

Things are not what they seem

Glimpses from Revelation

The World, God's Kingdom (b)

Revelation 10-11

Review

Chapters 8—11 have been about the kingdom of God. The first four blasts heralded catastrophic events in the creation that the world assumed as its home—on land, at sea, on rivers and in the skies, each time, affecting just one third. Then, the fifth and sixth trumpets, heralded demonic torments that made people wish to die, followed by overwhelming and demonic warfare that reduced the population by a third.

All this is God's response to the prayers of the saints that the kingdom would come, and portrays the truth that God's victory is on the way—like the blowing of trumpets by the Jericho marchers. The seventh trumpet will announce that the world has become the kingdom of our God and his Christ (11:15).

Two facts stand out while this is happening. First, none of God's people are affected by these events. Clearly, if they are in a cyclone, or whatever the event is, they may die, but the event, *as a judgement*, will not touch them. (What is revealed when the fifth seal was broken in vision two is still being worked out at the same time as this vision). Second, none of those who belong to the world will repent of their ungodliness and corresponding behaviour. They will thumb their nose at God as judge and endorse those who share their ungodliness (Rom. 1:32).

But what of God's people in the midst of his dealing with the nations? The interlude, like the previous one between the sixth and seventh seals, helps us see where we fit in the events that have just been described. In this case, John is commissioned for ministry to the nations, and we are given a thumbnail sketch of the powers of God intersecting with the powers of the world.

The little book (chapter 10)

The vision changes pace before the final trumpet is blown. 'Another strong angel', Christ-like in appearance, may follow on from the 'strong angel' who asked who could open the seals (5:2). The scroll he holds is small, perhaps suggesting that John is being asked to take up what is appropriate for him to announce, not to be responsible for the whole kingdom! That book remains in Christ's hands. But the scroll is open so it must be announced.

The angel is not to be trifled with—speaking with the command of a lion in his territory, standing astride land and ocean (owning both) and evoking a further sevenfold thundering revelation. This revelation is for John alone. He knows what it is, well enough to write it down, but must not do so (cf. Dan. 12:4; 2 Cor. 12:4).

But what the strong angel says is for us all. He swears on God's name and the fact of his creating all things that there will be 'no more delay', and that the last angel's blast will usher in the fulfillment of all God has promised—his 'mystery'. That is, if you can see

anything like the outworking of the first six trumpeters, be assured that the seventh is immanent. We are living in these last days (Acts 2:17). The kingdom is 'at hand' (Mark 1:15). Our redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28). 'Delay' is not an appropriate word to use about these times (2 Pet. 3:9).

The world is confessing their faith—that there is no God. God is going about demonstrating that he *is* God. John, and we to whom this revelation is given are to testify that God is King—that is, 'preach the kingdom' (Matt. 24:14). God's kingdom is always around the corner, and for all practical purposes, actually present.

I include a quote from Adrio Konig to show that this expectation of the Lord's nearness is to be held dear by every generation, not just one generation before the Lord's actual return.

'The function of the signs of the times is, then, to stimulate people to moment-by-moment readiness and vigilance, and not at all to encourage calculations of how near that moment might be. This function is of a piece with the New Testament message that the return is near. All New Testament traditions agree on this point. Jesus himself put this into words when he told his followers, "When all this begins to happen, stand upright and hold your heads high because your liberation is near" (Luke 21:28); "The end is near, at the very door" (Mark 13:29). Paul writes that "it is far on in the night; day is near" (Rom. 13:12), and "the time we live in will not last long" (1 Cor. 7:29). ... The writer of Hebrews knows that "soon, very soon...he who is to come will come, he will not delay" (Heb. 10:37). According to Jam. 5:8-9, the Lord's return is near and the Judge stands at the door. Peter says, "the end of all things is upon us" (1 Pet. 4:7). John's Revelation lays heavy emphasis on the fact that Christ will come swiftly (Rev. 1:1, 3; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20)' (The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology, p. 193).

Like Ezekiel before him (Ezek. 2:8-10) John must 'eat' the book and, like Jeremiah, experience both its sweetness and bitterness (Jer. 15:16-18). The teaching of Jesus did, and does, bring enormous pleasure to God's people, but then, the thought of what is coming on the world made Jesus 'a man of sorrows' who wept over those who would suffer (Luke 19:41-44). A sword may pierce our hearts too (Luke 2:35).

The two witnesses (chapter 11)

Our life in this world cannot be understood by analysis, or even by 'applying' this or that verse to events. Rather, there is a large story being played out and we need the earlier part of the story to understand the trajectory of what God may be about.

In this case, we are taken back to Ezekiel who was told to measure a visionary temple (chs. 40—47). To measure something may indicate it is being 'cased out' ready for destruction, but here, that it is known in detail and will be preserved and used. But this only applies to the temple proper and the altar where sacrifice is made.

The same cannot be said for the larger temple precincts and holy city, Jerusalem. Does this area indicate the formal but not true church? Or does it indicate that danger will be so near as to threaten the church as an institution but that the worship of the saints will be inviolable? I suggest we live in the imagery and let its application be clear when we need it to be clear. All this continues for 42 months (also concerning 'the beast' in 13:5).

But this section is about the coming of the kingdom and God has two witnesses, dressed like prophets. They are to prophesy for 1260 days, that is, for the whole time of the church is being kept in the midst of oppression (stylized on the basis of 30 day months—also 12:6).

This time of protection is also rendered as 'a time and times and half a time' (12:14; based on Dan. 7:25; 12:7—the time God's people would be oppressed)—again, a stylized 42 months or 1260 days. In

passing, note that the same time reference is being used in a different vision, suggesting they apply to the same period.

We are now reminded of Zechariah who was told that he and his High Priest Joshua were like olive trees supplying oil to the lampstand of Israel's witness. They also lived in perilous times but lived, not in the presence of their enemies so much as before 'the Lord of the earth' (11:4).

If the imagery of destruction on those who reject God is vivid, what of prophetic fire to destroy enemies! We are reminded of Elijah being targeted by Ahaziah (2 Kin. 1). If this sounds vicious, we should remember what is at stake: people knowing the Father. Everything is geared to this being known, not merely to our being threatened. The word of God is a sword to be taken up (Eph. 6:17). Already, the church has received letters from one who has a sharp two-edged sword of the word coming from his mouth (1:17).

The description of powerful witness continues, in terms of events from the days of Moses and Elijah. The world recognises that it is the word of God's servants that has caused them enormous distress (11:10; like Ahab in 1 Kin. 18:17).

Witness to God's reign will last until it has 'finished' (11:7). As David Livingstone said: 'I am immortal until my life's work is done.' So it is for the witness of God's servants.

Will this witness turn the tide and create a Christian world? Would that it did, but the world is desperate and unmovable in its evil and this is focused on those who bear witness to God's reign. They will take delight in leaving the corpses of God's prophetic people unattended and celebrate exuberantly with united generosity—an 'antichristmas party'. The world is finally characterized as one—the kingdom of this world' (11:15), as Sodom—viciously depraved, Egypt—cruelly oppressive, a place where Christ is crucified.

But this lasts days, not years. In language reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones (Ezek. 37) and Elijah's ascent into heaven, God demonstrates his approval of his witnesses, strikes terror in the peoples of the world for their obstinacy, gives them a 'natural disaster' to deal with and obliges them to see that God is God after-all.

We should not seek to locate this as a one-off event and some point in the long story of Christian witness but live in the vision and find its meaning as we go.

The seventh trumpet

'It's time' said Gough Whitlam. So many others try to identify their efforts as 'historic'. But God has his time to judge the dead and to reward his servants and this is the time that should keep us focused. History is 'about' God's reign.

If we are watching signs of the second woe (the sixth trumpet judgement), then we should know God reign is 'coming quickly' (11:14), and we are given a thumbnail sketch of that day as the seventh angel sounds his trumpet. Jericho's walls are coming down and the land promised to us is ready to inhabit.

In a way we cannot imagine, God sits on the throne of the world. From one point of view, the first heaven and earth pass away (21:1), but from another point of view, God's creation is now as he purposed it to be—what Jesus called 'the regeneration' (Matt. 19:28).

The destroyers of the earth, those who abused God's creation rather than harnessed it to God's purposes, will be destroyed. An 'open door' (4:1) has revealed something of heaven's secrets, but at this point in the vision, heaven itself is opened up, and the covenant box that bore testimony to God's faithfulness and presence is seen. Again, the vision is overwhelming loud and overpowering!

Review

The whole section has been about God's kingdom and the task of proclaiming it. We need to turn to Jesus himself to see what this may look like. He announced that the kingdom was 'at hand' or that it had 'come upon' those who witnessed a miracle. But his whole life was lived in attentiveness to God's reign. One simple illustration may be helpful. When Mark begins his gospel, he constantly uses the word 'immediately'. He uses it 12 times in the first chapter and 50 times in his whole book. What is it in Jesus's life and what happens around it that draws forth this word? I suggest it is his awareness that he lived in the light of 'last things', not things as they seem to be. His life was not characterised by delay but by God being at work with a view to the end time. May God do such a work in us also!

Joseph L. Magina writes, 'While the story of the witnesses does not say everything that needs to be said about the church, it does serve as a rough script for the improvised guerilla theater that the *ekklesia* is called on to perform, in a role that combines extraordinary power with infinite vulnerability. Part of God's grace to the church is that it does not have to have everything worked out in advance; this is part of its essential humanity. It need only entrust itself to the God who raises the dead, as he once did in that city "where their Lord was crucified." It need only be a witness' (*Revelation*, p. 143).