

*All Things New: The Sweet and Sour Scroll*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Zephaniah 1:14-16, 2:1-3; Ezekiel 3:1-14; Revelation 10*

Today's final Scripture reading is from Revelation 10. May God bless the reading of His holy and sacred Word. "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.""

You gotta take the bad with the good; that's how the saying goes. You can go to a concert with a famous performer, but it will cost you a week's pay. Awesome meals usually come with awesome calorie counts. Our marriage vows are "for richer; for poorer; in sickness and in health." It's said that companies can accomplish one thing – something fast, something cheap, or something good. Two out of those three is pretty great. If you can find a company that does all three, invest in it – it's destined for greatness. Because the sour goes with the sweet.

Today's passage reminds us of that in several ways. Revelation 10 continues the strange journey into unfamiliar territory that is difficult for us to interpret. But there are clues here that give us a foothold in understanding a couple core concepts that have meaning for us today, even as we puzzle through.

You might remember that last week, there were six trumpet judgments on the earth. We studied how these trumpet judgments are modeled after the plagues on Egypt during the Exodus; God is using a familiar pattern. The trumpet judgments don't necessarily come one right after another in history, and we may have very well experienced the third trumpet judgment in our lifetimes. It doesn't mean that the end of all things is tomorrow, but it does mean that we must be prepared for what is to come. The last of the six trumpet judgments was the harshest, where a third of humanity was struck down. It's a judgment we believe is to come.

That's why it's so important we see what we see at the beginning of Revelation 10. Another mighty angel comes down from heaven. He is robed in a cloud, signifying his belonging to God in heaven and not a fallen angel. But then there's another important detail: a rainbow is above his head. What does this say to us? It's this, and it's our first point for today: *even when carrying out His judgment, God always has His promises to us in sight.* There's no doubt that what we heard about last week was unnerving and even scary. But we might remember the final sentence of Revelation 9, that despite all the warnings, all the woes, all the trumpet blasts of judgment, the living didn't change their ways one iota. They kept doing the same exact things – their lying, cheating, lusting, killing. They didn't repent.

We've got to remember that back in Exodus, when we saw these kind of plagues the first time, Pharaoh had the exact same reaction. He saw all ten plagues; he lost his firstborn son; he told Moses and the Hebrews to go; and yet then in his anger he chased them with his army up to the Red Sea, where a good portion of his troops drowned. Despite seeing that the God of Moses was the one true God over all, Pharaoh still fought against Him. And we can't just pick on Pharaoh here. The Israelites saw all of God's wonders, yet they complained bitterly against Moses leading them into the wilderness, committing idolatry, conspiracy, and rebellion. Those who saw the wonders would rather God leave them alone.

God wouldn't be God unless He brought punishment on the wicked. A perfect God must display perfect justice. No one is free of guilt. Yet even in the time of Noah and the flood, God did not destroy all people; He saved Noah and his family. And after the flood, God put a rainbow in the sky as a promise – a covenant – that never again would He destroy all life by a flood, whether animals or humanity. No matter how bad things have become, God keeps His promise. Now the covenant of the rainbow is very specific – it's about a flood destroying the earth. Yet that promise to show mercy to mankind is right in front of God, even as He brings His judgment down on the wicked.

Here's the point: God never forgets His promises. They are always in front of Him, even during the worst of times. Are you sick? I was writing this with a 101-degree fever. Psalm 107:19-20 – “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.” Are you dealing with sin in your life and you don't know if you'll ever overcome it? Colossians 1:13-14 – “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Do you feel like God is far from you? Hebrews 13:5 – “God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”” He has made promises to us He will keep. The covenant of the rainbow was above this angel's head in heaven; the angels wear the reminders of God's promises! Or so it would seem. He will not forget them.

Moving on...this angel then does something unique. He comes down to earth with a little scroll, and he puts his feet on land and sea, and he gives a lion's shout. Since the lion stands for Jesus in Revelation, usually, we have to imagine that he's been given the power to speak on Jesus' behalf. And seven thunders speak. Again, this is the angel speaking on behalf of God, because in the Psalms, in Job, in Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, God's voice is compared to thunder.

Here's the really odd part: John hears what the angel says, and he's about to write it down, and a voice from heaven pretty much says, "Nope." Don't write down what the thunders say; seal it up. It seems strange that John would even write this part down, that it would matter if he was to keep it hidden. It may simply be because John was writing the vision down or dictating it as it occurred; whatever happened, that's what's in there. The writing style of Revelation with all of its messiness suggests that's the case. But why didn't this bit get edited out? Why did we hear about the thunders only to find out we can't hear what they said?

It actually leads to another point I want to talk about briefly this morning: *God wraps Himself in mystery, and though He reveals His mysteries to some people at some times, not every mystery is ours to know.* We have a whole lot of questions for God, don't we? Sometimes they're softball questions – why did God make colors, and why can we see them? (Especially since we know a lot of animals don't.) Why can't Detroit put together a good football team? (I mean, they're the only franchise that's been in the NFL since Day 1 that has never been in a SuperBowl!) Good questions, sure. But there are harder, deeper questions. Why did someone have to die young, tragically, leaving behind young children? Why do a couple of our friends, some of the nicest people ever, have to spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs? Why flu and bad knees, why tremors and cancers and COPD?

The thing is, sometimes we do get let in on the secrets. Sometimes God does reveal Himself. After a long period of silence, God made Himself known to the Hebrews and rescued them from Egypt. After a similar period of silence, God made Himself known to us all through His Son, Jesus Christ. The mystery of the ages, how God would ransom His people and satisfy both justice and mercy, was revealed. The book of Revelation illustrates this mystery as a scroll being unsealed by Jesus Himself. We live in the truly blessed time of history because we don't have to wonder and ponder – we know what God has done. It's already been accomplished. Jesus has already paid the price for our sins and secured our place in His Kingdom.

And sometimes, we get let in on some of the mysteries in our lives. There were times in my life when I questioned why God would send me on a year-long trip to Russia while I was engaged, while I had other things I really wanted to do in my life, only to get me there and tear apart all the plans I had for the mission and evangelism and good things I was going to do for God there. But in reality, that year was set-up, it was preparation, for so many things to come. I needed desperately to see that God was to be the focus – not ministry, not the total numbers of people saved under my watch or Bible studies led, but God Himself. It shows how dimwitted I am that He had to send me halfway across the world to start getting through to me, but I'm glad He did. I don't understand all the mysteries there, but I'm aware enough to be grateful.

Sometimes, God lets us in on what He's doing in His proper time. When Paul was really struggling with a problem, some major physical issue, God told Him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul then boasted about His weakness because it was a way that God could glorify Himself. If Paul was weak but God was shown as strong through him, all the more glory to God! Not every mystery will remain a mystery.

But sometimes, like those seven thunders, the mysteries we question are going to remain sealed up. It's not for us to know. We can be angry about that, especially when those mysteries are tragic, affect us personally, we feel we have some right to know. And yet God spares us a great deal, I believe, in keeping some mysteries hidden. We might remember the story of the righteous man Job, and how after his huge losses of all he owned, all his children, his friends came and sat with him in silence for a week. That was when they were a true blessing to him. It was only when they opened their mouths and tried to figure out the mystery of why this had happened that things went sour. God never revealed to Job why he had lost everything – it was through no fault of his own. But would Job have felt better knowing? Probably not.

A fair number of scholars have guessed at what the thunders said, which I honestly think is kinda stupid – if God wanted us to know, He would have let John write it down. But what I really think is that God wants us to hold on tightly to one another, to support one another, when things are difficult and the road ahead is unclear and mystery seems around us on every side. As your pastor, as much as I've studied, as much as I might understand Scripture, there are so many mysteries. All I know is that those mysteries have taught me that I need to trust in Jesus, that He knows the way through them, and that the things that God has revealed to us prove that we can in fact trust Jesus to lead us through the darkness when it comes.

And as we continue, we do get some promises from the angel, that in fact the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as was foretold. Then comes the little scroll. The voice from heaven tells John to take and eat it. Bizarre, right?? But this is a vision, so we take it at face value. Just as promised, when John ate the scroll, it was sweet to eat, but made his stomach sour at the same time. Once he's done, he's told that he must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, kings, languages.

What's the meaning behind this odd little fact? More than we'd think. And it's the third and final point I'd like to discuss this morning: *the only way to tell the full gospel story is to include the sour with the sweet*. John is seeing this grand vision, he's writing it down, he's prophesying to and about the whole world, and it's difficult. He sees the wonders of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he sees Jesus triumphant, he sees all things set right...but he also witnesses the great evil on the earth, evil that will become even more vicious and horrible as the vision progresses. He sees the failure of people to repent and suffering the fate that their choices doom them to. He sees the glories of heaven and the horror of hell and he must prophesy about them both to be faithful to his calling as a witness for God.

This is the reality of life for true Christians, especially those of us who take seriously our calling to share with others who Jesus Christ is. Perhaps now, before we come to grips with the rest of Revelation, we need to settle in our minds the urgency of the gospel and why we carry it to all, with the hopes that they might repent and believe in Jesus.

As Revelation will show us, there is real evil in the universe and real evil in the world. Spiritual opposition to God is real. It comes from outside of us, and it comes from inside our own warped hearts. Jesus said of the last days in Matthew 24, "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."

That sounds a lot like our American situation. Our political situation is wicked; our social perspective is wicked. We were once a country where we cared for our neighbors, where their children played on our lawns, we'd go to their ball games, where we'd sit on the patio and have a beer with them. We weren't all Christians, not by a long shot, but our culture was deeply influenced and shaped by Christian thought. Now, we don't know our neighbor's names.

Maybe it's not wicked not to know our neighbors, but it points to the truth that we live in a time of deep self-centeredness. We have everything delivered these days partially because we have no time, but partially because we don't want to deal with people. As a society, the love of most has grown cold. As a society, we don't trust one another. We see others as burdens to avoid or objects to be used for our gain, not persons in need of God's love and grace. And that's wickedness. That doesn't even get into the deeper wickedness that permeates our culture, where many now celebrate things that we wouldn't even talk about in polite society. We live in darkening times where everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And even this darkness pales in comparison to the oppression and violence facing our fellow believers around the world.

There will be a price to pay for all this wickedness. All who fail to come to Jesus as Lord and Savior will one day stand before Him condemned. Since they refuse to turn to Him and accept His payment on their behalf, they will take that wrath on themselves. That's bleak, that's sad, and yet it's also just. Those who rebel against God in life without remorse or regret will face the consequences of their wickedness. That's the sour part of the scroll. It's the part we'd prefer not to talk about. But it's not the prophet's job to say what is comfortable. It's to say what is true. That does turn our stomachs, if we're honest. But if we're dishonest and do not speak the whole truth to people, then Jesus appears to be just one spiritual option among many. Our job is to befriend, to witness, to comfort, but also to warn.

But the good news, the sweetness of the scroll, is so sweet, permanently sweet, beyond any bitterness. The good news is that Jesus saves. The good news is that we don't have to do anything to receive His salvation or to earn it; it's already been purchased; it's already a done deal. Jesus' righteousness covers our sin as we believe in Him through faith – faith that itself is a gift from God. And not only that, Jesus promises to make us more like Him, that we can grow in His likeness, as we allow His Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

That free gift of God's grace and salvation changes not only our future life, it changes us right now. It frees us from living the way the world wants us to. It frees us from fear. We can live in joy knowing that God loves us and cares for us always. And once we do die, once we leave this place, we'll be going to our perfect, permanent home...not just an old humans' home, but a place where we will live and reign alongside our Savior, where we are priests in His Kingdom serving the living God. Yes, the bitter is truly bitter, but the sweet is truly sweet.

May we go into this week full of confidence in our God, who has His promises to us always in front of Him. May we live in expectation that every mystery has its answer in Him. And may we talk to those we know about the full gospel of God – because while it may be bitter to those who reject Him, the news of God's love will be the sweetest thing to those He saves.