

Revelation 10:1-11, 11:15-19

Happy Thanksgiving! On this weekend, Christian churches focus on giving thanks to God for all God has done for us. Here in Canada, this celebration happens in October to coincide with the time of harvest. We can be thankful for the abundance of fruit and vegetables available to us pretty much all year round, but especially at this time. A few years ago, at camp Squeah we had a theme of thanksgiving, and everyone was given a notebook to record things for which they were thankful to God. It is good for us to give thanks. Before eating meals, Christians have a habit of praying and giving thanks for the food. Here in Canada, we can be thankful that we live in a country that is not at war. We can be thankful for the many blessings we enjoy. We can be thankful for a good health care system, and so on. There are so many blessings for which we can give God thanks, but sometimes we forget the deepest blessing that we have, and that is something that doesn't change with our changing circumstances. It's much deeper. Because no one is able to follow God's laws perfectly, God made a way for us to be part of God's kingdom by sending Jesus Christ. Through his sacrifice on the cross, we are forgiven all our sin, and are now part of God's family. Our being fit for God's kingdom has nothing to do with following rules, but it has everything to do with God's grace, and the work of Jesus. Through Jesus we see God's deep love for us. Nothing we can say or do changes God's love for us. As the Apostle Paul says, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This is the deepest thing for which we can be thankful. When we live with an attitude of gratitude, we gain power that can carry us through challenging times. How deeply do we feel this?

Today, we continue our journey through the book of Revelation with chapters 10 and 11. Again, as we've often found, these chapters are full of scary images. For those who reject God, the images of Revelation are a warning. God is real, and we need to take seriously, what the Bible says about God. And yet, the purpose of John in sharing these visions of God is to encourage followers of Jesus. Many of the Christians were persecuted. Through the book of Revelation, God's message is, "No matter how bad things may look, I am still in control. Your suffering will end. I have sent my Son, Jesus who has already won the victory over evil. Believe in me! My love for you is deeper than you can imagine! Be faithful and you will receive strength to endure hardship. Do not be afraid!" These messages come in the form of various images, kind of like paintings in an art gallery. Many think they are a roadmap as to details of what will happen at the end of time, but instead as with paintings, there are often various possible interpretations. They represent past, present and future realities in our world. We don't have time to look deeply all of the images today, but I'll try to highlight some of the main parts.

Earlier, we read about seven seals being opened, and various judgements coming from them. Between the sixth and seventh seal, there is a pause and other things happen. In a similar way, at the end of chapter nine we have a pause between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Chapter 10 begins with a mighty angel coming down from heaven. A number of images support this angel as being from God. He is wrapped in a cloud symbolising the glory of God. The rainbow around his head symbolises the mercy of God (as in the story of Noah and the flood – God put a rainbow in the sky to show that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood – a symbol of mercy). The angel's face was like the sun – another image of divine glory. With legs like pillars of fire, the angel also represents divine guidance. During the Israelite journey in the desert, God led them by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night... At the shout of this angel, seven thunders sound out. The thunder is an image of the voice of God, and the number seven also represents divinity. It's interesting that John is told to not write down what he heard. This is very curious! It most likely represents the fact that God's ways go beyond what can be written down. There will always be mystery. There will always be things we don't know concerning God. In Revelation we don't have a complete account of every detail about what God is doing in the world, and how the world will end.

The angel has a little scroll that John is invited to take and eat. He is told that it will taste sweet, but it will feel bitter in his stomach. In the Old Testament part of the Bible, there are also stories of Jeremiah and Ezekiel encountering angels, and each being asked to eat a scroll. The meaning here is to take the words of the scroll and “digest them.” They were to read them (or take them into themselves) and make them a part of their lives so that they could share the message well. The difference with John, though, is that although the scroll is as sweet as honey, it later gives a bitter feeling in his stomach. This symbolises two sides of salvation in Christ. The words of the Lord are as sweet as honey. In Jeremiah 15 verse 16, Jeremiah says, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart...” God’s word, and salvation are sweet, but what about the bitterness of the scroll that John tastes? It likely represents the suffering that is usually one aspect of salvation.

God’s word to us is good news. Jesus represents God’s word to us. Through him, we receive joy, peace, love, and hope. But, there is another side to Christian life. Jesus calls us to “take up our cross” and follow him. It means that in following Jesus there will be challenges. Since the values of God are different from the values of the world around us, there will be conflict. Believers may be criticized for refusing to work on Sundays. Or, they may be ridiculed for not going along with company policies that are not fully honest. At the extreme, there are Christians who are killed for their faith. The message of Revelation is that we are to stay faithful to Jesus, even if we face opposition. It is assumed that Christians will be persecuted.

Coming back to the theme of Thanksgiving, how does this fit with suffering? If we follow Jesus, we have an example. We see that God’s power was stronger than his suffering on the cross. We see that God raised Jesus to life and glorified him as Lord of all creation. We can see that Romans 8, verse 11 says, “...if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.” We need not fear suffering, evil, and death. God is stronger. Are we able to give thanks to God in all circumstances, as the Apostle Paul encourages? Our thanksgiving goes much deeper than thanks for enough food to eat, and the blessings of living in a peaceful country. If we are walking with Christ, our thanks to God can come from deep within our hearts. Through Christ, we are purified and now a part of God’s family. To be a Christian means to have the joy of the Lord deep in our hearts. We are saved from the power of sin. We are no longer separated from the love of God through sin. But, we also have the cross of possible persecution and suffering that often comes because of our faith.

Following the section talking about the scroll, in chapter 11, we left out a section for the sake of time, but I’d encourage you to also read this part. I’ll summarise it, a bit. John is given a measuring rod and told to “measure the temple of God” This symbolises a calculating of the number of faithful who will be protected for salvation (the temple), and the number of unfaithful people who would be destroyed (or the outer court). There is then an account of two witnesses that come from God to the earth. “If anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes...” This sounds pretty violent, but the fire from their mouth is an image of the power of their words. They have the power to stop the rain from falling, and to turn water to blood and cause plagues. These powers have a connection with the prophet Elijah, who had the power to keep rain from falling, and Moses, through whom God sent many different plagues on Egypt, including one that turned the water to blood. So, these two witnesses could possibly represent the work of Moses and the prophet Elijah.

At this point, a beast comes up from a bottomless pit symbolizing the place of evil. The beast makes war on the two witnesses. With only three beings having a war, this is likely a spiritual war rather than a military one. The witnesses are killed and their bodies left in the street of “the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.” This city has various meanings, all of which represent hostility toward God’s people. The expression, “the great city” usually means Babylon (the evil nation that conquered Israel and destroyed the temple). In the

context of the book of Revelation, the city also meant Rome (the city that promoted emperor worship rather than worship of God). Sodom was the city where there was widespread corruption and sexual sin. Egypt was the city where the Israelites had been enslaved, before being freed by God, through Moses. We also read it's the city, "where also their Lord was crucified." This would have been Jerusalem. So, by giving the city many names, we have multiple images of evil. Three and a half days after the witnesses are killed, God brings them back to life, and then they're taken up to heaven. In a similar way, Moses and Elijah were also called up to heaven by God. For followers of God, suffering and death are not the end. We may experience the bitterness of suffering for various reasons, but we can be confident that the sweetness of following Christ includes the promise of God's victory in the end. We are a part of God's family.

At this point in our reading, we finally come to the seventh angel who blows his trumpet. The first six trumpet blasts brought plagues and judgement, but the surprise is that the seventh trumpet does not bring judgement. With the seven seals, the seventh seal resulted in a silence rather than judgement. Some have interpreted this to represent a time of silent worship. The seventh trumpet also results in worship, but with "loud voices." Words from the "Hallelujah Chorus come directly from this passage: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." It's a scene of heaven, filled with praise and thanksgiving.

The 24 elders get down from their thrones, and fall to their faces in worship before God, giving thanks to God. God has begun to reign, rewarding the faithful and "destroying those who would destroy the earth." Who are the ones who would destroy the earth? This could possibly include the horsemen who wreaked havoc on the world. They would also be destroyed. Some might think, didn't God send the horsemen to punish the evil-doers? But, it seems more likely that the horsemen represent war, famine and hardship that God temporarily allows as a natural consequence of the sin of humanity.

In this heavenly scene, those who would resort to violence and destruction are no more. During the worship, God's temple in heaven opens up and the "ark of the covenant" is revealed. It's a very special box that contained the 10 Commandments. This box represented God's presence to the Israelites. Several more images emphasise the presence of God: thunder and lightning, an earthquake, and heavy hail. This scene of worship could be a fitting conclusion for the book of Revelation, but we're actually only half-way through. Chapter 11 divides Revelation into two parts. The following chapters use different symbols to repeat the same message that has been described in the first half of the book.

So, we conclude with an image of worship, praise and thanksgiving, with God in control. During our life, here on earth, our faith in Jesus Christ has both sweet and bitter aspects. As we follow him, we may face many hardships. Our health may fail; we may have problems with relationships or with finances. There is a time when I was recovering from surgery, and I was in a lot of pain. I had taken the prescribed pain medication, but it had been too much for me. Not only did it not take the pain away, but it also caused me to feel like I might die. I panicked, I called doctors for advice, but then as I prayed, I calmed down, knowing that whatever happens God is in control. Life may sometimes feel out of control. And it may seem like there is nothing for which to be thankful. But, if we open ourselves up to God, trusting in Jesus Christ, we'll find peace that is far above human understanding, a peace that doesn't change with changing circumstances. We'll find that any bitterness due to suffering, will begin to feel small compared with the sweetness and strength of God at work in our hearts. May we walk with God and find the joy of giving thanks in all circumstances. Let's pray.

Almighty God, you reign above all. Thank-you that you are in control. Thank-you for the longing you've placed in each of us for a deeper connection with you. In our lives, we see glimpses of your presence. Grant us strength and faith when we face challenges in life. Help us in those times when we can't find the our energy even to pray. Grant us wisdom to walk with those who suffer. And, may we continue to follow you, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.