

7. The witness to the Gospel from Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] Now, we can have our Bibles open, please, at page 1033, and we'll have a moment's prayer as we start to look at this passage. Come then, with prayer and contemplation, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

And so we pray, Father, that you will take my words and all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Some of you, I imagine, will go to theme parks, either on your own or with your children.

It's a long time since our children were that age. But I do remember in theme parks there were the gentle rides, which mum and dad were able to go on. And then in those days what was called the ultimate.

I don't know what it's called now. Now, in Revelation, we have been on the gentle rides so far. Those of you who felt there were great mysteries in chapters 6 to 9, you were right.

[1 : 1 9] But I think here we come into greater mysteries still. But I don't want us to be frightened at that. Because, as I said at the very beginning of this series, the point of Revelation, the point of the apocalypse, the unveiling, is not to mystify, but to reveal.

John is not writing this to bamboozle us. He's not writing this so that only those of the particular type of brain can make a road map of the last days.

And I'm going to come back to the last days and what they mean in a moment or two. He's giving this to help the people of God in the present. John is saying it is tough.

It's very tough and it's going to get tougher. It's what Apocalyptic says. It's tough. It's going to get tougher. The problems are there and they're going to get more difficult. Nevertheless, the resources to deal with those problems are formidable.

And in particular, John in the Revelation tells us a great deal about angels. Angels have fared very badly in Christian thinking.

[2 : 2 8] If you read books like Hebrews and Colossians, you'll find that some early Christians were giving far too great a place to angels. They were exalting them to the level of the Lord Jesus Christ himself and virtually worshipping them.

That's hardly the problem today. We're rather embarrassed by angels. Not surprisingly because of some of the absolute nonsense that's written about them. You go to the mind, body and spirit section in Waterstones and look at the books on angels.

Most of them are worthless. Most of them are sensational. Most of them are lurid. And most of them have nothing to do whatever with the angels in Scripture.

If you read Psalm 103, verses 20 to 22, you'll find a very, very important statement about angels. Angels, says the psalmist, are God's messengers, his holy ones who do his will.

Billy Graham long ago wrote a book about angels, which he called them God's secret agents. In the government of the universe, angels are totally involved.

[3 : 35] God, as he carries out his purposes, God, as he upholds creation, uses the mighty angels, the mighty ones who do his will. If that's true, it would not be surprising.

Indeed, it would be very surprising if this were not the case. That in the message of the gospel, as the gospel spreads throughout the world, it would be unthinkable that angels were not involved.

Now, it's often been said, God has not entrusted the gospel to angels, but to humans. And that is, of course, true. That ignores the even more important truth, that angels are profoundly concerned with the gospel message on earth.

That's why I'm calling what I'm saying today, the witness to the gospel from heaven. Next week, we'll look at the witness to the gospel on earth. But this week's the witness to the gospel from heaven.

Remember this. Remember the parables in Luke 15. Luke 15, verse 10. The lost sheep, that is, joy among the angels of God at one sinner repenting.

[4 : 41] When the gospel spreads throughout the world, when sinners turn to Christ, the angels rejoice. They rejoice because it's the message that they too are committed to.

And here is the witness to the gospel from heaven. And the emphasis here is on the heavenly origin of the gospel and the divine protection of the church.

As the judgments rain down on the world, the church continues to preach the gospel. And here we have the pure protection of the church.

Next week, we're going to look at the savage persecution of the church. Both things are true. And we need to remember both things. If we focus on the protection and ignore the persecution, we'll soon become disillusioned.

Because what's happening doesn't appear to fit the reality. On the other hand, if we simply concentrate on what's happening on earth, we ignore the important truth that the angels of God are involved as the church presents the gospel.

[5 : 49] After all, remember chapters 2 to 3 to the angel of the church in Laodicea and Philippi and so on. Right. So let's look at this chapter then. It's a mysterious chapter, but as so often in Revelation, the details may be obscure, but the general thrust is quite clear.

So first of all, we have the awe-inspiring messenger from heaven, verses 1 to 4. I was going to call it the awesome messenger from heaven, but nowadays awesome is a word that's used by everything.

That was an awesome concert last night and so on. So I think we, or better, I want to use the word awe-inspiring to suggest that this figure inspires in the apostle himself tremendous awe.

Because this envoy from heaven is truly awesome. I saw another mighty angel wrapped in the cloud, a rainbow over his head, face like the sun, his head like pillars of fire.

Now the image we use gives us an insight into who this angel is and what his task is. I want to suggest that this mighty angel is almost certainly the angel Gabriel.

[7 : 05] He's mentioned in Daniel chapter 8 in a similar role, but Gabriel is best known, isn't he, in Luke chapter 1 for coming to Mary to announce the coming of the Savior.

The angel said to Mary, the Holy One born of you will be the Son of God, the Savior of his people. Now, of course, that scene with Mary is a domestic scene, if you like.

The visit from the angel, it's familiar. But what I want to suggest to you is that what John is saying here is that this domestic visit to Mary actually was an event that was so amazing that it could only be described in terms like this.

This, if you like, is the heavenly counterpart of the visit to Mary because this angel is announcing the gospel from heaven.

And that, of course, is exactly what Gabriel did when he visited Mary. We've got a glimpse behind the scenes. When we come to chapter 12, we'll come across the archangel Michael himself fighting with the devil.

[8 : 16] And that is the heavenly counterpart of what happened on the cross when Jesus died. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb. So what's happening here, I want to suggest, is John is throwing the veil aside, or rather, the voice from heaven is throwing the veil aside and saying, look, John, this is how impressive, this is how amazing the gospel is.

This is the eternal gospel. And the appearance of the angel dramatizes the great realities of the gospel. We mustn't imagine...

When I said the details are obscure, I didn't mean the details don't matter. I didn't mean they're unimportant. What I mean by that is we can't always penetrate the reality. However, the way this angel appears, wrapped in a cloud, this, of course, is a cloud of mystery, the mystery that surrounds the throne of God.

But the rainbow, the rainbow takes us right back to the beginning of the Bible. The rainbow after the flood, reminding us of God's covenant with the whole of creation.

He's promised to renew creation. This is how big a thing the gospel is. God is going to renew creation. He's not just saving individuals. That's very, very important. Saving people out of the world, turning them into sons and daughters of God, transforming their lives.

[9 : 42] But he is going to transform creation. And the rainbow is a reminder. His legs, like pillars of fire, recalling the Exodus story. The God of salvation, who rescued his people.

You see why John calls this an eternal gospel, or an everlasting gospel. This is the gospel right from the beginning. God of creation, the God of Exodus, who has sent his messenger, Gabriel, and his authority in his voice, when he called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring.

And the seven thunders, this recalls Psalm 29, sometimes called the Psalm of the seven thunders, where the voice of God is embodied in a thunderstorm that coming from the Mediterranean sweeps over the pasture lands of the Holy Land and into the mountains.

Now, notice also, well, we'll come to this in a minute, but notice particularly, the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write. This is not inarticulate noise.

That's the important thing. What God is saying needs to be interpreted. The event itself is not the revelation. It needs to be interpreted.

[10 : 59] The great, this is what happens in Scripture, the great events need to be interpreted. Remember the cross itself. Ninety-nine percent of the people who witnessed that event misunderstood it, misrepresented it.

And seeing and hearing this great angel needs to be interpreted. That's the first thing. Gabriel from heaven comes with a message which is not just to Mary, but to the whole world.

And I believe, I say, this is the heavenly counterpart of that. It all hangs together. Then we come to the, secondly, to the message from heaven, verses five to seven.

I'm not certain, I'm not falling into what I tell the Cornhill students not to do. I say, don't just give, don't just give descriptive headings. Well, that's exactly what I'm doing, but you have to forgive me.

The message from heaven. Now, John is told to seal up verse four. God does not tell us everything about everything.

[12 : 05] God tells us what we need to know. God tells us everything we need to know for life and godliness. When I began this series on Revelation, I referred you to Deuteronomy 29, 29.

The secret things belong to the Lord, our God. There are many, many secrets that we do not know and cannot know. But the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children.

In other words, the message to be passed on that we might do everything in this law, in this Torah, in this word. There's enough for us to live faithfully in the world.

So what is he saying? And I think he's saying two things in particular. First of all, the timing of events is in God's hand. I swore the angel whom I saw, verse 5, that there would be no more delay.

Now the authorised version is misleading here. It says that time would be no more, implying this is the end of history. I think that's an unfortunate translation because it leads on to a particular interpretation of the later chapters of the book which actually projects them into the future and takes them away from relevance to us on earth.

[13 : 31] No, the point angel is saying is God's purpose is about to be fulfilled. Put it another way, we are in the last days. Now you get lots of people around who say, we are in the last days and I have a message for the last days.

If you meet somebody like that, you say to them, good for you, so do we. Here's the message for the last days. The words of the apostles and the prophets, the scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments.

When did the last days begin? They began when Christ was born in Bethlehem. Of course, we are in the last days. What we don't know, of course, is when he will come again.

That has not been revealed to us. But as we live on earth, we are in the last days because God has spoken his last word to the world.

Verse 7, In the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh trumpet angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled just as he announced to his servants, prophets.

[14 : 38] The prophets prophesied right from the beginning that there would come someone who would fulfill God's purposes. What we call the second coming is mentioned, first of all, in Genesis 3.

The descendant of the serpent, sorry, the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. All we know at that stage is that there will be a serpent crusher, there will be a champion who will win back the creation for God and fulfill his purposes.

And as the prophets prophesy, throughout the Old Testament, we have this figure mentioned, sometimes a king, sometimes a suffering servant, sometimes the son of man.

Different names, always the same person, until the day when John the Baptist stands on the banks of Jordan and say he's arrived. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That's God's time. And that is fulfilled in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel.

[15 : 53] Now the point I've made already is that all these judgments are happening all through that period, the period between the comings. So what we've got here is what Revelation so often does, compressing these two events into one.

The Bible, incidentally, doesn't often talk about the second coming. It tends to say the coming because these great events are all seen as part of one event in which God invades the human race.

the first time the young prince of glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines, met the serpent dragon and dealt him his death blow. When he comes again as Revelation 1 says, he will come in the clouds with great power and glory and every eye will see him.

He is Alpha and Omega, the one who lives forever and ever. So the timing of events is in God's hand. The second thing is that the one who is to come is the center of history.

Look once again in verse 7. The mystery of God would be fulfilled. Who is the mystery of God? Now we read in Colossians chapter 2 as we began the service, the mystery of God is Christ himself in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

[17 : 14] This is the theme of Revelation, the eternal gospel which focuses on the suffering and triumphant Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15, that great chapter about the resurrection, Paul associates the mystery with the final coming.

We shall not all sleep. I show you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. Now I want you to notice particularly, as I say, this last phrase in verse 7.

The mystery of God would be fulfilled just as he announced to his servants the prophets. Now you see, you see what's happening here. John is saying, read your Old Testaments.

You'll find it there. The mystery of God, the one who is to come, the center of God's purposes, the Alpha and the Omega. That was announced, but now it's actually happened.

He has come, and he is coming. You see, ultimately, the gospel is not about Christ. The gospel is Christ.

[18 : 18] He is the hope of glory. He is the one whom we proclaim. He is the word made flesh. And when we preach the gospel, it's ultimately not a talk about the Bible.

It is presenting Christ, the living Christ. Timothy Dudley Smith says, in that great hymn we sang, come then with prayer and contemplation. See how in Scripture, Christ is known.

The mystery of God, right from the beginning, right from the time, that the Lord God says, the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent, right until John the Baptist announces that he has come, he's here, right until he comes again.

That is what the eternal gospel is. The mystery of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, announced the prophets. We've seen this already in Romans, haven't we, in the early chapters of Romans.

The prophets, the great, but now, but now, the gospel has come. But that gospel doesn't contradict the law and the prophets, rather, the law and the prophets bear witness to that gospel.

[19 : 26] So we have the messenger from heaven. Let's see, almost certainly, Gabriel, that mighty angel who made this, if you like, domestic visit to Mary, and now publicly, standing on the land and the sea, showing, of course, God's control over the whole creation, and brings this message that time is going somewhere where in the last days, the mystery will be fulfilled because the mystery is Christ himself.

And thirdly then, verses 8 to 11, the message received and delivered. The prophet, who is called into the action, rather than the way Alfred Hitchcock used to like to be, like to play a little cameo role in his films, and more recently, Colin Dexter, like to be an Inspector Morse, and now an Inspector Lewis.

Just as in chapter 4, where John was summoned up to heaven, now here, he is summoned into the action again. And he is representing all of God's people.

God's people now have to receive that word and to proclaim that word. Go take the scroll that is open and the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. We are not apostles like John.

We have not written scripture, but our task is to take that scripture, to receive it, and to proclaim it. Notice the active verbs, go, take, eat, prophesy.

[20 : 49] And there are two things here. First of all, the attractiveness of the word of God. Take and eat it. In your mouth, it will be as sweet as honey.

Coming, of course, from the Psalms, your word was sweet as the honeycomb. And Jeremiah, in chapter 15, says, when your words come, I eat them.

They are my joy and my delight. Talking about digesting, making that word his own. Nourishing meals from scripture which cause growth and maturity.

And when that source of nourishment is neglected, the individual Christian and the Christian community becomes anemic and undernourished and unable to face the challenges of life.

There is no other way. We must take the scroll and eat it. Read, mark, and inwardly digest. There is also the painful cost.

[21 : 53] It will make your stomach bitter. Now, the contents of the scroll are probably especially chapter 11, which we'll be looking at next week, and possibly into chapters 12 to 14.

They are bitter because they are utterly realistic. They speak of a painful ordeal for God's people. And the often bitter agony of proclaiming the gospel.

Verse 10, I took the little scroll and ate it. It was as sweet as honey in my mouth. When I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. Notice the compulsion.

You must. Jeremiah speaks about this. He says, Often I say, I will not prophesy again in his name, and his word is like a fire in my heart, and I can't help it.

All those who love the gospel know this. It becomes a compulsion. All that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace, the arms of love, that compass me would all mankind embrace, as Wesley sang.

[23 : 01] But more than this, this is public truth. Peoples, nations, languages, and kings. If this is the word of the eternal God, if this is the word of the creator of the universe, if this is the word of the one who lives forever and ever, who made heaven and earth, then heaven and earth have got to listen.

That is the rationale for preaching the gospel, isn't it? It's not, it's not our truth in that sense. It's not a view. It's the eternal living truth.

But notice, particularly the addition of the last word, and kings. In other words, this is truth that affects the destinies of nations. It must be proclaimed to those who are in power.

It must be, it must be spoken in the corridors of power and among the great and the influential. And it's interesting to use the word prophesy.

Now, prophecy is not simply about foretelling the future, although John does that, particularly come to the last chapters of the book. There is a great deal which is revealed there, which isn't revealed in so much detail elsewhere, about the events of the coming of Christ and the subsequent new heaven and new earth.

[24 : 19] But prophecy is using, is using the revelation in such a way that it will show the meaning of what's happening here and now. Prophets speak words which summon people to repent.

That's one of the ways in which you know a true prophet. That he, that the prophet calls people to change. The one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change.

The false prophet will always be affirming, always saying to people everything's fine. This is the prophet taking this message and saying, look, this is what history is about.

This is where history has come from and this is where it's going. And that, as I say, is the reason for this awesome picture of Gabriel here with the message. It's the message about the, about the time and about the centrality of Christ.

And you can see how powerful that is. The original heroes of this were suffering under the dreadful regime of the emperor Domitian. time of savage and fairly widespread persecution throughout the Roman Empire.

[25 : 31] We in this country are not suffering persecution. We don't come back to that when we come to particularly to chapter 13 which is particularly important in that respect.

But aren't we so often intimidated? We're intimidated by the militant new atheism led by the prickly figure of Richard Dawkins, aren't we? We're intimidated by the sneers of the media.

We're intimidated by the indifference and apathy of so much of what passes for Christianity. John is saying to us, look up. Look at the eternal gospel.

As Elisha said long ago to his panic-stricken servant when they were trapped in the Syrian town of Dothan surrounded by armies, look behind the veil, see the armies and chariots of God and see that those who are with us are more than those who are with them.

That I believe is what Revelation 10 is saying. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. Amen. Let's pray.

[26 : 47] Our Father, these great truths are simply staggering. Help us amid the pressure of our daily lives, amid the gigantic problems, amid the frustrations and inevitable setbacks, to look beyond the veil into the unseen world, to see the mighty angels of God, to see the triumphant Christ who has the keys of death and of Hades, and seeing that to go on bravely until he returns.

We ask this in his name. Amen.