

As I begin my sermon this morning, I want to take a few minutes to briefly recap of where we've been in the Book of Revelation over the past three months.

Revelation begins by introducing us to two different people; the first being John. John was one of Jesus' 12 Apostles, and he had been imprisoned on Island of Patmos because of his ongoing witness to Jesus. The second person we meet in *Revelation* is Jesus Himself: He is the Risen and Ascended Lord, who holds all power and authority.

John was caught up to heaven to see and hear God's perspective about what is happening in the world, and, will happen. *Revelation* comes to us in the form of a letter, written to the seven churches that John oversees; *Revelation* is a word of instruction (prophecy) that includes visions of heavenly creatures and beast-like monsters (apocalyptic).

In chapters 2-3, Jesus addresses each of John's seven churches individually; He commends them for certain actions and chastises them for others. But in each case these churches are challenged to "overcome," that is, to persevere in spite of the present—and coming—persecution.

Chapter 4, answers a question that many people have asked throughout history, a question that is relevant for all of us today—*who is Lord over the world?* When the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish, Christians are tempted to think that evil has gotten the upper hand. In Chapter 4 John see a vision of God the Father, seated on His throne. Despite evidence to the contrary, *Revelation*

declares that God *is* ruling over creation, and one day, He *will* overthrow evil and rule without rival.¹

In Chapter 5, John's vision expands to include Jesus, who now stands at the centre of the throne. Jesus is the One who conquers, the Lion of Judah. But when John turns to glimpse this Lion, he sees that the Lion is a slain Lamb—Jesus has conquered, not by exerting overwhelming strength, but by submitting to death on behalf of the world. We're told that John saw a scroll, sealed by seven seals, in the right hand of God—it symbolizes God's plans and purposes for the world. Jesus alone is worthy to open this scroll and usher history towards God's intended purposes.

In Chapter 6, we saw that in order for God to save humanity, He must deal with the evil that makes salvation necessary. Remember, God's ultimate plan isn't to whisk people away to heaven—up in the clouds somewhere—and leave the world to destroy itself. God created the world, He loves the world, and He's not willing to scrap it and start over. For this reason, judgement is necessary; He needs to deal with evil, and those who perpetrate it, in order to make it fit once more for human flourishing. The final vision in *Revelation* is of heaven coming down and becoming one with the earth.

Last week I preached on Revelation 7, which offers an initial picture of the eternal rest God has planned for humanity; that brings us to our text this morning: Revelation 8-11. Revelation 1:3 says, "*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it*". While these words are true, no one who reads Revelation 8-11 for the first

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 8-9.

time feels blessed; they are more likely to feel burdened and overwhelmed. Chapters 8-11 provide a detailed description of God's coming judgement. In *Revelation*, though God holds out salvation to the world, the majority continue to reject Jesus, and, persecute those who bear witness to Him.

Before I jump into chapters 8-11 this morning, let me offer two observations; the first has to do with chronology, and the second with structure.

- **Chronology:** While there is definitely movement throughout *Revelation*, John did not write it in order to offer a timeline of what's going to happen, and when. John is much more concerned with *theology*—what these visions say about God, us, and the world—than he is with *chronology*.
- **Structure:** In chapter 6, and then 8:1-5, the **seven seals** on God's scroll are opened; a specific judgement is connected to the opening of each seal. I have taken on this large section of Scripture this morning, from chapter 8:6-11:19 because it is thematically concerned with **seven trumpets**. As with the seals, there is a specific judgement is connected to the blowing of each trumpet.

Because we are looking at such a large selection of Scripture this morning, I'm going to remain at the 30,000 foot level and make the occasional foray into the details of the text. I want to begin by directing your attention to Revelation 8:7-12.

When the first angel sounded his trumpet, we're told that hail—along with a mixture of fire and blood—was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth and trees were burned up. When the second angel sounded his trumpet, something resembling a large mountain, engulfed in flames—was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the sea creatures died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

At the blowing of the third trumpet, a great star fell from the sky and contaminated a third of the rivers, which caused the death of many. When the fourth angel blew his trumpet, a third of the sun, moon, and stars were struck resulting in an increased darkness—a third of the day, and night, was without light.

John's description is not meant to be understood literally, but metaphorically and *theologically*. The word that dominates the description of the first four trumpets is **one-third**: a **third** of the earth and trees; a **third** of the sea; a **third** of the rivers; a **third** of the great lights. *What does this number tell us?*

It tells us that God's judgement is partial, not total. Darrell Johnson writes, "The fraction spells mercy...only one-third, not two-thirds. The fractions, of course, are not to be taken with mathematical literalness...After all, if one-third of the sun, moon, and stars are darkened, everything on earth would cease to function. One-third is a symbol—a symbol of mercy. Judgement is not total."²

² Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship On The Edge*, 194.

Later in Revelation 9, we're told that God allows judgement to fall on those who oppose Him; in this case, fearsome locusts will oppress God's enemies for a period of 5 months. Why five months? Again, the same point is being made; judgement will come to those who oppose God but it is partial, not total—it is for a time, not forever.

Why is this an important detail? We need to remember that until Jesus returns, the primary purpose of God's judgment is not to punish people, but to warn them, to call people to turn and repent, that they may be restored.

One-third and five months—these numbers tell us that God's judgement is partial, not total. God's mercy leaves room for people to turn from their ways and seek His face. But the tragedy of Revelation 8 and 9 is that in the face of God's judgement, many people harden their hearts and dig in their heels. Revelation 9:20-21 offers the following summary:

“The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

As I think about the way people think about freedom and responsibility in Vancouver, I have concluded that the average person wants unlimited freedom to choose **and** limited responsibility for the choices they make. Some people want to drink too much on Friday night, **and**, get into a car and drive home without hurting anyone. Some want to work their way to the top, using whatever means necessary—stepping on others if need be—**and** they want to be

admired, respected, and loved. **But**, in this cause and effect universe that God has made, the freedom to choose comes with both privilege and price—there are consequences to our choices.

illus: In this world that God has made, where sins flourishes, destruction is the natural result. When greed, hatred, and suspicion builds up between nations, the result is war. When unforgiveness is regularly, habitually, practiced in a marriage, family, or friendship, it results in a broken relationship. It was unchecked greed in financial institutions, along with unchecked greed in home owners, that resulted in the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States; greed left to itself will always destroy.

When performance, achievement, and success become the driving forces in any society, it will result in a wide-spread anxiety among people. *Are we not experiencing this firsthand?* When sexuality is reimagined—without barrier or boundary—the result is confusion. Just recently, a friend of mine was driving his son home from elementary school; on the way he asked what his son was learning. At one point in the conversation, his son asked, “Dad, how old do I have to be before I will know whether I’m a boy or a girl?”

How much more war, greed, anxiety, and confusion must humanity experience before the world wakes up and says, “*We’ve done this to ourselves!*” Revelation 9:20-21 holds...the judgement of God—the consequences of our choices—are not enough to cause people to repent; something more is required. The conclusion of chapter 9 helps to make sense of what comes next in Revelation 10.

John looked and saw a mighty angel; in his hand lay an open scroll. Verse 9-11 says, “*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. II Then I was told, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.'"

This scene is reminiscent of a similar Old Testament encounter between God and the prophet Ezekiel. God sent Ezekiel to prophesy to the people of Israel—to tell them to repent and return to God, but Ezekiel was told in advance that Israel would not listen, nor would they return. Ezekiel was instructed to eat a scroll, and as he did, it tasted as sweet as honey. *What is going on here? Why is the scroll sweet on John's tongue but sour in his stomach?*

The scroll symbolizes the word of God; to eat it is to internalize it, cherish it, live by it. For the one who follows God, His truth is sweet on our tongues, but this same truth can be sour to the stomach. Think about the truth concerning Jesus...everyone you know could be blessed, enriched, and expanded by this truth. The truth concerning Jesus is sweet to our tongue but it becomes sour in our stomach when it is ignored, ridiculed, and rejected by those we love.

Perhaps you have family members who have made fun of your faith, or, disowned you. Perhaps you've experienced friends pulling away, or you've being left out of social functions at work, or because you're a Christian, you've been labelled as weak-minded, brainwashed, or judgmental.

It's painful, I know. Every time I meet someone new and they ask me what I do for work, I wonder if I will be rejected the moment I tell

them I'm a pastor. I wonder some times, will my job, will my faith in Jesus, make things difficult for my kids at school? I'm not ashamed of Jesus, not after all He has done for me, but the truth that is sweet to my tongue, at times, is sour in my stomach.

But the conclusion of Revelation 9, and John's vision in chapter 10, combine to remind us that God's judgement alone does not bring about repentance; it must be accompanied by prophetic witness. In Revelation 11, the last of the seven trumpets is sounded, and it brings to conclusion the themes of judgement, freedom, and mission.

Revelation 11: There is a long history of interpretation when it comes to this chapter—some people interpret it literally, and others more symbolically. You won't be surprised to discover that I believe it best to interpret Revelation 11 symbolically. Revelation 7 tells us that God knows who belongs to Him—those who have been sealed have nothing to fear from God's judgement, but *what are we to do as we wait for His return? Do we circle the wagons? Withdraw from society and wait for the end to come? What is our part in God's work in the world?*

I believe that Revelation 11 reveals the answer to these questions—let's take a closer look, beginning in vs. 1.

Rev. 11:1, I believe this chapter is meant to be understood symbolically, in part, because of the task John is assigned. He was given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple, the altar, and the worshippers. The problem with taking this literally is that the Temple in Jerusalem had already been completely destroyed . There was literally no Temple or altar to measure.

In Matthew 24:2, Jesus prophesied that the Temple would be destroyed, and the rest of the New Testament makes plain that God's people have become His dwelling place. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, "*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*" Ephesians 2:22 describes the church—God's people—as "*being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*" Interestingly, when John saw the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, there was no Temple in it because God was dwelling among His people. When John was told to measure the Temple, he was being told to measure God's people.

Vs. 2: John was then told to leave the court of the Gentiles out of his measurement. In Jesus' day, the court of the Gentiles functioned like it sounds—it was a court, attached to the Temple, in which Gentiles were allowed to enter. In essence, God is saying, "*John, don't worry about those who stand against Jesus and His people. Don't think about how many there are, or how powerful they are.*"

He goes on to say that the Gentiles—those who persecute God's people—will trample this court—God's people—for 42 months. And this number, like the other numbers in *Revelation*, is meant to be understood symbolically. 42 months = 3.5 years = 1260 days—it's the same number. God's people will be spared from His judgement, but not from persecution.

Vs. 3: In vs. 3, John describes two men, dressed in sackcloth, who will bear witness to Jesus during the entire period of persecution.

³ N.T. Wright, *Revelation For Everyone*, 99.

⁴ Zechariah 4:14.

These two witnesses are a symbol of the entire church: faithful followers of Jesus who bear witness to Him, even under the threat of death.³

Notice what these witnesses are wearing—sackcloth. Theologically speaking, we could say that they are intentionally making a fashion statement. Sackcloth is both the sign of a prophet, and, the sign of repentance. As Christians bear witness to Jesus Christ, we offer a prophetic witness to the world—we speak the truth about God's love and mercy, but we also call people to repent and turn to God.

Vs. 4: The reference to the olive trees and lampstand echoes a word spoken in Zechariah 4. The olive trees represent those who have been anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's purposes.⁴ In Revelation 1-3, the image of lampstands are used as a symbol of the church that bears the light of Christ in the world. Taken together, these two images describe the mission of the church. The power and authority for prophetic witness is found in keeping step with the Holy Spirit.

Vs. 5-6, The two witnesses of Rev. 11 are supernaturally sustained and protected from those who would seek to destroy them. God has empowered the Church to bear witness to Jesus, and until this task is complete, no Empire—no matter how powerful—can shut the Church up, or shut the Church down.

Vs. 7, But upon completion of their appointed task— prophetic witness—a Beast came up from the Abyss, attacked, overpowered, and killed the two witnesses. For 3.5 days their bodies lay in the public square, and the people to whom they had been preaching rejoiced at their death. They gave one another gifts to celebrate. *We didn't think they'd ever shut up about their God! Now we can have some peace and quiet! We have won and they have lost!*

Here in Vancouver we tend to think of our lives as being independent and autonomous—*you live your life your way, and I'll live my life my way.* But every Empire, and the values they hold dear, are constantly under threat. Any allegiance to a higher authority—or to different values—are perceived as a threat; such an allegiance betrays the conformity the all Empires demand.

As things "heat up" in our culture, as our allegiance to Jesus is perceived to be a threat—to other people's freedom—it will become more costly to follow Jesus. As the cost of following Jesus grows, so too the need for the church to stand together.

The practice of community is one of the most important spiritual practices of our time. More than ever, we need to gather together, to encourage one another, to pray for one another, to share one another's burdens. We need to develop a herd mentality—we are in this together, we are stronger together. We need to see ourselves like live coals in a fire, when we remove ourselves from Christian community, the coal predictably grows cold. We need each other in order to remain true to Jesus.

Vs. 11-12, *“But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck*

those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.”

The point being made is that Jesus' Church cannot be destroyed. You can take away our charity status, repossess our buildings, burn our Bibles, and even execute Christians, but the witness to Jesus will go on. Look at China. Western missionaries were pushed out of China under Mao's Communist rule—Bibles were burned, churches seized, congregants and pastors imprisoned or killed. When persecution first began, the church in China was small, but look at it now—it is millions strong. Chairman Mao is dead, but Jesus is not, and His church is very much alive!

Jesus said, *“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”*

After the two witnesses ascended to heaven, we read that there was an earthquake in the city and one-tenth of the city perished. Again, the number is a symbol of God's mercy; judgement falls on 10% but 90% are given the opportunity to repent. **And they do!** We're told that they *“gave glory to the God of heaven;”* this is the language of conversion.

Revelation 11 gives us a picture of the church, fulfilling her role of prophetic witness to Jesus, in the midst of opposition. A witness gives testimony to what they have seen and heard; whatever you have seen, heard, and experienced of Jesus is meant to be shared with family, friends, and neighbours. *The question is, will you be God's witness?*

In the last few months I have been encouraged and challenged by High School and University students in our church. They've taken it upon themselves to start Alpha groups in their schools with students who don't know Jesus. These students get it—they've answered the call to be a witness to what Jesus has done for them, and for the world. May their example spur us on.

The Lord's Supper: This morning as we come to the Lord's Table, we do so remembering this table itself bears a prophetic witness to the world. In 1 Corinthians 11:26, the Apostle Paul writes, "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*"

What do we proclaim in this meal? We proclaim His death. Not simply that He died, but what He died for. Jesus died to break the power of sin of and death. We also proclaim that Jesus didn't remain dead—three days later He rose from the grave. Jesus once said, "*You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all*".⁵

Perhaps today is the day that you repent; in other words, stop, turn around, face the Lord Jesus and receive the forgiveness He offers.

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way,

after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it in remembrance of me."

At this time I want to invite those serving the Lord's Supper to come and take their place—we have three stations on the main floor and one/two stations in the balcony. When the band begins to play, when you are ready, you can come forward to receive. As you tear a piece of bread from the loaf, the one serving you will say, "*The Body of Christ was broken for you.*" Then, as you dip the bread in the cup, another server will say, "*The blood of Christ was shed for you.*" At that time you can eat with thanksgiving.

I also want to let you know that during this time, our prayer ministers will be praying for people. One prayer ministry team is going to be on the main floor, to my left, at the back, near the exit; another will be to my right, at the back; we also have a team in the balcony.

Worship

Prayer Ministry Announcement: In just a moment I will speak a final word of blessing before our service concludes, but I wanted to share a brief story with you about an answered prayer.

One of our congregants needed repeated biopsies as she awaited a diagnosis. She came forward to ask for prayer on a Sunday morning because she wanted to experience God's peace in the midst of her waiting and wondering. She was prayed for and this is the reply that we received back from her:

⁵ John 11:25-26, The Message.

“My doctor informed me that the biopsy came back benign and they could not find any cancer! I am tremendously grateful and happy. I have felt such peace over the last 2 months. This can only be explained by God’s peace through all your prayers and support. Thank you so much. It is wonderful to know how we can lift each other in prayer in hard and joyful times. God is so good. Psalm 94:18-19 was a scripture that sustained me while I was waiting, “When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.”

God knows what we need and He delights to answer when we ask. If you would like to be prayed for this morning, we would love to join you in asking the Father to help.

Benediction