

Sweet and Sour

Revelation 10:1-11

By [Derek Thomas](#)

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. 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."

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."

There is an evident structure to the Book of Revelation. Just as there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals (chapter 7), so there is a similar parenthesis between trumpets six and seven. The seventh trumpet sounds at 11:15 and the section 10:1-11:14 consists of two visions: the angel with the little scroll (10:1-11), and the two witnesses (11:1-14). As before, what is recorded for us in chapters 10 and 11 is not meant to be regarded as chronological, as though these visions describe something taking place *after* the blowing of the sixth trumpet. Rather, as in chapter 7, these are visions describing something that cover the same period of time as those events described by the first six trumpets (and the first six seals). According to 10:6-7, whenever the seventh trumpet does sound, there will be no further delay in the plan and

purposes of God. Consequently, in 11:15, whenever the seventh trumpet sounds, we are ushered into the arena of the Day of Judgment.

As many have recognized, the basic structure of Revelation is expressed as a recapitulatory and progressive parallelism. That is, the book is constantly covering the same general ground, returning to survey it on several occasions, on each of which further insight is provided. We have already noted, for example, that the first six seals and the first six trumpets describe the same events, but from different perspectives. The seals are concerned with history from the vantage point of earth looking back into heaven. The trumpets, on the other hand, view the same history, but this time from the vantage point of heaven looking down upon the earth. The two visions of chapters 10 and 11, provide us with an interlude before the cataclysmic description of the Day of Judgment which is signaled by the blowing of the seventh trumpet (11:15ff). Just as Revelation 7 had formed an interlude prior to the opening of the seventh seal, and interlude in which we are given assurance as to the security of God's people despite the revelations of God's wrath, so Revelation 10 and 11 provide John with motivation and challenge to continue as a faithful herald of God's truth. In particular, chapter 10 speaks of a recommissioning of the apostle to the work of prophetic ministry.

Back to Ezekiel

As has become clear to us by now, reading the book of Revelation requires some familiarity with the pages of the Old Testament. For John's first readers, the Old Testament was the only Bible they possessed and it goes without saying that they would have known its details in a way that we often do not. The books of Daniel (particularly the second half) and Ezekiel play an important part in the shaping of this chapter and perhaps it is true to say that images it contains would not have appeared quite as strange to those who first encountered them as they evidently do to us today. That, of course, is an indictment upon our unfamiliarity with the pages of the Old Testament!

The opening of chapter 10 reminds us of the opening of chapter 5 since both chapters describe a "strong angel," who cries with "a loud voice" (10:1,3; 5:2) of lion-like proportions (10:3; 5:5). Everything about the description of this angel would seem to indicate that Christ (rather than, say, Michael or Gabriel) is intended, though many commentators disagree. In that sense, it is similar to many such passages in the Old Testament where the "angel of the Lord" is a theophany, or Christophany, a preincarnate appearance of Christ in human form in the Old Testament economy.

The angel appears "clothed with a cloud," (10:1) and appears to reflect the imagery of Daniel 7 where the Son of Man comes on the clouds to receive authority from the Ancient of Days. Similarly, the description of the rainbow that overarched his head (10:1) is a powerful reminder of a similar description given in the opening chapter of Ezekiel (1:26-28), where God's glory is described in this multicolored way. Both of these descriptions from Daniel and Ezekiel have already been alluded to in the opening chapter of Revelation (1:7,13). John may now be attempting to tie up the picture of the

Son of Man as bookends to this first half of Revelation. Additionally, the description of his face as "like the sun" and his feet (or legs) like "pillars of fire" also remind us of the description given of Christ in the first chapter (1:15-16).

Daniel's vision of the Son of Man was intended to portray the presence and power of God's servant with His people in the midst of severe persecution and trial. The concern facing John's readers, and the church ever since, has been similar. Jesus is "coming down from heaven" to speak to John! God's servant needs a personal word of motivation and challenge.

The "strong angel" stands with one foot on the land and the other on the sea (10:2, signaling, of course, his total sovereignty over the affairs of the earth) and carries in his hand a "little scroll," on which is inscribed the contents of verses 1-13 (and more likely, chapters 11-16, and possibly 17-22 as well). In chapter 5 a similar scroll contained the seven seals of judgment and redemption that unfolded in chapters 6-8. Some believe the two scrolls of chapters 5 and 10 to be identical, but the fact that John uses a different word for scroll here than in chapter 5 probably points to the fact that this scroll is a smaller, less general one. The scroll in chapter 5 had contained the purposes of God in redemption and judgment. This one seems more specifically orientated to the book of Revelation itself and to John's calling to be God's spokesman in delivering it.

The imagery is one of a mighty ruler whose dominion is over land and sea (10:2), and whose voice sounds like that of a lion roaring (10:3; cf. [Amos 3:8](#)).

When a lion roars, it is already committed to the attack. The sound is meant to paralyze, in much the same way that a car's headlights effect a deer. It is a savage, terrifying word that signals the unleashing of devastating, bloodcurdling images of death and destruction. John describes the sound of "seven thunders" that accompany the vision. Clearly, John's nerves are in need of being steeled for something altogether dreadful.

The Seven Thunders

Since John has been in the habit of recording what it is he has heard, he makes as though he will do the same again; but this time, he is forbidden to do so (10:4). Why? What did John hear that could not be recorded?

The identification and meaning of the seven thunders is difficult.

Does the prohibition to write down what John has heard mean that some things in the future are not to be revealed in order that we might live more in dependence on God?

Is this another example of [Deuteronomy 29:29](#), that the secret things belong to God and we are to be content with that which he has disclosed to us in his revealed will?

Was the message so extraordinary (ineffable) that, like the message Paul heard about which he records in 2 Corinthians 12, the church has no business knowing it?

Is this an example of God delaying or even canceling His proposed work of judgment in order to rescue more of mankind from the certain effects of sin by encouraging repentance?

Are the seven thunders meant to be yet another parallel set of seven judgments along with the seven seals, trumpets and bowls (the contents of which, of course, are not revealed)?

Is the passage recalling Psalm 29 where God is alluded to in terms of a seven fold formula: "the voice of the Lord...", the first of which adds by way explanation that: "The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters"?

Commentators have suggested all of these.

It is interesting that the seven thunders precede the seventh trumpet and therefore signifies, along with the first six seals and the first six trumpets, judgments which take place throughout the course of the time that followed the first coming of Jesus Christ. The multitude in John 12, hearing the voice from heaven acknowledging the prayer of Jesus that the Father's name be glorified, thought that it had thundered ([John 12:28-29](#)). Jesus' interpretation that followed is therefore all the more salutary: "'This voice was for your benefit, not Mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.' He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die." ([John 12:30-32](#)). On this view, the death of Jesus was the first indication of judgment upon the impenitent, and the certainty of God's plan of redemption which includes the destruction of the wicked as well as the salvation of the people of God.

No More Delay

As soon as the thunders have been revealed to John, the angel swears on oath, reminiscent of [Daniel 12:7](#), regarding the immanence of the future Day of Judgment which the seventh trumpet will unleash: "there will be no more delay" (10:6). The *Authorized Version* renders this, "there will be no more time." This has led some to conclude that eternity will be *timeless* in nature. But it is doubtful if the verse is meant to convey that notion. Instead, John is being reminded that there is nothing left to happen after the six trumpets have sounded except the sounding of the seventh trumpet and Day of Judgment that it ushers in. In the sequence of events as the New Testament portrays it, following the outworking of God's judgments in history, there is nothing else that needs to happen *before* the Last Judgment comes about. In that sense we can speak of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ as imminent. Not that it necessarily need occur within the next few minutes, or days, or even years; but, that once the six trumpets have sounded, nothing else remains to happen. (1) There will be no more delay. It is this sense that the closing words of the Book of Revelation, and of the Bible, are to be understood: "I am coming soon" (22:20).

The Book of Revelation is unfolding the course of history as an unfolding of a "mystery" (10:7). In the end (when the seventh trumpet sounds) the mystery of God will fully disclosed. Things otherwise hidden from view will become apparent by God's initiation and explanation. We would know nothing apart from God's revealing work. But what mystery is this? It is the mystery of God's plan and purpose. The greatest mystery of all is the way of salvation as presented in the gospel, something which Paul gives testimony to in [Romans 16:25-26](#): "...". What John is testifying to here is that the end of time will reveal to us what God is doing in this world, namely fulfilling His plan of redemption. History is His-story. What Daniel and the other prophets (c.f. v.7) had been able to do, given their place in the history of redemption, John is now disclosing to us: that the first coming of Jesus has actually set in motion the process that leads to the final consummation. The picture of Jesus opening the sealed book in chapter 5 had already established for us that perspective. In the end, whatever may be the case now, Jesus will be *seen* to be victorious over all the forces of evil. That which has been veiled will then be fully disclosed for all to appreciate.

Jesus shall reign, where'er the sun does his successive journeys run; His kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.
Isaac Watts (based on Psalm 72)

Sweet and Sour

John is asked to take the scroll and eat it. That which tastes sweet (c.f. [Psalm 119:103](#)) can also turn bitter, something which reminds us of [Ezekiel 2:8-3:11](#). There the prophet was told to eat a scroll which tasted sweet. "It was in my mouth as sweet as honey," Ezekiel said ([Ezek. 2:3](#)). Everyone who meditates on Scripture is urged to experience something similar: "O taste and see that the Lord is good" ([Psa. 34:8](#)). But just as Ezekiel was to discover that his word would be to a "rebellious house," ([Ezek. 2:8](#); c.f. 3:7), so John's discovery would likewise be that what tastes sweet in the mouth can turn bitter in the stomach (2:9). Jeremiah would confess that: "the word of the Lord has brought me insult and derision all day long" ([Jer. 20:8](#)). John, like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, must proclaim a message that contains the notes of doom. When this message is taken to the nations of the world (see 10:11), the experience will be bitter one. It is one every preacher and witness to the gospel knows all too well.

Commissioned to Obedience

John's office and call had unique features about it, but we are entitled to draw some principles that apply equally well to those called to preach of the gospel of Jesus Christ. John's commission is to make known the contents of the little scroll. He is to be God's prophetic minister in making His word known. In that sense, he is a paradigm of what God has intended from the start: that he grows his kingdom through the faithful exposition of his word. Like Timothy, John is being urged to "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" ([2 Tim. 4:2](#)).

Luke records that the first thing that Jesus did after His resurrection was to "open the Scriptures" ([Lk. 24:32](#), cf. v. [27](#)) to the two on the Emmaus Road, who promptly returned to Jerusalem and to the other disciples where Jesus appears to them too, and "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (v.45), adding, "this is what is written" so that it might be "preached in is name to all nations" (v.48). Over thirty years later, knowing that his own death is not far away, Paul would commission his friend to "preach the Word" ([2 Tim. 4:2](#)). Peter would put it this way: "God made a choice... that... from my lips" the gospel would be made known ([Acts 15:7](#)). Just as God's hand lay upon the choice of Paul, Timothy and John, so too it lay upon Peter: his *lips*, that is to say, his voice, his personality, his background. He had been shaped and formed for this special task of being the "mouthpiece of God" through whom God speaks. Their task, like the Old Testament prophets before them, and John seems to be alluding to Ezekiel in particular in Revelation 10, is to expound what God has first of all revealed to them, that is, to make known the Scriptures. Ezekiel, like John, was asked to eat the scroll contained the divine word ([Ezek. 2:8 - 3:3](#)), that being the best way to explain the task laid upon him.

There is a reason why John is re-commissioned at this point. The message which he is asked to proclaim is a hard one. Just as God would say to Ezekiel, "But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate" ([Ezek. 3:7](#)), so will many refuse to listen to the Book of Revelation. Paul warned Timothy: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" ([2 Tim. 4:3-4](#)). Such opposition will require faithfulness. Timothy is charged, "keep your head in all situations" (4:5). And John is similarly urged, "you must prophesy again" (10:11).

A faithful minister's course is a fight. The "man of God" is to "fight the good fight of faith" ([1 Tim. 6:11-12](#)). He is to be faithful to the final Word God has spoken in Scripture. He neither adds nor subtracts from the Bible ([Rev. 22:18-19](#)). His concern is not ultimately scholarship and erudition, but faithfulness and accuracy.

The purposes of God in history have a quality about them that we might consider harsh and difficult, and from which we would sooner turn away than pronounce. In the same way that Paul asks for prayer from the Ephesian Christians that he might make known the mystery of the gospel "fearlessly" ([Eph 6:19,20](#) *twice*); in the same way that Paul confessed to being afraid and weak when he visited Corinth ([1 Cor 2:3-4](#)); so John needs the assurance of a divine call and enablement to fulfill his task of being an ambassador of Jesus Christ. By eating the scroll, John is being informed that the word which he must proclaim is also a word which nourishes and empowers him. He is dependent on the very word of God that he must now proclaim. Jeremiah was told to look at an almond bud (Heb. *šaqed*) so that he might understand God's reassurance, "I

am watching (šoqed) to see that my word is fulfilled" ([Jer 1:11-12](#)). Just as the power of God lies behind the bursting forth of Spring's blossom, so the power of God's Spirit lies behind John (and those commissioned in a similar way to John) in the accomplishment of God's purposes.

In particular, the Word will be to John, and to all who faithfully proclaim it, both sweet and sour (10:9). Sweet, because one half of the Bible's message is good news! It is *evangelical* truth designed to rescue sinners from their miserable plight! It is [John 3:16](#), "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It is a message that informs us that God has entered into a covenant of grace with sinners. He calls, regenerates, justifies, adopts, sanctifies, glorifies—what William Perkins, referencing [Romans 8:28-30](#), called the "golden chain" of salvation. These are sweet notes indeed!

But the Word is bitter, too. [John 3:16](#) which declares God's love to those who believe, also warns as to the consequences of unbelief. They will "perish." To be faithful to God's message, John as representative of all preachers, must proclaim judgment on the enemies of God. The bowls and trumpets of wrath are also part of God's mystery, now revealed. "There is no peace for the wicked" ([Isa. 48:22](#); [57:21](#)) is also a part of God's message. And not only the wicked, but God's own people must hear of the consequence of covenant violation. When the Corinthians were abusing the Lord's Supper, Paul asks, "What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!" ([1 Cor. 11:23](#)). He tells the Galatians: "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" ([Gal. 6:3](#)). When two Christian women at Philippi were having "words," Paul names them publicly and says, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other" ([Phil 4:2](#)). These are sour notes, but a faithful servant will proclaim with tears in his eyes. Jesus' words to the church at Smyrna seem appropriate here: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" ([Rev. 2:10](#)).

Notes:

1. The expectation of a personal Antichrist at the end of the age, and the conversion of the Jews are problematic for this view. For this reason, some have gone in the way of a *premillennial* interpretation that maintains the nearness of the second coming whilst postponing these and other expectations until *after* the second coming. Others have adopted *preterist* interpretations, seeing the references to things that happen "without delay" or soon" as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d.

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