

I'm going to get this out of the way up front because 0% of this is about me. I'm just giving y'all the update: Recently, I got engaged. This is my beautiful fiancé, Ashley [view the online sermon to see the photo]. Yes, I'm the luckiest guy in the world!

One of the things I love about Ashley is how she pushes me to grow in ways I need growing!

- I'm an introvert, she's an extrovert (she's always up for hanging).
- I care about ideas and concepts; she cares about people.
- I'm more of a thinker, she's more of a feeler. (We're wedding prepping and she made a save the date graphic and she's like, "What do you think?" I'm like, "It's great." She's like, "BUT DO YOU LOVE IT?" which means I need to be like, "YES, ITS AMAZING!")

One of the ways she really pushes me, though, is in seeing and serving "the least of these." I'll never forget the time she and I went for a walk on the near east side and ended up at Highland Park and came across "Kelly." "Kelly" was sprawled out in the grass, no blanket, no anything, all disheveled. She looked like she had been knocked out. Ashley was immediately clued in to her. I was not. So, because of Ashley, we went over to spend time with her, made sure she was all right, left to get food, water, and blankets, and came back and heard her story.

I had many thoughts that day. One of them was something like this: "Things are not as they should be." The reason I share that story is because everywhere we look, it seems like things are not as they should be:

- Iran launched missiles into Israel—we fear World War 3.
- Hurricane Helene demolished Asheville, NC—we fear climate disaster.
- Last week, our vice-presidential candidates met and the issues they discussed showcased the fact that there's a lot in our current cultural moment that feels broken. Think of the issues they debated: gun violence, abortion, economics, climate, and more.

Things are not as they should be. So, my question is this: How can God's salvation come to the earth when it seems the world is unraveling?

Our text today is Revelation 8:6-11:19. In chapters 8 and 9, John the Revelator sees seven angels with seven trumpets. Following each trumpet of the first six trumpet blasts is a plague-like, judgment-oriented catastrophe:

- Trumpet 1: hail and fire are mixed with blood and hurled down,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the earth is burned up
- Trumpet 2: a huge mountain is thrown in the sea,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of it turns to blood
- Trumpet 3: a great star falls into the rivers and springs of water,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the waters grows bitter
- Trumpet 4:  $\frac{1}{3}$  of sun, moon, and stars struck;  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the day and night without light
- Trumpet 5: a star falls that opens an abyss with locusts
- Trumpet 6: four angels are released to kill a  $\frac{1}{3}$  of mankind

As Dan mentioned last week regarding Revelation 6-7, the trumpets of Revelation 8-9 are not describing events that did take place or that will take place, but rather events that always take place (John utilizes the plagues from Exodus—hail, water turned to blood, darkness, etc.).

It's like an NFL replay. Just as one team scores and then the NFL shows that same play from this angle and then that angle, the same thing happens in Revelation: same event, different angles. What John is showing here is that, because of sin, the world is unraveling.

Q: How can God's salvation come to earth when it seems the world is unraveling?

A: Through the gospel-shaped witness of his people.

Really? That's the answer? That's the answer. Let's look.

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven...He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land... Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." 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...'" Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." (Revelation 10:1-2, 8-9, 11).

There's a lot in this passage, but I want to home in on the "little scroll" that John eats. Many scholars think it's the same scroll that we read about in Revelation 5—the scroll that contains God's plan to save the world. And John is told to do what with it? The angel tells him to "take it and eat it." Notice what happens when he does: in his mouth, it tastes as sweet as honey, which reminds John (and you and me) of the sweetness of God's plan to save the world. That God's got us. But it also will turn his stomach sour, and that's what I want to focus on.

What's happening here is that John is being called upon to think about what the gospel means for his life. He's being challenged to have an accurate mental framework for the gospel.

Q: What is the foundation for the wonderful blessings of the gospel?

I think about it like a tree. On the tree you have the roots that lay the foundation for the fruits. Without the roots, there is no fruit. Now, we all know the fruits, right? Resurrection, new life, salvation. But what are the roots of this? Jesus emptied himself, Jesus came, Jesus suffered, Jesus died, Jesus was buried

To get the fruit, you need the roots. The sweetness of the gospel could have some sour moments. This is the challenge for John (and for us)—to not only identify with Jesus in his resurrection, but to identify with him in his death as well.

This can be illustrated by looking at the life of Polycarp. Towards the middle of the second century, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was taken into custody for being a Christian. He was a leader in the Church, saved by the blood of Jesus, but things were getting rough. The authorities were fed up with the exclusivity of his faith. They wanted him to swear fealty to Caesar, to which he responded, "I ain't doin' it" (direct quote!). Because of this, Polycarp was arrested and taken to a stadium where he knew what awaited him—either being fed to wild beasts or being burned alive.

As he entered the stadium, he heard a voice from heaven that said, "Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!" In that moment, Polycarp was faced with the question, "Will I eat this scroll?"

And, as the story goes, he did. When later he was commanded to swear loyalty to Caesar, Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" He's tasting the sweetness! But shortly thereafter, Polycarp was

burned at the stake. What he learned is that the gospel isn't just a call to resurrection life, it's a call to a cross-shaped life.

Like Jesus, and Polycarp after him, whose living of the gospel led him to his suffering and death, what John is learning is that the gospel isn't just about resurrection life; it can be a suffering life. This is the gospel-shaped part of the answer to our question. Christianity isn't any sort of "this is your best life now" kind of thing, or some sort of life-hack to make life go "up and to the right." No, the roots come first. Then, the fruits come. Before we go up, we must first go where? Down. We must follow the cross-shaped life of Jesus.

And so the question then remains for you and me: As Christians, will we eat that scroll?

- It may not look like being burned alive for our faith, but I know some people who are in an other-religion dominated country serving as missionaries. I can't say their names because it could cause them problems serving the Lord.
- It may not look like serving as a missionary in some foreign nation, but I know several people whose friends are ready to cut them out of their life if they bring up God or an invite to church.
- It may not look like inviting people to church, but I know one fiancé who is pushing her fiancé to step outside of his comfort zone and to love people that are the least of these, even though that's uncomfortable for him.

Q: How can God's salvation come to earth when it seems the world is unraveling?

A: Through the gospel-shaped witness of his people.

But it's not enough, says Revelation, to only embrace the shape of the gospel, we must embody it too. This hits at the back half of our answer: through the witness of his people.

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshipers. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." They are "the two olive trees" and the two lampstands, and "they stand before the Lord of the earth..." They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. (Revelation 11:1-4, 6)

In Revelation 11:4, the two witnesses are referred to as "lampstands," which is what the church is called earlier in Revelation. In 11:6, they have the power to "shut up the heavens" so that it will not rain (like Elijah) and they have the power to "turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague" (like Moses), placing them squarely in the prophetic tradition of speaking God's truth to the world.

The problem? Right there in verse 3: God's enemies "will trample on the holy city for 42 months" (not an actual city, but on God's people; not an actual 42 months, but symbolic for the time between Christ's first coming and second coming). Keep reading later in this chapter and see what happens: "Now when they (the lampstands/church) have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them" (11:7) which results in the "inhabitants of the earth" (all those who follow the world, not the Lamb) not burying them and, instead, gloating over their demise (11:9)!

But, as the parable goes, however, hope springs forth: "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. 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” (Rev. 11:11-12). And the result? “At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed...and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). Which means that while some may always reject the church’s faithful witness, not everyone will. In fact, most won’t. And what this is showing us is that it is specifically the death of God’s people, their laying their lives down for their Jesus, in the train of Jesus, that causes the world to go from gloating to giving God glory.

Okay, that’s a mouthful. What are we talking about here? The point is that God is using the church, even their martyrdom, as a prophetic witness to the world. Tertullian, in the second century, said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” I think that’s true.

Earlier this year I read some of MLK Jr.’s writings on nonviolence. I learned that during a meeting of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a man rose up from the audience, leapt onto the stage and smashed King in the face. Punched him hard. And then punched him again. After the first punch, one person recounts that King just dropped his hands and stood there, allowing the assailant (who turned out to be a member of the American Nazi Party) to punch him again. And when King’s associates tried to step in King stopped them: “Don’t touch him!” King shouted. “Don’t touch him. We have to pray for him.”

That story is crazy, right? Let someone punch you? But everyone watching what happened came to the same conclusion: King might have been the only one punched, but we know who won the fight.

With that in mind, here’s a quote I want to share that showcases why King did that and how he thought about things like that, that has application for what we’re talking about today:

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. And do to us what you will, and we will still love you. And so throw us in jail, and as difficult as that is, we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators and violence into our communities at the midnight hours and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half-dead and we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom but we will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience, that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory.

That story is where we’re taken in Revelation 11! What Revelation is communicating to us is that Christian suffering isn’t pointless suffering—it’s transformative suffering because, in the end, God will use the faithful suffering of his Church. God is using the Church, even their martyrdom, as prophetic witness. Thus, as for MLK Jr., the Church’s witness is a double victory! It not only emboldens believers towards faithfulness, but in our faithful suffering we will win the heart and conscience of those who are our enemies.

Q: How can God’s salvation come to earth when it seems the world is unraveling?

A: Through the gospel-shaped witness of his people.

In 2015, 21 Coptic Christians were captured by ISIS in Libya. One man, Mathew, who was not a part of their group, was captured with them.

The ISIS group took these men, put them in orange jumpsuits, and made them kneel on the beach. Their black-clothed attackers stood behind them. One by one, they began beheading them on camera. The video shows each man praying to the “Lord Jesus” before his demise.

According to reports, Mathew was not a Christian. However, just moments before his death, when the ISIS militants demanded he follow Islam, Mathew turned them down. After witnessing the “immense faith” of the Egyptian believers, he reportedly decided to become a follower of Christ himself. On camera, one of the terrorists asked Mathew, “Do you reject Christ?” He responded boldly: “Their God is my God.”

This, my friends, is what this section of Revelation is all about! Yes, our world is unraveling, but God is bringing His salvation through the gospel-shaped witness of his people.

Oh, and in case you were wondering—God won’t leave his people high and dry. In the end, he’ll vindicate every ounce of suffering Christians do for the gospel!

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm. (Revelation 11:15-19)

God will bring his Kingdom. God’s wrath will be poured out on all evildoers. We can hope in the assurance of that!

Now, I’ll end with this: What does this idea that “God brings his salvation to earth through the gospel-shaped witness of his people” mean for you? For us?

For me, two things happen:

1. I’m emboldened—if he can face all that there, I can live for Jesus here.
2. I’m challenged—how can I move out of my comfort zone to bring Christ to those in need?