

“The Bittersweet Book” (Revelation 10:1-11)

Why does God allow human suffering and death? Why does He allow evil to go unpunished? When will He break the silence and punish the wicked? Have you ever been asked such questions? I have. Have you personally asked any of these questions? I have. This may be the most difficult biblical question to answer this side of eternity. It is the one question that no Christian wants to be asked. After all, many people say they can't accept a God who stands by and lets evil continue in the world. Even Christians have fallen away from Christ because they couldn't harmonize the reality of evil and suffering with a God of love. Yet, for those that are interested, the Bible provides an answer to this dilemma in Revelation 10:1-11.¹

Before we delve into our passage, let's get our bearings. Revelation 10:1-11:14 is a parenthetical vision. The opening of the seventh seal was preceded by two visions (7:1-8; 11:1-17), so here, the sounding of the seventh trumpet is preceded by two visions (10:1-11; 11:1-14). The emphasis shifts temporarily from the outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers to the consolation and encouragement of believers.

1. Trust and Time God's promises (10:1-7). In 10:1, John sees “another² strong³ angel⁴ coming down out of heaven.” A “strong angel” is referred to three times in Revelation (see also 5:2 and 18:21). This implies there are angels of varying degrees of strength and that this one is very powerful. He probably uses a Bowflex like I do. In 10:1b, a four-fold description of this angel is included. This strong angel is **(1) “clothed with a cloud.”**⁵ In the Old Testament, God appears in a cloud as a sign of His glory.⁶ In the New Testament, clouds are frequently connected with God's judgment.⁷ In Revelation 1:7, it is predicted that Jesus will come again “with the clouds” (cf. Dan 7:13). **(2) “The rainbow⁸ was upon his head.”** In Revelation 4:3, God has a rainbow encircling His throne, signifying His faithfulness and mercy. The rainbow is a reminder that God will never destroy the earth with water again (Gen 9:12-17). God will never go back on His Word. He never goes back on a promise. He is always true to Himself. **(3) “His face was like the sun.”** In Revelation 1:16, Jesus' face “was like the sun shining in its strength.” This angel is reflecting the appearance of the radiant glory and majesty of Christ.⁹ **(4) “His feet like pillars of fire.”** Fire, throughout Revelation, symbolizes judgment and this angel's mission is to announce God's coming judgment. “Pillars of fire” is reminiscent of Israel's wilderness wanderings, when God sent a “pillar of fire” to guide the Israelites at night and a “cloud” by day (Exod 13:21-22). This not only guided but also delivered and protected God's people (Exod 14:24). Thus, this angel signifies judgment, glory, and power but also deliverance for God's people.

The strong angel in 10:2 “**had in his hand a little book which was open.**”¹⁰ The little scroll may be different from the scroll Jesus Christ unrolled (5:1; 6:1). John used a different and rare Greek word to describe it.¹¹ However, it is also possible that the size of the book may mean that most of the message has been revealed.

In 10:2b-3a, this strong angel “**placed his right foot on the sea and his left on the land; and he cried out with a loud voice, as when a lion¹² roars.**” This is a colossal angel that straddles land and sea. This angel would win any game of *Twister* hands down. Spanning the earth and the sea symbolized this angel's sovereignty and authority over the whole world.¹³ It conveys the image of taking possession. This angel is claiming the world for Christ. God is going to take back what is rightfully His (Ps 2:6-8). This should cause our hearts to leap within us! God will eventually rid the world of evil. He will be victorious. This should encourage you and me to continue to trust Him and wait for His promises to be fulfilled.

The loud voice of this angel is likened to a roaring lion, suggesting a cry of vengeance. God's anger is described as the roaring of a lion (Job 4:9-10; Hos 5:14). He is often referred to as a lion ready to devour (Isa 31:4; Hos 11:10; Amos 3:8), emphasizing the importance of His message and the power and majesty of His authority and sovereignty over all.

After the strong angel cried out, **“the seven peals of thunder¹⁴ uttered their voices”** (10:3b). Such **“thunders”** come forth from the throne of God (4:5) and dramatically emphasize the importance of God’s message and purposes (cf. 8:5). The number seven could emphasize the completeness of the message or be a symbolic number that points to the voice of God Himself. It is likely that this is an allusion to Psalm 29:3-9 where thunder is portrayed as the voice of the Lord, seven times.¹⁵ The idea is that thunderstorms are a reminder to man that he should ascribe glory and strength to God and worship God as the Creator King of this world. In the physical world, thunder warns of coming storms. In the spiritual world, thunder warns of impending storms of judgment. In this verse, these thunders spoke to warn John of tribulation to come.

After the seven peals of thunder had spoken, John was about to write down what he heard, but was interrupted by a voice out of heaven. The voice commands John to **“seal up the things which the seven peals of thunder have spoken and do not write them”** (10:4). The voice probably belongs to God or Christ (cf. 1:11, 19; Dan 12:4, 9). From the context of the passage, this apparently deals with God’s judgments and purposes for these things, but the details are sealed. This indicates that God has not revealed in Scripture all the judgments that will take place on the earth during the great tribulation. Evidently, the message was so awesome that man could not handle it. It is sealed and is never revealed in this book. The Lord will evidently explain and reveal this Himself when we are with Him.

It also seems that these things were spoken for John’s benefit, but not for ours. This is similar to 2 Corinthians 12:4 where Paul shared that he “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (see also 2 Thess 2:5). We must remember that prophecy is only partial (cf. 1 Cor 13:9), and God has only revealed what we need to know, not what we would like to know. Therefore, there is no value in trying to conjecture as to what God has said we should not know. While we may know the broad outlines of things to come, there are still some things that are not revealed. Thus, we cannot accurately predict the future and should not attempt.

After being stopped dead in his tracks, John begins writing again in 10:5. He records, **“Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven.”** For emphasis, the gymnastic ability of this angel is mentioned three times in this chapter (10:2, 5, 8). Again, this presents a picture of total conquest of land and sea. This angel **“lifted up his right hand¹⁶ to heaven.”** This was and is a customary gesture when making a solemn oath (cf. Gen 14:22; Deut 32:40; Dan 12:7). In fact, the Bible is the basis of our modern-day courtroom oath taking: “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and...”

The angel then **“swore by Him¹⁷ who lives forever and ever,¹⁸ WHO CREATED HEAVEN AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE EARTH AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE SEA AND THE THINGS IN IT”¹⁹** (10:6). This oath emphasizes the certainty of what the angel announced. It is important to note that the basis of the oath is the person and work of God (see Rev 4:9-11). The phrase **“who lives forever and ever”** sums up all the attributes of God—who He is. The three-fold division of creation sums up all the deeds of God—what He has done.²⁰ God is the eternal, self-existent God who created all things and who can cause whatever He pleases to happen.

It is significant, for us who are living in these last days before the tribulation, that the key philosophical issue of our time revolves around these two issues—the existence of God, and creation versus secularism and evolution. Modern man derides both. Instead of being the creation of a personal God who created mankind for His own glory and purposes, man is the impersonal result of time and chance.²¹ This is a lie. Therefore, we must counteract this teaching. We must have answers for our children. We must study up on matters pertaining to the Bible and science. If we fail to educate our children and ourselves, we will potentially hurt the cause of Christ.

Going back to the oath, the strong angel proclaimed **“that there will be delay no longer, but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets”**²² (10:6d-7). When the angel says, **“there will be delay²³ no longer,”** he means that once the seventh trumpet is sounded, God will act swiftly to establish His righteous rule on earth. Evidently, the seal and trumpet judgments will take some time to unfold, giving earth-dwellers time to repent (6:15-17; 9:20-21), but the bowl judgments will come very quickly allowing little or no time for repentance (16:1-17). The period of God’s patience is over. In fact, the verb translated **“finished”**²⁴ (cf. Rev 15:1) is a form of the verb Jesus used at His crucifixion when He cried out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). God is bringing complete closure.

The remaining question is: What is the **“mystery of God”**?²⁵ First, we must define the word **“mystery.”** In the Bible, a “mystery” is a divine truth previously undisclosed but now made known through Christ or His apostles (Eph 3:9). In this context, the “mystery of God” refers to the fulfillment of God’s defeat of evil (cf. Dan 12:7a). The mystery of God describes the good news of the redemption of creation and the bad news of the judgment of the wicked.²⁶

Chapter 10 is vital to our understanding of the book of Revelation for it signals a significant change that is about to take place. Listen up: Time will run out at the blowing of the seventh trumpet, and the mystery that was preached, to and through the prophets, will be finished.

[So how can you trust and time God’s promises? Verses 8-11 will instruct each of us to...]

2. Digest and declare God’s Word (10:8-11). When John first saw the strong angel in 10:1, he immediately focused on a little book in his hand (10:2). These last four verses involve this book and how it relates to John. In 10:8, John records, **“Then the voice which I heard from heaven, I heard again speaking with me, and saying, ‘Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land.’”** In Revelation 5, it was the Lamb who took the scroll from the Father. Here, John takes the open book from the strong angel. What exactly does this little book say? The Bible doesn’t say directly. Yet there are a couple of clues. In 10:7, John is told that the sounding of the seventh trumpet will complete the mystery of God. This is a clue that the contents of the book are all the information regarding the rest of the tribulation. In 10:11, when John is informed that his commission to prophesy continues, there is indication that the contents of the little book are that prophecy.

In 10:9, John approached the angel and requested the little book.²⁷ The angel told John, **“Take it and eat it.”** This is quite strange, to say the least. Imagine sitting around munching on the Bible! Usually, eating a book is not very nourishing! Books normally do not contain vitamins! Yet, this is the third time in the Scriptures that a person is told to eat a book (cf. Jer 15:13-17; Ezek 2:8-10). Why? Eating is a universal idiom for receiving knowledge. John is being challenged to know and understand God’s prophetic Word. But biblical knowledge is not merely knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It refers to assimilating knowledge into one’s life. God wanted John to digest the contents of the book so that it would change him personally. He needed personal transformation. This is also true for each of us. It is not enough to read the Bible; we must apply the Bible to our lives. Reading the Bible without applying is like eating without chewing. No one would consider such a thing!

You’ve heard the old adage, “You are what you eat.” Well, it’s actually true! When you eat a burger, your body metabolizes it. It assimilates and converts it to energy and the building material to create flesh and bone. That burger eventually becomes a part of your body, whether you like it or not! You bear it on your body. The same ought to be true with God’s Word. You should begin to act and look more like Jesus Christ. Every day and in every way, people ought to be able to say, “I’m becoming more like Christ.” I would suggest to you that you haven’t really learned the Word until you live the Word. So how are you living? What difference has the book of Revelation made in your life?

In 10:9, this angel tells John that this book **“will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.”**²⁸ This is a sweet and sour scroll.²⁹ God’s Word can be bittersweet and hard to digest. Let’s face it; sometimes “relief” is not spelled b-o-o-k. Sometimes God’s Word can give us heartburn. Other times it is sweet to the taste.

We must understand that prophecy and Scripture, as a whole, is bittersweet. There are sweet promises in the Bible, but there are also bitter warnings. God’s Word can bring joy to our heart, but at times it brings sorrow. It both blesses us and burdens us. People get excited about studying prophecy. Preaching from Revelation thrills people. Unquestionably, there are some exciting things about this book. It has a sweet taste. But it also burdens the believer about his unsaved family and friends, and is a stern warning of judgment to come to the unbeliever.

In 10:10, John writes, **“I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.”**³⁰ This revelation was pleasant at first because it was a revelation from God (cf. Ps 119:103). Please note that John tastes God’s revealed Word. It is not enough to see the book in someone’s hand or even to know what it contains. We must appropriate it into our lives. We must assimilate it and digest it. Too many Christians do not make the Word part of their inner being. Yet, our privilege as believers is not only to read the Bible but also to assimilate it into our lives. God won’t force-feed us with His Word; rather, He exhorts us to take it from His hand, eat it and assimilate it into our lives. The Word of God is the food of the Christian. It is compared to bread (Matt 4:4), milk (1 Pet 2:2), meat (1 Cor 3:1-2), and honey (Ps 119:103).

Still, as John meditated on it and comprehended the fearful judgments that it predicted, he became distressed. Have you ever experienced the sweet and bitter dimensions of God’s Word? We read of God’s love and mercy toward us, His eternal plan of salvation, His promise to give us a future and a hope, and the assurance of eternal life. That’s sweet! But then the Word also speaks directly to areas in our lives that may require change. Maybe your behavior or lifestyle dishonors God and is in direct violation of His Word. Maybe you have excused a bad attitude or a critical spirit in your life. At times, God’s Word can be a painful tool of correction. But it is always redemptive! It is always for our good.

You may have noted a correlation between the contrast of “sweet” vs. “bitter” and that of “hot” vs. “cold” in the message to the Laodicean church (3:14-22). Hotness and coldness are preferable to bland lukewarmness. Hotness and coldness both benefit men by its contrast to its surroundings. Hot coffee on a cold morning is a blessing; lukewarm coffee is not. Ice-cold iced tea is soothing on a hot summer day; lukewarm tea is not. So too, God’s Word, whether sweet or bitter, is beneficial because of its distinctiveness. This was a much needed message for the Laodicians, who were virtually indistinguishable from those who were lost and without hope. The superiority and desirability of Christianity is found in its distinctiveness. It is that distinctiveness which must be evident in our lives and on our lips.³¹

In 10:11, John writes, **“And they said to me, ‘You must³² prophesy again³³ concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.’”**³⁴ In 10:4 and 8, a voice from heaven speaks to John, then the mighty angel in 10:9. But now we read **“and they said to me.”** This is what is known as an indefinite or a literary plural, sometimes used to hide the precise subject. Whether this came from the voice from heaven or from the angel or from some other source is not important. It is left indefinite. What is important is the commission or the assignment.

John is recommissioned to faithfully proclaim God’s Word and judgment on the wicked (cf. Jer 1:9-10). John must speak! In a similar manner, as a pastor, I am commissioned to faithfully proclaim the entire Word of God. Each of you, as fellow believers, is also commissioned to the same task of applying and proclaiming His Word. Being a true prophet of God is no easy task. It requires a man or woman to tell people what they don’t want to hear.

Humanly speaking, we would rather speak “sweet” words for God, rather than “bitter” words which cause men to react against us. When God sent forth His prophets, He warned them of the danger of compromising their message, making it easier for the people to hear, but thus diluting God’s warning about the dire consequences of sin (see Isa 5:20).

I hear many different “messages” being proclaimed by the evangelical community, but nearly all of them have a “sweet” taste to them (cf. Isa 30:10). There are messages about being successful and effective. There are messages about a positive outlook and a positive self-image, but frankly there is not much said negatively about sin and God’s holy wrath. If judgment was near enough that the apostle John needed to be hardened by the eating of that scroll, should we not be more direct and more pointed in speaking to men and women about the realities of sin, righteousness, and judgment?

Until we are faithful to speak out concerning the “bitter” realities of God’s judgment on sin, we will not find the Word of God as “sweet” to us as it could be. You see, the prophets found God’s Word sweet because of the persecution they experienced for being faithful spokesmen for God. We do not appreciate the sweetness of some things until we have first experienced the sourness of others. Is this not the reason why some people “sweeten” watermelon with salt? It is the bitterness of the salt which causes us to sense the sweetness of the melon. So too, when we experience opposition and persecution, the sweetness of the Word is much more fully sensed and appreciated.

Are you feeding on the Word of God? Are you exposing your life to the truth of the Scriptures? As you do, the Holy Spirit will give you great joy as you assimilate the Word of God into your heart and life. You will be daily transformed by the power and instruction of God’s Word as the Holy Spirit teaches you. God’s Word will never return empty without accomplishing the purpose for which God has sent it. You have a mission! You have a calling! You are an ambassador for Christ! God has equipped you with the sword of the Spirit—the Word of His Gospel, that you might impact other lives for the eternal and everlasting kingdom of God.

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Notes

¹ In Revelation, we read of God's final corrective to evil in the world. Yet, most people recoil in horror at the finality of His judgment. We're a very contrary people!

² "Another" (*allos*) means "another of the same kind." The "strong angel" is an angelic being of the same kind, but different (another) from either the sixth angel (9:13) or the strong angel (5:2).

³ Almost all of the popular English versions translate *ischuron* as "mighty" (e.g., ESV, NRSV, NIV, KJV, NKJV, NLT).

⁴ There is considerable debate over whether this is simply an angel or Christ Himself. Those who consider this individual an angel state that: 1) Christ is never called an angel in the book of Revelation. He is Lord over all the angels. 2) In Revelation, angels are always angels. 3) Elsewhere angels may have great splendor and power and yet not be identified as Christ (cf. Rev 18:1). 4) There is no other biblical evidence that Christ "comes down from heaven" midway through the tribulation period. 5) Christ wouldn't be swearing an oath to God since He is God (Rev 10:6). Those who consider this angel to be Christ point to the numerous appearances of Christ in the Old Testament where He is called the "Angel of the Lord" (see Exod 3:1-6; Jdgs 13:21-22). However, Christ was never called by this title after He took on humanity. They also argue that each of the descriptive elements that John records are elsewhere used only of Christ (Rev 1:13-16). This is true but angels are Christ's representatives and possess Christ's traits.

⁵ In Rev 11:2, the two witnesses will go up to heaven "in the cloud." In Rev 14:14-16 Jesus is seen "sitting on the cloud."

⁶ E.g., Exod 16:10; Lev 16:2; 1 Kgs 8:10; Ezek 10:4.

⁷ Nine of the 20 occurrences of clouds in the New Testament are connected with scenes of judgment (Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev 1:7; 14:14, 15, 16). Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 61.

⁸ The only other use of the word "rainbow" (*iris*) in the New Testament is found in Revelation 4:3. In this context, John writes that around the throne of God, was a rainbow. This word is also found in Exodus 30:24 of the Greek Old Testament. Ezekiel records a powerful vision of the Son of Man and writes, "As the appearance of the rainbow (*toxou*, LXX) in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance" (Ezek 1:28). While another Greek word for "rainbow" is used here, this is still a helpful passage. Interestingly, the only time *toxou* is used in the New Testament is in Rev 6:2 with reference to the "bow" of the Antichrist.

⁹ Also in Revelation a woman was "clothed with the sun" (12:1) and an angel was "standing in the sun" (19:17).

¹⁰ The tense of the Greek verb translated "was open" (perfect passive) indicates that someone had opened it and it was then open in his hand.

¹¹ Gk. *biblaridion*, not *biblion*. *Biblaridion* is only used in Rev 10:2, 9, and 10.

¹² The first creature was "like a lion" (Rev 4:7). Jesus Christ was called "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah" (Rev 5:5). The teeth of the locusts were like lions (Rev 9:8). The heads of the horses were "like the heads of lions" (Rev 9:17). The mouth of the beast was "like the mouth of a lion" (Rev 13:2). See also Joel 3:16.

¹³ Cf. Rev 7:2; cf. Exod 20:4, 11; Deut 11:24; Ps 68:22; 69:34.

¹⁴ The word "thunder" is used in Rev 4:5; 6:1; 8:5; 10:3, 4[2x's]; 11:19; 14:2; 16:18; 19:6. In Ps 29, the Lord speaks in the sevenfold thunderstorm upon the sea.

¹⁵ See Job 37:5; Ps 18:13; John 12:28-29.

¹⁶ The "right hand" is an expression of Jesus' authority (Rev 1:16, 17, 20; 2:1; 5:1, 7). The right hand (or the forehead) is also the location that the mark of the beast is received (Rev 13:16).

¹⁷ This is the only angel in the Bible to swear an oath with the exception of the "angel of the Lord" (Gen 22:15-16; Judg 2:1) who I believe to be the preincarnate Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ The phrase, "Him who lives forever and ever," is a common phrase in Revelation for God as eternally existing (1:18; 4:9, 10; 15:7).

¹⁹ These are paraphrased quotes from Gen 14:22; Exod 6:8; Num 14:30; Ezek 20:5.

²⁰ Kendall H. Easley, *Revelation: HNTC* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 174.

²¹ Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation* (www.bible.org, Biblical Studies Press, 1997), 185.

²² "His servants the prophets" is a common description of the Old Testament prophets in particular (cf. Jer 7:25; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4; Ezek 38:17; Dan 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7; Zech 1:6).

²³ The Greek word translated "delay" (*chronos*) commonly means "time." The original expression (*chronos ouketi estai*) is literally rendered "time will be no longer" or "there will be no more time." Yet, nearly all scholars agree that the expression does not mean that time will cease to exist and that a kind of timeless eternity is to commence with the blowing of the seventh trumpet. Therefore, it seems that the rendering "time is up," conveys the sense

intended here. The phrase “there will be delay no longer” is also a very acceptable translation that makes sense in this context.

²⁴ The mystery is “finished” (the aorist passive of *teleo*) in the sense that God would then have no more to reveal about these kingdom plans beyond what He revealed to John. He had revealed His plans for the future kingdom to His servants the prophets in former times but only partially (cf. Heb 1:1-2).

²⁵ The only other occurrence of the phrase the “mystery of God” is found in Colossians 2:2 (cf. Col 4:3).

²⁶ The tribulation martyrs would have to wait no longer for vindication (cf. Rev 6:10).

²⁷ An understanding of Ezekiel 2 will help you in interpreting this next section. Ezekiel was commanded to preach to the nation of Israel the Word of the Lord. In Ezekiel’s day, God’s judgment fell upon the people of Israel; Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon in 586 B.C.

²⁸ David writes, “They [the judgments of the Lord] are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps 19:10). Elsewhere, the psalmist writes, “How sweet are Your words to my taste! *Yes, sweeter* than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:103).

²⁹ This clever expression came from my friend, Bob Deffinbaugh.

³⁰ The order of the results is here changed to the actual experience (sweet in the mouth, bitter in the belly).

³¹ I am indebted to Bob Deffinbaugh for this correlation.

³² Gk. *dei* points to a moral necessity.

³³ Following this interlude, John must once more pick up his prophetic pen.

³⁴ The specific mention of “kings” reflects God’s sovereignty and anticipates the judgments in Rev 16:14; 17:10, 12; 18:9.