding them certainly recalls Moses and Elijah. They shut the sky, turn water to blood and strike the earth with plagues. Fire comes from their mouths against their enemies. But that does not necessarily mean John wants us to identify two historical individuals returning to earth. He is drawing from the great prophetic witnesses of Scripture to portray the power of faithful testimony.

Jeremiah described God's Word as fire. That is the fire God's witnesses carry. And this connects directly with Chapter 10. John ate the scroll and was told to prophesy again. Now we see witnesses doing exactly that. The people of God receive the Word of God and then bear witness to the world.

5. The Witnesses Are Silenced—or Are They? — Revelation 11:7–14

Then something terrible happens. “When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them.” The beast will become increasingly important as Revelation continues. For now, notice what appears to happen.

The beast wins. The witnesses die. Their bodies are left exposed in “the street of the great city,” symbolically called Sodom and Egypt, “where also their Lord was crucified.” John deliberately piles images on top of one another. Sodom was a city. Egypt was a nation. Yeshua was crucified in Jerusalem. We are not meant to find a geographical location that can somehow literally be all three. John is describing the world in rebellion against God.

Sodom, Egypt and the city that rejected Yeshua become pictures of humanity resisting God's rule. Even the refusal to bury the witnesses matters. Across cultures, burial has been one of the basic ways human beings honor the dead. To leave a body exposed is an act of humiliation. The world does not merely kill God's witnesses. It celebrates their disgrace.

“Those who dwell on the earth” rejoice over their deaths. They celebrate and even send gifts to one another because the witnesses who troubled them are finally gone.

In the Jewish world, the greatest *mitzvah* (commandment, now colloquially: a good deed) a man can perform is that of burial of another. Why is this the greatest? They say it is the only one which cannot be reciprocated.

That phrase, “those who dwell on the earth,” has appeared before in Revelation. It is more than a location or address. John uses it for people who have settled into the world's rebellion against God. The witnesses disturbed them because faithful testimony has a way of doing that.

Truth can torment people who desperately want the truth to disappear. For three and a half days, it appears that evil has won. Then God breathes. “The breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet.”

Once again, Ezekiel is nearby. There in his dramatic chapter 37, the breath of God enters the dead and they stand on their feet, a vast army brought back to life. The witnesses stand. This is one of the great encouragements of Revelation. You can kill a witness, but you cannot kill the witness of God.

I'm reminded of the story of Robert Jermain Thomas, a Welsh missionary connected with the Scottish Presbyterian mission who went to Korea in the nineteenth century, when that country was largely closed to outsiders. Thomas wanted to bring the Gospel and Korean-language Bibles into the country. In 1866, while travelling aboard an American trading ship, he was killed near Pyongyang. According to accounts that grew out of the Korean church, Thomas continued handing out portions of Scripture even as his life was threatened.

That might have looked like the end of the witness. One missionary dead. Mission over. But others followed. Protestant missionaries eventually entered Korea more openly, established churches, schools and hospitals, translated and distributed Scripture, and proclaimed the Gospel. What had looked like failure certainly was not the end of the story. Today South Korea has a substantial Christian population and the Korean church has become a significant missionary-sending force, with Korean missionaries serving around the world.

Throughout history, followers of Yeshua have discovered this strange reality. Persecution may silence one voice, but then others rise and speak. The kingdom of God has repeatedly grown in places where people attempted to destroy it. That does not make martyrdom painless. Revelation never asks us to pretend suffering does not hurt. These witnesses really die. But their enemies do not get the last word.

God does. The witnesses are summoned upward by a loud voice from heaven: "Come up here." Their enemies watch as they ascend. What looked like defeat becomes vindication.

6. The Seventh Trumpet — Revelation 11:15–19

Finally, the seventh angel sounds his trumpet. We have been waiting for this since Chapter 8. But what follows is not merely another plague. Loud voices in heaven make an extraordinary announcement:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah; and He will reign forever and ever."

There is the destination toward which these chapters have been moving. John ate the scroll. The witnesses testified. The beast attacked. The witnesses fell and stood again. Now heaven announces what has been true throughout the struggle: the kingdom belongs to God and His Messiah.

Think about how that would sound to John's first readers. Rome looked invincible and permanent. The emperor appeared powerful. Imperial authority reached across the known world. Followers of Yeshua could be marginalized, punished or killed. And John says: Rome is not the kingdom that lasts.

The twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship God. They thank Him because He has taken His great power and begun to reign. The nations were enraged, but their rage could not prevent God's purposes. Then God's Temple in heaven is opened, and the ark of His covenant appears.

For Jewish readers, that is an astonishing image. The ark represented God's covenant presence with Israel, yet the earthly ark had disappeared centuries earlier. Here John sees the ark in the heavenly Temple. God has not forgotten His covenant. Lightning, voices, thunder, an earthquake and hail follow. Heaven itself declares that the story belongs to God.

What Are We Supposed to Do?

First, we have to eat the scroll before we can speak it. Christian witness is not merely repeating religious dogmas, truths, and slogans. God's Word must become part of us. We receive it, wrestle with it and allow it to shape us. Some of it will be wonderfully sweet. Some of it will become bitter because obedience is costly and truth is not always welcomed. But we don't get to edit the scroll.

Second, we have to bear witness.

That is the thread running through both chapters. John must prophesy again. The two witnesses stand before the Lord of the earth. Their testimony reaches peoples, tribes, languages and nations. Revelation never encourages believers to retreat from the world and spend our time calculating when Yeshua will return. We have work to do while we wait.

Paul had to remind some believers in Thessalonica of something similar. They were expecting the return of Yeshua, so much so, that some of them did not continue in their work. They still needed to work, live responsibly and serve God where He had placed them. There is a difficult balance here. We long for Yeshua's return while still planting gardens, raising families, serving our neighbors, doing our work and speaking about Him today.

Third, we should not confuse apparent defeat with actual defeat. The witnesses die. For three and a half days, the world celebrates. If we stopped reading there, the beast won. But three and a half days are not forever. God breathes life into His witnesses and they stand again.

That is a word John's persecuted readers needed to hear, and so do we. Faithfulness is not measured by whether the world applauds us or whether our circumstances look successful. Our confidence rests in the God who raises the dead.

Finally, we should remember where history is going. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah.” That is not an invitation to predict dates. It is an invitation to faithfulness.

We know who reigns.

Takeaways

Because some things remain hidden, humility is appropriate when interpreting Revelation.

The Word of God can be both sweet and bitter.

God calls His own to bear witness. What once was a mission field can become a sending-agent!

Evil has limits. Opposition and “the dark side” do not last forever.

You can kill a witness, but you cannot kill the witness of God.

There is a single throne, and the One who sits there is still there. Today.

Memory Verse

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah; and He will reign forever and ever.”

Revelation 11:15

What's Next?

The seventh trumpet has sounded and the kingdom of the world has been declared the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah. But John is not finished. In Chapter 12, the scene changes dramatically as he takes us behind the conflict we have been watching.

A woman appears, a child is born, a dragon waits to destroy Him, and war breaks out in heaven. John is going to show us something deeper than another sequence of earthly events. He will reveal the spiritual conflict behind them. It will involve Satan, Yeshua and Israel.

Most importantly, Chapter 12 will answer a question that has been hovering over Revelation from the beginning: If Yeshua has conquered, why are His people still suffering?

John's answer will not be that the enemy has no power. His answer is that the enemy's power is limited, his time is short, and his defeat is certain. Right in the middle of that conflict, we will hear one of Revelation's great declarations about God's people: they will overcome even when faithfulness costs them everything. Stay tuned!