

## **Lesson 4: Revelation 11**

(In order to get through Revelation in 10 weeks, there are chapters we won't cover.)

**Opening Question:** When you're alone (in your dorm room, house, apartment), do you like silence, or do you prefer to have a little noise going on? Why?

**Opening Prayer:** O God, the world we live in seem overcome by evil at times. We see videos of violence, we hear stories of trauma, and our news feeds are marked by pain. Remind us that all of this is temporary, and that you are the true ruler of this world. Equip us to be people of hope, even in a troubled world. Amen!

### **Read aloud Revelation 11:1-14**

Because this is one of the more puzzling passages in this book, we are going to spend some time on it. Also because it reveals important truths that we can't miss.

#### **Wright says:**

We haven't met this 'monster' yet. Nor have we yet discovered 'the great city, which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where their lord was crucified'. John will make all this clear in the several chapters that follow, where we learn that the 'monster' is the might of pagan empire, presently embodied by Rome, and that the 'city' is Rome itself, or maybe in this case the public world of the entire Roman empire. And that point – the point which John is determined his readers will grasp – is this. The God-given and God-protected vocation to bear faithful prophetic witness will not mean that one will be spared from suffering and death, but rather that this suffering and death itself, like that of the Jesus whom the church worships and follows, will be the ultimate prophetic sign through which the world will be brought to glorify God.

How does this work? For three and a half days (there we have the half-of-seven symbol again) the world will celebrate a victory over the church. But suddenly God will act in a new way. The vision of Ezekiel 37, of God's breath coming into the dead corpses, will come into reality. And the vision of Daniel 7, of God's people coming on a cloud to heaven, will also come to pass. The vindication of the church after its martyrdom will complete the prophetic witness.

The result will be that the world, looking on, will at last be converted. That is the meaning of the powerful language at the end of verse 13. Elsewhere, both in Revelation and other biblical books, the idea of people coming in fear and trembling to 'glorify the God of heaven' is an indication not of a temporary or grudging acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, but of a true and penitent turning to God. *The martyr-witness of the church, in other words, will succeed where the plagues have failed.* This is how the nations will come to glorify their creator. This is how 'the kingdom of the world' will

become the kingdom of 'our Lord and his Messiah' – which is precisely the point that follows immediately in verse 15.

This most puzzling passage in this most puzzling book, then, turns out to be one of the most important and central statements of what John wants to say to the churches to whom he is writing. The lamb has opened the seals on the scroll, and all kinds of terrifying things have happened as he has done so. The trumpets have blown; terrors of a different sort have come to pass; but now the scroll has been handed to John, and John prophesies in symbolic action (measuring the temple) and parabolic story (the two witnesses). And this is how the kingdom of God, already spoken of in chapters 4 and 5, is to become a reality on earth as in heaven.

We should not mistake the powerful impact of the symbolism in verse 13. When God judged Sodom and Gomorrah, he might have spared it if ten righteous persons were found there (Genesis 18.32). Now, however, only one-tenth of the wicked city is to fall, and nine-tenths is to be saved. When God was judging Israel through Elijah, only seven thousand were left who had not bowed the knee to the pagan god Baal. Now, however, it is only seven thousand who are killed, and the great majority are to be rescued. Suddenly, out of the smoke and fire of the earlier chapters, a vision is emerging: a vision of the creator God as the God of mercy, grieving over the rebellion and corruption of the world but determined to rescue and restore it, and doing so through the faithful death of the lamb and, now, through the faithful death of the lamb's prophetic followers. The way stands clear for the glorious celebration at the end of the chapter, which rounds off the first half of this very carefully structured book (99-101).

#### **Optional Discussion Questions:**

Wright suggests that it is through the suffering and witness of the church that transformation shall come.

1. When in your life have you seen someone's suffering point other people to Christ?
2. How do you engage the suffering in your life: as something to be resisted, or as something that God can use to transform you and others, or as some combination of the two?

#### **Read aloud Revelation 11:15-19**

Perhaps you've sung or heard part of this passage in *The Messiah*: "The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our God, and of his Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever!"

This allows us a good opportunity to reflect on the idea of "kingdom."

**Read aloud Wright:**

Revelation, like its main biblical prototype (the book of Daniel), is all about the kingdom of God – which is, in my experience, one of the most misunderstood themes in the whole Bible. Far too many Christians have understood ‘the kingdom’ simply in terms of ‘God’s kingdom in heaven’, meaning by that that God is in charge in a place called ‘heaven’ (as opposed to this messy place called ‘earth’, from which God wants to rescue us), and that the main aim of life is to ‘enter the kingdom of heaven’ in the sense of ‘going to heaven when you die’. Perhaps one of the many reasons why Revelation has been literally a closed book for so many, and for so much of the church, is that it powerfully and dramatically contradicts this popular view. God’s kingdom is not simply designed for ‘heaven’, because God is the creator of the whole world, and his entire purpose is to reclaim that whole world as his own and to set it on the way to become the place he always intended it to be, before human rebellion pulled it so disastrously off track. That, in fact, is the message of the four gospels, despite many generations of misunderstanding. This misunderstanding has come about partly because, when Matthew uses the phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ (the other gospels mostly have ‘kingdom of God’), it has been easy for readers with ‘going to heaven’ in their minds to suppose that that was what Matthew, and hence Jesus, were talking about.

But here it is quite clear – and quite explicitly political in its implications. This is not about a private spirituality in the present, or an escapist ‘salvation’ in the future. This is about the living God confronting the powers of the world with the news that he is now in charge, and that the mode of his rule is that which was established by ‘his Messiah’, the lamb. ‘Suffering love conquers all’ is the message, as powerful as it is unwelcome (unwelcome, sadly, all too often in the church, as well as in the world). History has, of course, proved the point. The time of the church’s greatest expansion was the first three centuries, during which the Roman Empire was doing its best, through torture and death, to stamp the movement out. ‘The blood of the martyrs’, said one of the great early teachers, ‘is the seed of the church.’ So it has proved again and again (103-104).

What remains now is ‘to destroy the destroyers of earth’. This is the ultimate meaning of God’s judgment. So often that judgment is seen as negative, ‘destructive’, thwarting the things which humans really enjoy and want to do. This is one of the biggest lies there is. God’s judgment is the judgment of the creator on all that spoils his creation. His purposes, deep-rooted in the vision of chapters 4 and 5, are for his wonderful creation to be rescued from the forces of anti-matter, of anti-creation, of anti-life. It is time for death to die (105).

Wright alerts us to the fact that “kingdom” does not mean a faraway heaven, but the reign of God on earth. When we die, we exist in a temporary state in the presence of God, but we are not as we will be for eternity. For when Jesus returns, those who have died in him will be raised to life and will celebrate a new heaven and a new earth in which God is king and all darkness has been banished. When we use the term “agents of renewal” at Calvin College, we are anticipating that the work we do now as partners with God is just the beginning of the full renewal that will come when Jesus returns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

**Optional Discussion Question:**

When we pray in The Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come,” for what are we praying?

Wright points out that judgment is often seen as negative; that God is getting in the way of letting us do what will bring us pleasure. But in reality, the judgment of God is for us, to rescue us from the anti-creation and anti-life forces that seek to destroy us.

**Optional Discussion Question:**

Where in our lives could we see God’s judgment as preventing us from pleasure, and how can we transform that into viewing God’s judgment as life-giving?

**Closing Prayer**

Our Father, who is in heaven, holy is your name.  
Your kingdom come. Your kingdom come. Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For yours is the kingdom  
For yours is the kingdom  
For yours is the kingdom  
And the glory and the power, forever. Amen.