



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Kingdom of Our Lord

Revelation 10-11

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This morning we return to our study of the book of Revelation. You'll remember—or I hope you do—that the book is a letter from God to the churches of Asia Minor, given through Jesus to John. It began with a vision of Jesus himself in all his glory and continued on to a series of seven letters to the churches. In those letters, Jesus praises the churches where they have been faithful, rebukes them where they have not, and exhorts them to stand firm in the face of coming tribulation. Revelation is about tribulation, about perseverance, and about kingdom. It's a reminder that Jesus is Lord, that his kingdom has come, that he judges sin and that he will, with absolute certainty, vindicate his people.

The rest of the book is a vision meant to show those churches what was coming and so far what John has seen has been a fleshing out of the prophecies that Jesus told against Jerusalem and unbelieving Israel. These—at least so far—have been past events for us, but events about to or just beginning to unfold when John wrote about them to the churches. These, so far, are the things that Jesus warned would take place in the lifetime of those who were alive during his ministry. And in the vision these events began in the heavenly throne room with the delivery of a sealed scroll, given to Jesus. Its seven seals have been broken and, with the last seal a sequence of seven trumpet blasts has begun. With each, unbelieving Israel's judgement and doom have been revealed. Just as there was an interlude before the seventh and final seal was broken, there's now an interlude between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets. Look at 10:1-4.

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. 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."

The description of the mighty angel is similar enough to the description of Jesus at the beginning of the book, that I think it's safe to conclude that this *is* Jesus. He is clothed in symbols of glory here and he stands with one foot on land and one on sea—an image of his lordship over all of creation. And his voice roars out. Meredith Kline describes it vividly: "It is the noise of war, the trumpeting of signal horns and the din of battle. It is the thunder of the storm-chariot of the warrior-Lord, coming in judgements that convulse creation and confound the kings of the nations."¹ And in response to his voice sevenfold thunder echoes back. This is the voice of Psalm 29, the voice that breaks cedars, shakes the wilderness, and strips everything before it bare. John stood in awe, both of the thundering voice and of what it said, but when he went to write it all down another voice from heaven stopped him. Something even more important was about to take place. The most important thing here is the scroll carried by the mighty angel—presumably the scroll that had been handed to Jesus, the seals of which he has broken. He now holds the opened scroll. Continuing at verse 5:

And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 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, that there would be

no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. (Revelation 10:5-7)

Jesus raises his hand and swears by his Father, he gives a pledge and the pledge is that there will be no further delay. The seventh trumpet is to be sounded and with it the "mystery of God would be fulfilled". What mystery? The one "he announced to his servants the prophets". And what's that? Well, this is exactly how St. Paul describes God's calling forth a new people for himself—a people neither Jewish nor gentile, but both—one people, drawn from the nations, and unified in Jesus the Messiah. Paul uses this language particularly in Ephesians and Colossians. This is how Paul puts it in Colossians 3:3-6.

How the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The mystery, revealed to the prophets and made clear in the ministry of Jesus, that the Gentiles will be fellow heirs with the faithful of Israel, is about to be fulfilled. But what's that got to do with the seventh trumpet? Well, so long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, the life and systems of the old covenant remained, the temptation to look for hope in the temple and in the land, the temptation to find one's identity in *torah*—in circumcision, in diet, in sabbath—the temptation to require Gentiles to come to Jesus, to become part of the people of God, through *torah*, would remain. The Lord had to send a clear and unmistakable message to everyone that the old covenant was finished and a new one had been established. The seventh trumpet would signal that the days of Jerusalem and the

¹ *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 101.

temple were over. The Lord's promise to Israel have been finally and once-and-for-all fulfilled in Jesus.

And remember the opened scroll held by the mighty angel, held by Jesus. Look at verses 8-11:

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." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." And 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. And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

John draws this imagery of the scroll from Daniel and Ezekiel. Daniel is told to seal his scroll, because the events it relates are not for his own day, but relate to what will "happen to your people in the latter days" (Daniel 10:14). This doesn't mean John's scroll is the same one. It could be. But the key point of the imagery is that the Lord is now fulfilling his promise given through the prophets. But what is that promise? That's where the Ezekiel imagery comes in. Here's what Ezekiel writes:

And he said to me, "Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. (Ezekiel 3:1-3)

Sound familiar? John, too, is told to eat the scroll. And like Ezekiel's scroll, it is sweet to taste, but bitter, hard to stomach. Ezekiel writes a few verses later:

The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me. (Ezekiel 3:14)

This bitter-sweetness is the nature of the Lord's judgement. Ezekiel was addressing the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. And now the Lord is about to bring about something very similar. Judgement will once again fall on faithless Israel. And it's bitter-sweet. It is sweet in that the faithful will be vindicated. Those martyrs we saw earlier, the ones under the altar, will finally have an answer to their prayers. Those who persecuted them will be judged, they will finally get their comeuppance, and the righteous will rejoice. But the judgement and destruction of the wicked is bitter and the Lord takes no pleasure in it. To quote from Ezekiel again:

As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11)

And so, as Jesus had promised, the Lord gave Israel forty years to repent, to turn from their unbelief and to embrace his Messiah. He is merciful and slow to anger, but the Lord must deal with the stubborn rebellion of his people. If Creation is to be set to rights, the wicked who perpetuate its corruption must be removed. And so John not only sees the Lord's judgement on Israel, but he tastes it, he experiences the full reality of both its sweetness and its bitterness, so that like Ezekiel, he can prophesy from the heart. This is the culmination of Israel's story—the *old* Israel at any rate. John is told that this is about many people, nations, languages, and kings. This is how the nations will see the works of the Lord, how the nations will know his faithfulness, how the nations will come to the new Israel, hear the good news about Jesus the Messiah, believe, and become a part of it themselves.

But first, remember that this happens in an interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets sounding. This is the second interlude. The first was between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. In that first interlude the 144,000 were counted and sealed by the Lord—they were marked out that they might be spared from the coming judgement, much like the Hebrew homes marked with the blood of lamb and spared by the angel of death as judgement fell on Egypt. This second interlude serves a similar purpose. Look at 11:1-2.

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months."

Again, this is an echo of Ezekiel and Daniel. The periods of time that John writes about in the coming chapters are drawn from Daniel's imagery: forty-two months, 1260 days, and three-and-a-half days. The forty-two months and 1260 days are the same period of time equaling three-and-a-half years. This was the duration of the war against Jerusalem that brought about the fall of the city and the destruction of the temple. Daniel wrote about the time of the "shattering of the power of the holy people" (12:7). The sanctuary would "be trampled underfoot". In other words, judgement is coming on Jerusalem and the temple.

The imagery of measuring the temple is drawn from Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's vision, he was given a measuring reed and given the task of measuring an idealised temple. For seven chapters we read in detail every measurement and at the end of Ezekiel's task, the glory of the Lord fills the temple and he promises, "I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever" (43:2-7). For Ezekiel—and for the people of his day—this meant that the Lord would restore the temple and the priesthood and that his presence would remain with his people. For John this imagery

means that despite the coming crisis and disaster, despite the gentiles trampling the city and the temple for three-and-a-half years, despite the end of faithless and unbelieving Israel, the Lord has established a new temple and will remain with his people—with this new Israel. The more immediate promise, as with the sealing of the 144,000, is that the Lord will spare the faithful amidst the coming destruction. The long-term promise is that this people, the Church, is the new temple, this one not made with hands and with Jesus its cornerstone.

John goes on in 11:3:

And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”

Scripture requires two witnesses before anyone is condemned. Here they are and they will witness against the city, its temple, and its people for the full three-and-a-half years. Who are they? John goes on in verse 4:

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two

prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

So who, again, are the witnesses? The imagery and the powers ascribed to them call back to the two great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah—who also happen to represent the law and the prophets—the totality of Israel’s life and ministry. And so what we see here is the ministry of the old Israel taken up by the new, by the Church in Jerusalem. The city, the city where their Lord was crucified—which tells us that these witnesses represent the Church—is condemned like Sodom and Egypt—condemned and marked for judgement and destruction. As the Romans trample the city for three-and-a-half years, these witnesses will testify against it. John draws on Jeremiah in describing them:

**Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts:
“Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire,
and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.**

Those words, too, were spoken by the prophet in the lead-up to Jerusalem’s capture by Babylon. The imagery recalls Elijah, calling down a famine on the land for three-and-a-half years and of Moses calling down plagues on Egypt—and points to the fledgling Church being led out of Egypt to escape in the wilderness as Israel did.

The witnesses, John writes, will be killed by the beast who ascends from the bottomless pit. John’s language of the

beast making war on them is straight from Daniel and helps to identify the beast, otherwise we might be tempted to think that the beast represents the unbelieving Jews of Jerusalem. In Daniel the beast that makes war on the saints is Antiochus Epiphanes. The beast here represents another pagan gentile empire making war against the saints—this time Rome—and as when Jesus was crucified, the Jews and Rome once again combine forces against Jesus’ people. The witnesses are killed and their bodies are left in the street. That expression “dead bodies” is here three times, but in the first two it’s singular: “their dead body”—which suggests that the number “two” is symbolic and that it’s a larger group that makes up the witnesses—maybe even the whole church. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets rejoices over the dead witnesses and in doing so only confirms the truth of their witness against her.

And yet the Lord is faithful to his people. The witnesses are raised three-and-a-half days later. “A breath of life from God entered them,” and as the city watched they were carried into heaven. Whether this is literal or symbolic isn’t clear. It may well be that the Lord resurrected two or more Christians in those days in Jerusalem and carried them up to heaven. But whatever the case, the language John uses parallels the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It is language of vindication. If this book is about tribulation, perseverance, and kingdom, here are all three. Not only are the saints vindicated before their watching enemies, but at the same time the Lord gives the city a precursor of the judgement to come—an earthquake that kills a tenth of the city—a tithe for the Lord, marking the remainder out for destruction. But notice the result. Those who saw and hear of these events were terrified and gave glory to God. We don’t have time to get into the details this morning, but I think there’s good reason to interpret this as an act of belief, not of rebellious Israel, but of the nations. Rome has finally been brought into the story, to take part in the persecution of Jesus’ people, and that gets the attention of the

pagan nations finally. And through these witnesses we see God's promises and Israel's calling to the nations finally fulfilled. What Elijah and Moses, what the old Israel was never able to do, to bring the nations to faith in the Lord, this new Israel by the power of God finally accomplishes.² And with that, as I said, the story now begins to shift.

Let's quickly finish Chapter 11. John continues in verse 14:

The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

The seventh trumpet is finally blown—remember, no more delays—and with it heaven rejoices: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Remember the little scroll at the beginning? The one that contained "the mystery of

God...just as he announced to his servants the prophets"? John's language of the kingdom of "our Lord and his Christ" is reminiscent of the language of Psalm 2, where the rulers of the earth take counsel "against the Lord and against his anointed". Psalm 2 is a psalm about the rule of Israel's king over the nations:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:8-9)

The judgement against unbelieving Israel and on Jerusalem has happened. The prophets and saints have faithfully witnessed Jesus and their witness has won the victory. The flag of Jesus' kingdom has been firmly planted. Even as the nations rage, the Lord has made them Jesus' heritage and is preparing to break them with a rod of iron. The focus of John's vision now shifts from Jerusalem to the nations.

Brothers and Sisters, the Church that Jesus has established and filled with his Spirit will accomplish its mission. He has placed us here to witness the faithfulness of God and to proclaim the good news about Jesus: that he has died, that he has risen, that he is Lord, and he is making all things new. We, ourselves, are a testament to the power of God to forgive and to renew. As Jerusalem did and as the nations did in John's vision, the world around us will rage, but the Lord will prevail. This week, south of the border, we've seen the ungodly raging over the prospect that there may be restrictions on their ability to murder their own children. The barbarians are at the gate. In their raging, Jesus and his people have been called out as Public Enemy No. 1. As it did come for the saints of old, tribulation will surely come to us. We will face pressure to conform, to give up, to bow to the gods of this wicked age, to give up hope in the promises of our Lord and to forget all that he has done in the past to confirm his faithfulness. Brothers

and Sisters, let St. John's vision of the triumph of the Lamb be your encouragement. And hear St. Paul's exhortation to the people of that First Century church who stood against the tide of that tribulation:

Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. (1 Corinthians 16:13)

Those are no empty words, my Friends. Our Lord himself stands behind them, for Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.

Let's pray: Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: Grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

² For the details, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 273-283.