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Revelation #22

Knowing Who's in Charge Makes all the Difference in the World
Revelation 10:1-11

It's not easy today to remain hopeful and encouraged and confident about the future of our society and the world as a whole. Things are a mess. For every one step forward it seems like we take two steps backwards. For every victory that is won for truth and morality and the Christian faith, it seems as if there is a multitude of defeats. In his excellent commentary on Revelation Dennis Johnson puts it this way:

“When evil is everywhere and the world is ripe for judgment, can God protect his own? When economies crash, when civil order falters and the social fabric frays, when restraint and respect give way to rude aggression and random violence, when greed and animal appetite reign supreme, this question weighs on the hearts of God's people: Can God keep Jesus' little flock safe as they stand, it seems, defenseless in the crossfire? On the one hand, Christian believers will be targeted for attack by people who hate our King, his purity, and even his mercy; on the other, God calls us to stay involved in the broader community, even as it rushes pell-mell toward its rendezvous with God's wrath” (155-56).

It's an important and pressing question, but I don't want to dwell today on the dark and discouraging elements in our world. I don't need to. The simple truth is that all of you are just as aware of how bad it is as I am. It wouldn't accomplish much for me to rehearse the countless ways in which the fabric of society as a whole is coming unraveled right before our eyes.

No, my aim today is to speak words of *encouragement*, words that remind us all that no matter how dismal the prospects for society may appear, *we know who is in charge*. We know that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign over every man and molecule in existence. And we know it because the Bible over and over again tells us so.

Take for instance the recent natural calamities, whether it be the two hurricanes that struck Houston and Florida, or the wildfires in California, or the snow and ice in the northeast, or volcanic eruptions and earthquakes that we read about on almost a daily basis. What are we to make of such phenomena? Here is what Scripture says:

“He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry. . . . He makes peace in your borders; he fills you with the finest of the wheat. He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost

like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow” (Psalm 147:8-9, 14-18; see Psalm 148:1-12).

There are several passages in Job that affirm God’s complete sovereignty over all of nature, both on earth and in the heavens above.

“[It is God] who removes the mountains, they know not [how,] When He overturns them in His anger; who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; who commands the sun not to shine, and sets a seal upon the stars; who alone stretches out the heavens, and tramples down the waves of the sea; who makes the Bear, Orion, and the Pleiades, and the chambers of the south; who does great things, unfathomable, and wondrous works without number.” (Job 9:5-10)

“He stretches out the north over empty space, and hangs the earth on nothing. He wraps up the waters in his clouds; and the cloud does not burst under them. He obscures the face of the full moon, and spreads his cloud over it. He has inscribed a circle on the surface of the waters, at the boundary of light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble, and are amazed at his rebuke. He quieted the sea with his power, and by his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his breath the heavens are cleared; his hand has pierced the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are the fringes of his ways; and how faint a word we hear of him! But his mighty thunder, who can understand?” (Job 26:7-14)

“Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. Under the whole heaven he lets it go, and his lightning to the corners of the earth. After it his voice roars; he thunders with his majestic voice, and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard. God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend. For to the snow he says, ‘Fall on the earth,’ likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour. He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know it. Then the beasts go into their lairs, and remain in their dens. From its chamber comes the whirlwind, and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen.” (Job 37:2-24; see also Psalm 104; 105:16; Job 38:8-41; Jer. 10:12-13; 14:22; Amos 4:7).

Or consider God’s sovereignty over our daily lives and the plans we make for each day

“A man’s steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?” (Proverbs 20:24)

“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21)

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. . . . Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

Many are ready to concede that God is sovereign over the beginning of life but they do not like the idea that God is sovereign over the time and manner of its end. But note the following:

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deuteronomy 32:39)

“The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 Samuel 12:6)

“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

God is sovereign over everything:

“[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will.” (Ephesians 1:11)

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3)

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2)

“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35)

Many are happy to concede that God is in charge when it comes to events in nature, but what about the choices and decisions made by us, by human beings? Consider these texts:

“Then God said to him [Abimelech] in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her’” (Genesis 20:6).

Here we see that God exerts control over the decision-making of Abimelech and restrains him from having illicit sexual relations with Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Some argue that God cannot do that. They say he cannot intrude on the human will and prevent a free moral agent from committing abuse or an atrocity. Yet we see from this story that God can surely prevent someone from sinning against someone else if he so chooses.

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1).

Again, God’s sovereignty over the will/heart of the king is seen in his determination to turn that will or to direct the king’s choices in accordance with whatever God pleases. And yet the king (or any person) is still morally responsible to God for the decisions he/she makes.

“In the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing . . .” (Ezra 1:1).

God moved on (“stirred up”) the heart of the pagan king Cyrus to issue a decree that the Jews should be free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see also Ezra 6:22; 7:27). There are numerous other texts that describe how God exerted his will on and over the will of others so that his ultimate purpose might be achieved. See Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

So why bring this up today? What does it have to do with Revelation 10? Everything! Revelation 10 is first and fundamentally about the sovereignty of God over the nations and peoples and

events on earth and in heaven. If ever a passage of Scripture should speak encouragement into your life, it is Revelation 10.

Who is the “mighty angel” in Revelation 10?

Here in vv. 1-2 John sees “another mighty angel coming down from heaven”. This isn’t the first time he’s seen a mighty angel. Back in Revelation 5:2 the same terminology appears. In both instances they cry out “with a loud voice” (5:2; 10:3). Some believe this “angel” in chapter 10 is, in fact, the person of Christ himself or perhaps “the angel of the Lord” referred to often in the OT (see Gen. 16:10; 22:11-18; 24:7; 31:11-13; Exod. 3:2-12; 14:19; Judges 2:1; 6:22; 13:20-22). Against this suggestion is the fact that the word translated “angel” (*angelos*) is never used elsewhere in Revelation of anything but a created, heavenly being (whether good or evil). Also, the “angel of the Lord” was a distinctly *pre-incarnate* manifestation of God. Now that the Son of God has appeared (permanently) in the flesh, it would be unlikely, if not impossible, for him to assume the guise or form of an “angelic” being. But let us note how he is portrayed.

(1) The angel is “**wrapped in a cloud.**” In the OT the “clouds” are often the vehicle or means by which God makes an appearance.

(2) There was also a “**rainbow over his head.**” This is probably an allusion to Ezekiel 1:26-28 where God is described in similar terms. The only other reference in Revelation to the “rainbow” is in 4:3 where God is pictured on his throne, surrounded by a rainbow.

(3) We also read that “**his face was like the sun.**” This recalls the description of the risen Jesus in Revelation 1:16 (cf. Matt. 17:2 and the transfiguration of Jesus).

(4) His legs were “**like pillars of fire.**” This also points back to Revelation 1:15 and the description of the risen and glorified Jesus. This also may point to Exodus 13:21 and the “pillar of fire” by which God guided Israel at night.

(5) We should also note that in v. 3 his voice is compared to “**a lion roaring**”. You will recall that Christ is compared to a lion in Revelation 5:5.

These factors would appear to indicate that the “angel” in chapter 10 is the risen Christ. However, it may simply be that the angel is portrayed in such terms because he *represents* Christ and speaks *authoritatively on his behalf*. Because the angel is doing Christ’s will and speaking on his behalf and portraying his sovereign rule, he is described in terms that apply directly to the Lord Jesus. He reflects the Lord’s majesty and glory and sovereignty. If this being is in fact an angel it may well be Gabriel whose name literally means “mighty one of God”.

(6) We read in v. 2 that “**he had a little scroll open in his hand.**” There has been a lot of fruitless debate about the identity of this so-called “little scroll.” The Greek word is the one from which

we derive our word for “Bible.” The question is whether or not this “little scroll” in chapter 10 is identical with the “scroll” of chapter 5.

You may recall from chapter five that the scroll was sealed with seven seals. It couldn't be opened and its contents revealed until the seven seals were broken. The seventh and final seal was broken in Revelation 8:1. Now, here in Revelation 10:2, it makes sense that the scroll is finally said to be “open.” ***The content of the scroll is God's sovereign purpose for establishing his kingdom on earth. Therefore, in all likelihood, the “little scroll” here in chapter 10 is identical with the “scroll” in chapter five and contains the substance of the book of Revelation itself.***

But why is it called “little”? Perhaps the scroll is “little” in comparison with the massively “mighty” angel who straddles land and sea (10:2). Also, perhaps the scroll is portrayed as “little” because it must be small enough for John to eat (10:9). Perhaps the scroll in chapter ten is called “little” precisely because its contents are smaller than the scroll in chapter five. That is to say, the scroll or book of chapter ten describes a smaller portion of God's eternal purpose in Christ, the whole of which is found in the larger book of chapter five.

(7) We read in v. 2 that ***“he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land.”*** This points to Jesus Christ's unchallenged dominion over all creation (see Psalm 8:6). When you put your foot on something it means you have absolute and ultimate authority over whatever is under it.

We should also be encouraged to remember that the mighty angel's sovereignty over sea and land demonstrates that ***God is also ultimately in control over Satan and all his activities.*** We read in Revelation 12:18 that when the dragon, or Satan appears, he stands “on the sand of the sea.” It is from there that he beckons forth the “beast” who is described as “rising out of the sea” (13:1). And in 13:11 there is “another beast,” often called the false prophet, who is said to rise up “out of the earth” (13:11). The point is that Jesus Christ rules supremely and sovereignly even over the enemies of the church. Satan may well call forth the beast and false prophet from the sea and earth, but Christ stands over Satan and anything that might emerge from sea or land.

David Aune suggests that the imagery of this “angel” is similar to what we know of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Colossus was a bronze statue erected in 280 b.c. by Charles of Lindos. It was destroyed by an earthquake in 224 b.c. It was approximately 70 cubits high (105 feet). “According to a popular but erroneous view, the Colossus stood astride the harbor of Rhodes permitting ships to pass through its legs; actually it stood on a promontory overlooking the harbor” (Aune, 2:556).

The Seven Thunders

We then read that when the “mighty angel” spoke he called out with a loud voice and “the seven thunders sounded” (Rev. 10:3).

What are the “seven thunders” and why was John prohibited from writing down in Revelation their content? In a book that is designed to “reveal” things to God’s people, this demand for secrecy is surprising. The presence of the definite article with the phrase “**the** seven thunders” may be referring back to something familiar to John’s audience. In other words, it may imply that “the seven thunders” are something already known to John’s original readers.

But why the command not to write it down? We can’t be certain, but here are some possible answers. (1) This may be God’s way of telling John and us that some things in the future are not for us to know. God is trying to tell us to live in complete dependence upon him, especially when we feel ignorant and lacking information. God obviously knows far more about the future than he has chosen to reveal to us. Some things are for him to know and for us to trust. This, then, would be a reminder that we should avoid undue speculation and certainly undue dogmatism about the future.

(2) Then, of course, there is Deuteronomy 29:29, where we read that “the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.”

(3) It’s also possible that we have here something similar to what we read in 2 Corinthians 12:4. There the Apostle Paul describes his translation into the third heaven where “he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” In other words, some things are so extraordinary and overwhelming and glorious that it is not for us to know, at least for now.

(4) It may be that the “thunders” are, like the seals, trumpets, and bowls, judgments that have been entrusted to seven additional angels. By telling John not to write them down he is saying that God has cancelled or in some way restricted the judgments they contain. In other words, not writing them down is an expression of God’s mercy in giving people an opportunity to repent. John is not allowed to write down the seven peals of thunder because they will never occur. But we have already seen that people in that day refuse to repent, notwithstanding the massive judgments that fall on the earth.

The Mystery of God’s Purposes is Fulfilled!

What we read in vv. 5-7 is clearly an allusion to Daniel 12:7 where Daniel encountered a “man [angel?] clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever.” It would appear that “raising the right hand to heaven when an oath is taken is a gesture that symbolically appeals to God, who dwells in heaven and therefore sees and knows everything, as a witness to the oath (Deut. 32:40; Ps. 106:26)” (Aune, 2:564).

Note the three spheres: heaven, earth, and sea, hence encompassing all that God has made. There is no place over which God’s sovereignty doesn’t exist and no place where his word doesn’t apply. God “created heaven and what is in it,” which means that every single one of the

seemingly countless trillions and quintillions of galaxies, each of which contains billions and trillions of stars, was created by our God! Everything on the earth, whether grass or grasshoppers, whether flowers or the country of Finland, whether rocks or human rulers, everything that exists because God said so. And everything in the sea he created: sharks and dolphins and swordfish and seals and eels and snakes and every species of the multitude of creatures at the bottom of the ocean, many of which no human eye has ever seen.

This “mighty angel” who is the ambassador and representative of the risen Christ swears an oath by God 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.” Literally it reads, “the *time* will be no longer.” But this doesn’t mean that when Christ returns time will be abolished and clocks will be obsolete, as if to say that timelessness ensues. “The idea here is that there is a predetermined time in the future when God’s purposes for history will be completed. . . . The point is that when God has decided to complete his purposes and to terminate history, there will be no delay in its termination” (Beale, 538-39).

Be very encouraged by the word “fulfilled” in v 7. It is a firm reminder to us all that there is no doubt about whether or not God’s purposes will come to pass. The angel “swears” that what God has revealed is true and will be fulfilled. In other words, don’t despair. Don’t fret. Don’t worry. Don’t be eaten up with anxiety. Don’t live in fear about who wins. Only if God himself can lie is this declaration not true. And if God can lie, he isn’t God and we’re all a bunch of fools for having trusted him in the first place!

This is our hope, our confidence, our joy, in knowing that God has sworn that he will judge wickedness and we will be saved. No terrorist attack, no nuclear assault (whether by North Korea or any other country), no corruption in government, no sexual scandal, no military power or economic collapse will stand in the way of God’s word being fulfilled.

Eat the Scroll and Prophecy Again

Although John has already been instructed to prophesy in Revelation 1:10 and 4:1-2, here in vv. 8-10 we find a formal **recommissioning**. The instructions given to John by the angel are patterned after Ezekiel’s experience where he, too, is commanded to eat the scroll (Ezekiel 2-3). The eating of the scroll symbolizes the spiritual “assimilation” of the message it contains and the prophet’s personal identification with and submission to its truth. The point is that it is not enough merely to own a Bible or hold it in your hand or carry it to church or display it on the coffee table in your den. We must digest it, take it in to our innermost being; assimilate it:

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16).

The book is sweet in his mouth because of the joy and delight which God’s word brings to the believer (see Ezek. 3:3; Jer. 15:16; Pss. 19:10; 119:103; Prov. 16:21-24; 24:13-14) and also

because of the blessings to God's people that the outworking of the divine purpose will bring. Its bitterness, however, is more difficult to interpret. Generally, two reasons have been suggested as to why the book turns bitter in John's stomach:

(1) Although salvation is certain for the people of God, the book contains a prophecy of harsh persecution we must suffer at the hands of Satan and the Beast before entrance into the bliss of eternal fellowship and joy with Christ.

(2) The book is bitter because it contains a prophecy of the judgments which must soon fall upon unbelievers. But is this bitterness simply a reflection of what *they* will experience, or is it also an expression of John's personal feelings as he contemplates their ultimate demise?

Believing and living according to the Bible is a "*bittersweet*" experience. It brings joy and life and hope and peace and also brings division and incurs the hatred and opposition of others.

In v. 11 John is addressed by a plurality of beings. The translation in the ESV, "I was told," is literally, "they said to me." Up till now, John has heard only a singular voice. These who now speak may be the angel of 10:1-3 together with the "voice from heaven" in 10:4,8. Or the plural may represent the consensus of all the angelic hosts surrounding the throne.

What's important for us to note is that John is given authority and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to "prophecy" of what the future holds. This is yet another reminder of God's sovereignty over all the affairs of men and angels and demons. He knows what is going to happen and communicates this to John by revelation, who in turn communicates it to us by prophecy. Prophecy is the believer's comfort and assurance that God controls the present and the future and that we can rest comfortably in knowing he is in charge.

When the world speaks scornfully of what God has said in Scripture, we may rest assured that the word of the Lord will stand firm and be fulfilled. When the world demands that we alter our views on human sexuality or gender or marriage or minimize the claims of exclusivity, we must call to mind that God has spoken.

Conclusion

You may remember the story from Greek mythology of Atlas. He and his brother Menoetius sided with the Titans in their war against the pantheon of Greek gods. When the Titans were defeated, many of them (including Menoetius) were confined to Tartarus, but Zeus condemned Atlas to stand at the western edge of Gaia (the Earth) and hold up the sky on his shoulders, to prevent the two from resuming their primordial embrace. A common misconception today is that Atlas was forced to hold the Earth on his shoulders, but Classical art shows Atlas holding the celestial spheres, not a globe.

As you look at pictures of Atlas, he is shrugging. He appears almost to be buckling under the weight of the world, barely able to maintain his grip and keep things in place. But not Jesus Christ. By his omnipotent power and infinite wisdom he easily upholds all things in place and is guiding this crazy world to its proper consummation, when he will be glorified and honored as Lord over all!

That is what Revelation 10 is all about. Christ reigns! Christ wins!