

“Bittersweet Witness”

Introduction: Have you ever been called as a witness in a court of law, or other legal proceeding? You know, the kind when you have to put your hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God? I’ve never done it, but I can imagine that it’s an intimidating process. On the one hand, it’s easy; you simply tell the truth about what you know, what you’ve seen, what you’ve experienced. On the other hand, it’s dangerous; not everyone wants to hear the truth, and people who tell the truth can get killed . . . that’s why they have witness protection programs!

One of the calls of Jesus on our life is to be a witness, to the truth of what we know about him and how we’ve come to experience him. It was his parting word to his followers, as Acts 1 makes clear. It was to be what characterized their life as they waited for him to return and bring his kingdom to bear full bore in this world. And, as we’ll see Revelation make clear in its own unique way, being a witness is what the church in any age is to be about as we continue to live in-between the two comings of our Lord.

Yet, as we will see, bearing witness can be difficult and even dangerous because not everyone wants to hear about Jesus. In fact, the Greek word for witness is *martus*, from which we get our word martyr, which is of course the word we use for those who lose their lives telling the truth about Jesus. But what John is led to see in this symbolic vision is that God’s kingdom triumphs by means of the faithful witness of his people. Through our witness, the inhabitants of the earth are led to glorify God. So as we look at what this next section of Revelation tells us about the witness of John and the church, we’ll explore, over this week and the next, several aspects what a faithful Christian witness looks like.

I. In the Interlude

A. We begin by reminding ourselves where we are in the vision. We are in the middle section that symbolically portrays the judgment and salvation of God through three sets of seven—seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Each of these series depict the entire range of God’s judgment and rescue of the earth and his faithful people. Last week, we looked at the seven trumpets. In chapters 10-11, our text for today, we find ourselves in what is referred to as an “interlude, or pause between the sixth and seventh trumpet, before, in other words, God’s final judgment and victory of his kingdom. There was a similar interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. The question posed there was, “Who is able to stand in God’s judgment?” And the answer was, those who have the seal of God upon their foreheads, those who have turned to Jesus, the Lamb, in repentance and faith. They will stand secure.

B. Now, in the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet, a different question is asked, “What are those who have been sealed to do before God’s final judgment is worked out at the second coming of Jesus?” This time period, the time between the two comings of Jesus, is what is symbolized by numbers “forty-two months,” or “one thousand two hundred and sixty days,” or “three and one-half years,” all equivalent time periods. It refers to the whole time the church is in the world, caught in the midst of the clashing of the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God (cf. 12:6, 14). What we are to do, as we noted in our introduction is bear a faithful witness. Chapters 10-11 show us what that means. As we move through the text, I’ll highlight six elements of such, three this week and three more the next!

## II. Internalizing God's Word

A. We must internalize God's word, taking it into our mind and heart, filling our souls with it, internalizing it, so that we can internalize God himself. This is symbolized by John being instructed not only to take the scroll that lay open in the hand of the angel, which contained God's redemptive plan, but to "eat" it. It's a way of saying that he is to assimilate God's word into his life, not simply by reading it, but by studying it, pondering it, and putting it into practice. If our witness is to be faithful and effective, it must be more than just our opinions about God; the life and purposes of God must become part of our life.

Illustration: To put a slightly different angle on it, a fellow who saw me for spiritual direction last week, in answer to my question, "What have you been up to this month?" said, "I've been marinatin' in God's word!" Like eating God's word, marinating is also a great image as it points to the slow, deep way we are to allow the word to penetrate our lives. We can only really share what has become a part of us.

B. Notice also the word "again" (10:11). As one who was in his 80's and now on an island prison because of bearing witness that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, I imaging that it might have crossed John's mind, at least for a moment, that if he ever made it off of that God-forsaken island, that he might just be more comfortable and a lot safer if he retired and took up golf. But God is not leaving old age as a way to opt out of bearing witness. Rather, God wants us to have the sentiment of the psalmist in mind who says, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation..." (Ps. 71:18).

## III. The Calling of All in the Church

A. So if bearing witness is not only for the young, neither is it, the vision goes on to declare, only for the leaders of the church like John. It is the calling of all in the church. Certainly, some in the church may have the gift of evangelism, but bearing witness to Jesus, sharing what we know and have experienced of him, is the calling of all. We see this as the text moves on from John, the bishop or leader of the seven churches to whom this vision was directed, to the church itself. Where do we see the church? It's the "temple" which John is instructed to measure: "Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, *Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there*" (11:1). Now, at this time, late in the first century A.D., the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. So, some think the construction of a new temple is in view here in which God will come to dwell and in which there will again be an altar upon which sacrifices will be made.

B. Certainly, the prophet Ezekiel spends several chapters sketching out in detail what a new temple will look like (40-48). But at the end of Revelation, we see that in God's new creation, the "new Jerusalem," there will be no temple (21:22). That is because the entire thing, the entire city, the entirety of God's new creation will be the temple in which God will make his home and dwell with his people. In God's new creation, the temple will not be some separate identifiable structure; the new creation will be all Temple all the time! Prior to this, God's people, the church, the Christian community, is the temple where God makes his home. Several NT passages express this image. One example is found in 1 Corinthians 3:16, where Paul states plainly to the church there (the "you" is plural): "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"

C. So why is John told to measure the "temple," the community that is the people of God? In one sense, it's because God is now going to highlight the role of the church as a witnessing body, that bearing witness is not just the role of a select few. Measuring identifies and marks the church off for this ministry. Such measuring also serves to protect, as it marks off the

church, notice, from the court outside the temple: "...but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months" (11:2).

D. What's going on here? The outer court of the literal temple was the place where the Gentiles were allowed to go. The "temple" was the inner sanctuary where only the priests could go. John is being told that the church, the "royal priesthood" (1 Pe. 2:9), will be protected by God because it has been bought by the blood of the Lamb. It's the place of worship, protected so that we can gather to pray and praise and learn and share, all to gather energy for the task of bearing witness to the nations, the non-believers, in the outer court to whom we are called to go. This outer court is not measured so it is not protected. It cannot be protected because it can only be judged or converted.

#### IV. Recognizing the Clashing of the Kingdoms

A. The third aspect of our witness that this vision reveals is that it will be tough and bittersweet. The vision reveals as much as it depicts the clashing of the kingdoms that takes place when we bear witness to the person and work of Jesus in our world and in our lives. Witness takes place in the arena of hostility. These nations, the people to whom we will go, will not all receive what we have to say gladly. Proclaiming the rule of Jesus in the courts of individualism, or materialism, or militarism, or relativism will not be readily received with open arms and hearts. In fact, John sees that they will "trample the holy city for forty-two months," symbolizing hostility during the time between the two comings of Jesus.

B. Why such hostility? Because Jesus brings into the world another kingdom, one which seeks to transform and displace all other kingdoms. Even more, he is the King, who sits on the throne of the world and before whom all other kings are to bow. Jesus has come to confront our idolatry and that will cause a clash, a loud one! If he is Lord, you and I and all those in the court of the nations are not. When and if we recognize this, we either confess our idolatry, turn around and follow him, or we lash out and begin to make things really uncomfortable. There really is no middle ground.

Illustration: In a telling picture, do you recall the scene in the heavenly throne room from Rev. 4, when the 24 elders fell down before the throne to worship the Lord? Remember what they did? They took their crowns off and lay them before the throne crying out, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (4:10-11). Then remember those locusts from chapter 9? They too had crowns, but they had no interest in removing them but simply in being hostile toward God's people (9:7).

C. So as we bear witness, we need to be fully aware of this clashing and not surprised by it. This helps make sense of what John is told that when he internalizes God's word it will be sweet to his taste but then become bitter in his stomach. That is, it will be sweet when we receive it and experiencing its life giving nature but bitter when and as we see it rejected by others. An earlier prophet named Ezekiel experienced this contrast. Instructed as well to "eat" God's word before he shared it, it tasted as sweet as honey to his mouth, but it became bitter as the people with whom he shared it refused to listen because of the hardness of their hearts (Ez. 3:1-15).

D. Our witness will be bittersweet because Jesus, and his death on the cross, and our need to appropriate that death by faith in our lives remains a stumbling block for many. Good Friday is not really "good news" until we recognize our sinfulness and the need for Jesus to do something about it. So, to anticipate where we will begin next week, we need to be sensitive to this, bearing

witness “clothed in sackcloth.” It’s how we see the two representative witnesses in v. 3 dressed. Sackcloth is the symbol of repentance and humility. It is to remind us that we can only truly witness to God’s kingdom from a place of our own brokenness and sin. We, too, at one time, clung tightly to our little kingdoms and crowns. So as we bear witness, even in the face of hostility and bitterness, may we do so without judgment; that is God’s department. Rather, may our witness be born of deep repentance, always casting our crowns before him and recognizing the work of grace in our own lives as we compassionately share the good news about this gracious one with others.