

THE END OF THE MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 10 of Revelation we come face to face with several mysteries that have confused many from time to time. I suppose there are millions of people on earth this morning that struggle with the mystery of a silent heaven. Why doesn't God explain what is going on? It must seem to many that he is unconcerned, and, perhaps, even unable to do anything, about human affairs. Evil seems to run rampant everywhere. Miscarriages of justice, cruelty, viciousness, and increasing crime are on every side. You only have to listen to the news broadcasts to know how rotten things are in many places of the world today. People are asking,

- "Why do we live in a world like this?"
- "Why doesn't God do something about it?"
- "What is wrong with a God who cannot run the world any better than this?"

Those are the questions we face in this chapter.

When we looked at Chapters 8 and 9 we saw certain horrendous disasters that are yet to come upon the world. Perhaps we feel the need of some encouragement at this point. The Spirit of God always anticipates such need and has given us in Chapters 10 and most of Chapter 11 another intermission, a kind of parenthesis that comes in between the judgments of the sixth and seventh trumpets. We have already noted that in these series of judgments (the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of the wrath of God) there is always a break between the sixth and seventh judgment. That is what we have come to in the trumpet series.

Chapter 10 presents three mysterious things. We shall look at:

1. The mystery of the mighty angel whom John sees as the chapter opens;
2. Then the mystery of God which the angel proclaims; and, finally,
3. The mystery of the little scroll that is held in the angel's hand.

Let us give our attention to the first 4 verses of Chapter 10.

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. 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, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down." {Rev 10:1-4 NIV}

There are certain clues given in this symbolic book that identify this angel as the "Angel of the Lord," or the "Angel of Yahweh;" the great angel who accompanied Israel through their wilderness wanderings. This Angel always appears when Israel comes to the forefront of God's program. That is an indication here to help us identify where we are and what is happening at this time.

This great Angel comes "robed in a cloud." A cloud is characteristic again of the nation Israel. Remember that when Israel was marching through the desert they were preceded by a cloud by day and followed by a pillar of fire by night. Actually the same cloud came to the rear at night and was lighted from some kind of fire within so that it appeared as a glowing, brilliant pillar. Later, when the tabernacle was completed, and later still when the temple was built, this same cloud came down and filled the Holy of Holies. It was called the Shekinah, the cloud of glory, an indication of the presence of God. So right from the start we have a clue that identifies this Angel as the Lord himself, Jesus, God the Son, appearing as the Angel of Jehovah.

Then we learn he has a rainbow above his head. We last saw a rainbow in Chapter 4 of this book, around the throne of God. The Angel's face, we are told, was "like the sun," and "his legs [actually, the word is *feet*] were like fiery pillars." That takes us back to Chapter 1 where John saw the vision of Jesus standing amid the churches. John describes his face as shining like the sun and his feet were like burnished, glowing bronze. Here, as John watched, he saw the Angel plant one foot upon the land and the other upon the sea, so that he stood astride the earth as a giant colossus. This symbolizes, of course, his ownership of the entire earth. Here is the rightful owner of earth, standing like a great colossus, claiming the earth for himself.

The last clue is that he "roared like a lion." This goes back to the scene in Chapter 4 where we saw the slain Lamb who is also the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He roars in triumph over the earth. So once again we have indications that Israel is coming into view again as God's people whom he desires to use in a special way throughout the period of judgment of the last days and to continue on into the establishment of the kingdom after the return of Jesus.

This scene must have been a great encouragement to John. It is also to us because it helps us see that all these cosmic events affecting earth are still under the firm control of the Angel of God. He is working out everything that happens on his own timetable. This mighty Angel should forever remove from our minds the concept we frequently have of angels as rather effeminate creatures who pluck languidly on harps. That is not what an angel is in Scripture. I like the way Eugene Peterson describes them: "Vast, fiery, sea-striding creatures, with hell in their nostrils and heaven in their eyes." That is more like it!

To the roar of this Angel, seven great peals of thunder reply. John heard what they uttered and was about to write it down, he tells us, when there came another voice that said, "Do not write it, but seal it up." By the way, that is the only part of Revelation which still remains sealed. The rest has been unsealed for our benefit, but this utterance is sealed up again. Would you like to know what the seven thunders said? Well, I have been studying this for many hours and days. I have been reading all the commentators. I have even searched through Ron Ritchie's notes (which did not take long), and I want to tell you: It has not been revealed! Only John knows what the seven thunders uttered. But thunder is always a symbol of the judgment of God, so it is something to do with judgment. I do not know why it was sealed. John does not tell us. Perhaps he did not know himself. He simply obeyed what he was told to do.

If you want a possible clue as to what these seven thunders declared I would refer you to Psalm 29. In that Psalm, seven times the voice of the Lord thunders over the earth in judgment. Check it out and you may gain some clue as to what these seven thunders in Revelation said. But for now it is sealed to us. It is not going to happen right away. The Apostle Paul tells us in Second Corinthians 12 that there was a time when he, too, was caught up into heaven, and heard, he says, "things which were unlawful to repeat," {cf, 2 Cor 12:4 KJV}. Thus there is truth from God that he does not want us yet to know. It is not that he will not tell us in time, but not yet. Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." That is why we are to study carefully the things already revealed in the word of God.

This brings us to the mystery of God himself, found in Verses 5-7:

Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets." {Rev 10:5-7 NIV}

That gives us a glimpse of what is coming in the book of Revelation. This mighty Angel began by raising his right hand to heaven. Have you ever had to do that when you took an oath in a court, and swore to tell the truth? This is where that ritual originated. The raising of the hand looks back to this very scene in Revelation. It is a sign that a solemn oath is about to be taken. The Angel swore by God, the One who created the earth, the heaven, and the sea, and everything in them.

"But," you say, "I thought this was Christ the Creator himself; would he swear by himself?" Yes, it is Christ. But I remind you that, in the book of Hebrews, when God wanted to swear an oath to Abraham that he would keep his promises to him, we are told that because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself. That is what Jesus is doing here. He is swearing by the triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- that there will be no longer any delay in explaining the mystery of God. God has apparently delayed for centuries in answering the questions of men.

We read in Acts that the early Christians expected Jesus to return in their day. Paul certainly expected it in his lifetime. There are many places where it is clear that they were looking for his coming two thousand years ago. Every generation of Christians in every century since has been expecting the Lord to return in their time, but he has not come yet. Today we are expecting the Lord to return, probably before this century ends, and yet he may not. But when the seventh angel sounds, the Angel says, "there will be no more delay!" Then that strange, mysterious reluctance of God to carry out what he has so long promised will not only end, but will be explained as well. That is what we may look forward to.

And when it happens, God will begin his reign on the earth. It may surprise some of you to know that God has never reigned on earth up to this point of time. He has been King over heaven and earth and the whole universe, but he has never yet reigned on earth. He has ruled on earth, and he has overruled. He governs human events, bringing them into being and changing things, but he does it, in a sense, remotely. He has never taken his great power and openly reigned upon the earth. But when the seventh angel sounds, then he will begin to reign.

If you want to see that, look ahead into Chapter 11, Verse 17. There we find the twenty-four elders praising God and saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign." That is the day when the prayer we have all been praying for so long, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," will be answered. That is what is to be found in the prophets, John was told, "as he has announced to his servants the prophets."

Among many other places, in Chapter 36 of Ezekiel there is a vivid description of just how God will begin his kingdom on earth. He will call the nation Israel back into prominence again. He will take out of them the evil heart of flesh and put his Spirit within them and forgive their sins. It is all predicted in the prophets. There are many such passages.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 11 that this truth is important. First he warns Gentile believers not to boast against Israel. There are many Christian teachers today who teach that Israel will not have a future; that all these promises of the Old Testament are to be spiritually applied to the church, and there is no future for Israel as a nation, distinct from any other nation on earth. But, when they say that, they are violating what Paul warns against in Romans 11, "Remember," he says, "you do not support the root, but the root supports you," {cf, Rom 11:18b NIV}. These promises belong to Israel; we Gentiles are allowed in on them by the grace of God, but they still belong primarily to Israel. In Verse 25 of that great chapter, Paul says:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

**"The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins." {Rom 11:25-27 NIV}**

That is what the prophets have long been predicting. There are at least a score or more of lengthy, clear passages that describe the return of Israel to their land and their status as the people of God, to fulfill the promises of God. Many passages describe in lilting beauty the restoration of the earth under the reign of Christ. Listen to these words from Isaiah 35:

**Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;**

say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. {Isa 35:3-7 NIV}

No wonder this announcement had a peculiar effect upon John.

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." I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." {Rev 11:8-11 NIV}

The symbolism of eating the word is a way of indicating that the truth written on that scroll becomes personal. It is individually assimilated.

That is what happens when you eat food, is it not? It becomes you! It is the way by which corned beef and cabbage on Saturday night becomes Patrick O'Reilly by Sunday afternoon! Doctors call it metabolism. They do not know exactly how it works, but they label it as if they did understand it. No one really knows how it happens. The food you ate this morning, or last night, is now rapidly becoming you. You are going to wear it soon, and it will become visible on you. (That is the problem that many of us are facing!) That is the symbolism here.

When a prophet eats the scroll it is a symbol that he is taking it into himself and becoming personally involved with it.

This imagery comes from the prophet Ezekiel. A very similar thing happened to Ezekiel, as we read in the second and third chapters of his prophecy. Let me read a part of it to you. The prophet says:

Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. {Ezek 2:9-3:3 NIV}

Then Ezekiel was sent to deliver the message to Israel, and later in the chapter he says:

The Spirit then lifted me up, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit with the strong hand of the Lord upon me. {Ezek 3:14 NIV}

That is similar to what John is experiencing here. The prophecy tastes sweet at first. These are promises of God as to exactly how he will work out his purposes on earth, and there is an element of it that is wonderfully sweet. Yet as the prophet takes this in, eats it and assimilates it to become personally involved, it begins to turn sour. He realizes that he has a part of this as well, not only in the final result but in the judgments that lead to it.

Has Scripture ever dealt with you like that? You read a passage that speaks of the destiny of the believer, the wonderful promises that we are to come into a time of glory and great happiness, and you feel excited beyond description with what is waiting when God fulfills his word to you. Yet as you meditate upon it, and read further, you begin to understand

- That God has plans to change you to get you ready for that bright future,
- That you are going to be personally involved in that preparation.

There are certain cherished attitudes and biases and bigotries that you are going to have to lay aside. There are bad habits that you must give up. It is not going to be easy. You will have to "pluck out your eye" {cf, Mark 9:47} and "cut off your right hand" {cf, Mark 9:43} in order to obey what God says. That is the pain of self-involvement. There is to be anguish. There is hurt in obeying the Word of the Lord -- but it is all part of his program. That is to see the whole thing. It is part of the fulfillment of the sweetness of the promises of God.

I have noticed that many read the judgments of Revelation and are virtually unmoved. They say, "That is going to happen to people in the end times, but it does not concern me. I am part of the church. We are going to be raptured before those days, so it does not touch me." They shrug their shoulders at these predicted judgments. But we are learning from this book that judgment does touch us, that God already has loosed judgments upon the earth and they find us right where we live. They invade our lives whether we like it or not. We flinch when the Word touches us personally, and we discover that we are part of the problem. We must be changed as well as others. The secret places of our heart must be searched out.

Recall that story of King David after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband in order to take her for himself. He went on for a year after that, still reigning as king. He thought no one knew about it. He felt he had gotten away with it. But God spoke to the old prophet Nathan, and sent him to the king with a story of gross injustice in David's kingdom {2 Sam 12:1, ff}. He said that he had learned of a rich man who owned a large flock of sheep. This man wanted to entertain some friends one day and he looked next door and saw his neighbor's one little lamb that he had cherished as a household pet. Instead of taking a sheep from his own flock to feed his guests he stole his neighbor's lamb and served it instead. When David heard this he was righteously indignant. His sense of justice was aroused. Angrily he said, "Tell me who it is, and I will take care of him." The old prophet looked at him and said, "Thou art the man!" {2 Sam 12:7 KJV} That is what you did, David. You could have had as many wives as you chose (and David already had several) but you stole another man's wife. You are the man I'm talking about!" David suddenly was confronted with the fact that God's judgment had touched him as well.

Scripture occasionally does this to us. When it happened here to John, and he ate the scroll, it was sweet in his mouth but turned sour in his stomach. But only then was he given a new assignment! Verse 11 reports, "Then I was told 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.'" (By the way, the word is literally, in the Greek, "They said unto me." Who are *they*? Not the great Angel. We are not told who it was, but it probably looks back to the four living creatures of Chapter 4 because they are the ones who seem to call forth the action of this book.)

The principle illustrated here is very instructive. It means that after you have personally entered into the meaning of judgment; God has judged you as well as others; and you have felt the hand of God upon you, then, and then only, are you are prepared to speak to someone else about the program of God. John is given here the privilege of ministering again to nations and peoples and languages and kings. That new ministry covers Chapter 11, 12, 13 and 14. We are going to find a pronounced change of scene in Revelation at this point. John, as it were, is sent back over the terrible scenes of judgment to highlight, zoom in, as it were, on

certain characters and personalities, and tell us more detail about them. It will involve, as it says, "peoples and nations and languages and kings." That is going to be the theme of the next chapters of Revelation. It is all yet to come, but it was only as he entered personally into the searchings of God that he is prepared to speak with impact to others.

The last verse of the great hymn "May the Mind of Christ My Savior" is surely the message for this hour:

May his beauty rest upon me,
As I seek the lost to won.
And, au they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.

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