

“Interlude: The Certain Future”
Revelation 10:1-11
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After the breaking of the sixth of the seven seals in chapter 6 and before the breaking of the seventh in chapter 8 we were treated to an interlude in chapter 7. Almost as if enabling us to catch our breath, but also adding a new perspective to what we had seen as one seal after the other had been broken, we paused to consider both the situation of the church in the world and its future in heaven. As wave after wave of trouble broke upon the world, what was to become of the church and of the followers of Jesus Christ? We heard of the sealing of the church to protect it from the divine judgment that falls upon a rebellious world and we saw it victorious at last in heaven. Then and only then did we return for the breaking of the seventh seal.

Now, in a similar way, John interposes a similar interlude or parenthesis between the sounding of the sixth and the seventh trumpet. The interlude extends from the beginning of chapter 10 to the 13th verse of chapter 11. Remember the chapter and verse divisions come long after. John did not write his Revelation with chapters and verses. Once again the story is not carried forward in the interlude, but the pause allows for the addition of some explanation and perspective. In chapter 10 we are introduced to the angel with the little scroll and in chapter 11 to the two witnesses. We take chapter 10 this morning.

Text Comment

- v.2 Unlike the great scroll of chapter 5 that was sealed with seven seals, this smaller scroll lies open in the angel’s hand. It is small enough that John will eat it later in the chapter. There are, by the way, many similarities between the visitation of this angel and the angel who appeared to Daniel in Daniel chapters 10-12.
- v.4 We noted before that in his visions John moves unannounced between heaven and earth. He had been in heaven from the beginning of chapter 4 through the end of chapter 9 but now apparently he is on earth because he saw this other angel *coming down from heaven*. He was a glorious figure indeed! The fact that he planted one foot in the sea and the other on the land indicates not only his great size but that he has authority over the entire world. Seven thunders, metaphors for the voices of a heavenly being or heavenly beings [Beale, 533], indicate the authority of the message and command everyone’s attention.

You will remember that in his initial encounter with the exalted Christ, of which we read in chapter 1, John was commanded to write down what he saw and send the record to the seven churches (1:11, 19). Here he is commanded *not to write down* what he heard when the seven thunders spoke.

- v.7 John is a successor to the OT prophets. The angel is swearing that all that has been prophesied through the ages about the consummation of history and the triumph of the kingdom of God is about to come to pass. The question that everyone wants answered is “*when* will all of this come to pass?” Remember the martyrs in heaven have asked, “*How*

long before you avenge our blood,” (6:10) and now comes the answer: “immediately upon the sounding of the 7th trumpet.” With that trumpet the end of history is irrevocably set into motion. [Mounce, 211]

The plan of God is here referred to as a *mystery*, which in the NT refers to something that is known but only because God has revealed it. Amos, more than seven hundred years before Christ, wrote, “Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.” [3:7] Otherwise, without that revelation, that “secret” or “mystery” would not be and could not be known. The world would know nothing about its future and its ultimate end had God not chosen to disclose this information. The word the NIV and ESV translate “announced” is the word “evangelize” or “proclaim good news.” We might translate the phrase “just as he announced the good news to the prophets.” The good news here, of course, is the triumph of the kingdom of God, the destruction of God’s enemies, and the vindication of those who have trusted in Jesus Christ. That there is also a message of judgment in the gospel is a point made again in 14:6-7 when the eternal gospel is said to be a message about the judgment of God. There can be no true and lasting peace until the enemies of God are put in their place.

- v.11 John’s eating of the scroll has an obvious parallel in Ezekiel, one of those OT prophets referred to in v. 7. That act, also in a vision, was part of Ezekiel’s commissioning as God’s prophet. It represented the complete assimilation of the Word of God by the prophet so that he could then communicate it to the people of God. In Ezekiel’s case, the scroll he ate was also sweet to his taste but its message was lamentation, mourning, and woe which may be what is meant by the stomach turning sour after John had eaten the scroll. There is a similar passage in Jeremiah where the prophet eats God’s Word and finds it sweet to the taste. In both cases the message that Ezekiel and Jeremiah were commissioned to deliver was a somber message of impending doom. So here. There is much that is unwelcome in John’s predictions of things to come. In any case this entire scene seems to represent a recommissioning of John as the Lord’s prophet prior to his delivering the great and terrible prophecies that make up the second half of Revelation. John has more to prophesy! The “prophesy *about*” in v. 11 can also be translated “prophesy *against*.”

So, what was written on the little scroll? In Ezekiel and Jeremiah the message was one of judgment and doom. What word did John find so sweet until it turned his stomach sour? Some hold that it is simply the Word of God; others that it is the gospel; others that it is simply another version of the first, larger scroll sealed with seven seals. Still others maintain that the first 13 verses of chapter 11 are the contents of the little scroll. We know from the last verse that John must prophesy about or against many peoples, nations, languages and kings. We know that the first 13 verses of chapter 11 concern the ordeal through which the church must pass as history comes to its close. Remember, we were told in 6:11 that the martyrs’ vindication must wait until the full number of those who must suffer for their faith is complete. Perhaps we are meant to think that the message that the end is coming quickly is sweet, but that Christians must suffer greatly in those last, fierce days of Satanic opposition to the kingdom of God is a message “hard to swallow.” [Mounce, 216]

There is perhaps no more significant *idea* shaping modern Western life, that is the life of Western civilization in its modern form, than the *fact/value* distinction, also called the *knowledge/belief* distinction or the *reason/faith* distinction. According to this way of thinking *knowledge* is objective and has to do with facts, the sort of things of which all men can be sure. Objects fall, hot air rises, the earth revolves around the sun, such facts as those. People can *know* such things. Knowledge is a word reserved for things that are certain and the only things we know for certain are the things that science and reason can prove. On the other hand, beliefs are subjective. They are opinions, valid only for the people who happen to hold them. In our culture today, for example, many argue that we can *know* that all living things, including human beings, evolved from primitive forms of life and that those primitive forms themselves evolved from chemicals that existed on the earth long ago. We can *know* that. Science is supposed to have proved that. But when people claim that God created the heavens and the earth and the creatures that fill them, that is a matter of subjective *belief* only. It is not knowledge; it is only opinion. It is not a fact; it is only a person's particular value. In this way human experience is divided into two separate and even contradictory domains. Human beings live in both – they can't help it – but only in one can they claim *to know* anything, to be certain of anything. Darwinian evolution, we are told, is public *truth*; Christian ideas about a creator and the creation of mankind are beliefs, opinions, nothing more. However useful it may be to those who hold such a belief, it cannot be made the basis of any claims that bear on all human beings at once. "Values may be personally meaningful, may be part of our cultural tradition, but ultimately they express something about ourselves only, not about objective reality." [Nancy Pearcey, "Intelligent Design and the Defense of Reason," *Darwin's Nemesis*, 228] Science gives us facts; God is a personal preference.

Most of you are Christians and you probably struggle to realize how deeply this bifurcation of thought, this distinction between facts and values has settled in the modern mind and, in particular, in the minds of young people in our western world. Professor Peter Kreeft of Boston College writes that the students coming into his classroom are

"perfectly willing to believe in objective truth in science, or even in history sometimes, but certainly not in ethics or morality."

It is true that there are some among the cultural elite who would admit in public that beliefs and values are really simply fantasies; they are illusions, however well-intended, and no educated person should imagine that they should be taken seriously. But most people who actually believe that they should distinguish between things that can be *known* – such as the facts of science – and things that can only be *believed* – such as religious truth – that is, people who still support the *fact/value* distinction, are unlikely to say such a thing publicly because it would offend too many people. Most people still think that there are real facts, that there is real truth, that there is *knowledge* in other words, that cannot be demonstrated in a test tube or by the calculations of a computer. That human life is precious, that certain behaviors are wrong and others right, that love is of supreme importance, and so on. They would say that they *know* such things to be true. The typical university professor would disagree, of course. They would allow that people are free to hold their religious beliefs but that no one should pretend that such beliefs constitute *knowledge*. And certainly no one has a right to impose such beliefs on others.

But the fact is even many naturalists and materialists [I am using the word materialist in its technical sense to describe someone who believes that the only thing that exists is matter, that everything is just stuff, nothing more], people who deny the existence of God, the soul, life after death, and the existence of a transcendent moral code governing human life – that is, people who are most adamant about the fact/value distinction – are willing to admit that the sphere of knowledge, the facts of science are cold comfort to a human soul and that they too must depend upon convictions that cannot be proved scientifically and so supposedly cannot be said to be *true* in any meaningful sense. Otherwise they could not explain or account for what matters most to them as human beings. Steven Pinker, the evolutionary materialist and author of the book *How the Mind Works*, argues in his book that nature, matter, is all that there is. Our brains are nothing but physical organs, complex computers. Our thoughts, our ideas, our feelings are all nothing but neurons firing in the brain. Other people have different thoughts and feelings, make different choices, believe different things simply because their neurons fire differently. Truth, love, right and wrong are not *real* things; they are simply what human beings *feel* because the meat in their heads produces such feelings. There is no truth and falsehood in objective reality; just the feelings produced by the brain. Love, right and wrong; all of this is simply a mindless chemical, biological process, nothing more.

But, says Pinker, he doesn't think that way about himself or his wife or his children. When he is at home, among his loved ones, he believes in the dignity of life, in the power of love, in the reality of moral standards. He wants his children to behave in a certain way. He teaches them that some things are right and others things are wrong. It is important to him that they embrace his standards of judgment and morality. He can't help himself. He couldn't bear to live as if human life was really nothing more than an accidental and meaningless dance of atoms.

In a similar way, Rodney Brooks of MIT in his book *Flesh and Machines* argues that a human being is in fact an automaton, or, as he puts it, "a big bag of skin full of biomolecules" that interact according to the laws of physics and chemistry. That is all a human being is: a complex machine. There is no such thing as moral freedom; a person is and does whatever the biological processes in his body – and he is only a body – make of him and make him do. He even says that when he looks at his children, when he forces himself, he can see that they [too] are machines. But he admits, "that is not how I treat them... They have my unconditional love." He freely admits that he maintains two sets of inconsistent beliefs. Still, he wants us to believe that his account of a human being as simply a biological machine is *a fact*; his love of his children on the other hand is his own personal value; really an illusion, but a personal preference that for some unexplained reason is precious to him. [Percy, 236-237]

As one Christian thinker puts it:

"This is an astonishing statement. Because of ordinary, undeniable human experience, people are *forced* to affirm certain things – like moral freedom – even when they claim "to know" these ideas are false, based on their naturalistic philosophy. This is the tragedy of the postmodern age. The things that matter most in life, the things that make us truly human, have been reduced to nothing but useful fictions. Convenient falsehoods." [237-238]

Now there are many things to say about this. Remember, this is no mere detail of modern life. This fact/value or knowledge/belief distinction is the foundation of almost everything that is happening in our culture today. The practice of abortion, the gay rights movement, the approach we take to economic and political questions, it is all based on this understanding of what can be *known* as opposed to what people may *feel or believe*. We could begin by saying that if one's philosophy of life cannot account for what is most important and precious to human beings, then it is time to ask if that philosophy is of any worth. If it can't explain the world – which is what a philosophy is supposed to do – what good is it? Can it possibly be true?

Then we could ask if the distinction between knowledge and belief is, in fact, as certain as many people think. Certainly there are many beliefs that people have that are not facts. That must be admitted. A great many folk call psychic hotlines and there are apparently quite a few people in our country who think that professional wrestling is actually a sport. On the other hand, many things claimed to be facts by educated men and women have been proved to be no facts at all. Scientists have been wrong about a great many things and there is nothing to suggest that they are any less prone to be wrong about things today. They may well have learned a great deal about physics, chemistry, and biology, they have learned much about the life of the human body, but they can hardly claim to know that the brain is all there is, that there is no such thing as a mind or a soul; they can hardly claim to have proved that human life is the accidental result of mindless forces working on matter, genetic mutations accumulating through the ages, accidents piling one upon the other. No one has begun to prove that consciousness can come from unconsciousness or that personality could ever arise from the impersonal. Evolution as a theory of the origin of life is a guess, and increasingly looking like a wild guess. It is, in other words, a preference, a value, not a fact.

But what we say as Christians first and foremost is that the fact/value, the knowledge/belief distinction itself is an illusion. Who said that we cannot *know* God or *know* about him? Who has proved that he does not exist and does not *speak*? Who said that we cannot *know* the meaning and end of life? Who said that such things cannot be facts in precisely the same sense that it is a fact that water is a fluid compound composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom?

In a remarkable statement the late Richard Rorty, the influential postmodern philosopher, a philosopher who denied vehemently and absolutely that there was such a thing as objective truth admitted that

“The suggestion that truth is *out there* is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.

“The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature [that can be objectively known]...is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described his own project.” [Cited in Percy, 242]

which is to say that, on Rorty's own assumptions, *if God is real, truth is real*. But *that* such a God exists and that he has revealed himself and his plan and purpose both in history and in his

Word, that he has come into the world in Jesus Christ, and promises to end the history of this world at a time he himself has chosen and then to judge all mankind, *this is precisely what Christians know!* They believe it, surely. But it is not for that reason any less real, authentic *knowledge*.

Here is John – who saw the Lord Christ and who witnessed his ministry, his miracles, and, above all, his resurrection, and who was given a calling to proclaim the plan and purpose of God to the church and for the world – telling us in no uncertain terms what the one who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them and the earth and all that is in it and the sea and all that is in it, what that divine being intends to do. He has revealed to us through John and the other prophets what we would otherwise never know about how this world will come to an end, how human life will face the judgment of God, and how all those who trusted in the Lord and followed him will be vindicated at the end of history. The future has been foretold by the one who has ordered that future and controls the present so as to bring the future to pass according to his will. The fact that the angel swore by the living God when giving this message to John is further proof of its certainty. By what reason, according to what logic, could anyone say that this is not *knowledge* if God has spoken! That this is not, in Richard Rorty’s phrase, “truth *out there*,” truth for everybody whether you believe it or not?

There is much, of course, that we do *not* know. John was about to write something more, what he had heard the voices of the seven thunders say. But he was commanded not to write that down, to seal it up. We don’t know what John heard. There are many details that have not been revealed; many things about the present and the future that we have no way of explaining. But what has been revealed by the living God, *that much we know for a certainty!* And, unlike the modern materialist philosopher or scientist, we don’t have to deny our humanity, the life of our mind and heart, and our entire concept of true knowledge every time we look into ourselves and every time we are face to face with another human being!

The final verses of chapter nine described a world gone over to falsehood: worshiping gods that are not gods and practicing behaviors that are both destructive in themselves and offensive to the judge of all the earth. But here, in the interlude of chapter 10, is God himself, the living and true God, the creator of heaven and earth revealing his purposes for mankind and for the earth to his prophet. The people described at the end of chapter 9 certainly do not believe that what John is writing is the truth with a capital “T,” truth that is authoritative for everyone in the world, truth that describes objective reality, the cold, hard facts. But then there are many facts, there is much knowledge that people find a way to deny. The fact that people deny the truth revealed by God in Holy Scripture is no more proof that it is false or that it is not knowledge than the fact that a scientist believes in evolution proves that it is true. Scientists have believed in a great many things that eventually turned out not to be true and the truth of many facts that were once denied is now admitted by everyone.

There is a great deal of knowledge that remains unknown. Sometimes this is because a person hasn’t cared to learn it. Much knowledge is hard won. There is a great deal that I should know that I do not know simply because I didn’t work as hard as I would have had to work to acquire that knowledge. Sometimes knowledge that is available and accessible to human beings remains unknown because they don’t want to learn it. There is a great deal that human beings would just

as soon not know. There is a great deal of intentional ignorance in our political and social life, in news gathering and reporting, in the university and in private life. Sometimes a person remains in ignorance because the knowledge offends him and he dislikes it. He won't accept the knowledge because he doesn't want it to be true. There is, alas, an immense amount of this sort of ignorance in our world: the professor who denies the obvious because he prefers the ludicrous; the white man who will not accept that other races are as intelligent or hard-working or responsible as his own; the alcoholic who will not accept what everyone else knows: that he is a drunk; the doctrinaire evolutionist who will not accept that there are immense difficulties with his theory. And, let us be honest, the Christian who does not want to know that the case for his own favored convictions is beset by significant problems or that his Christian testimony has been compromised by his own life and character. Willful ignorance is a *fact* of life. It is a truth *out there!* The fact that people don't know is hardly proof that the knowledge is not there to know if only they were willing to acquire it.

This interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seven trumpets is intended, at least in large part, to remind us in the midst of this prophecy of things present and things to come that what we have been told *is true*. *True truth* as Francis Schaeffer used to put it. Its purpose is to emphasize that what John is telling us is nothing less than *knowledge*, knowledge of reality, cold, hard facts, and not some subjective feeling that we have for some reason or other. The message about the future that John has recorded for us *is certain*.

“Certainty” is a word mathematicians use to describe the appeal of their work. Their work trades in certainty. But a mathematical equation is no more certain that what the living God has told us must come to pass and certainly not nearly as important! In the modern pluralistic and relativistic world of ours we are taught to believe that no enduring truths are finally knowable. You can obtain facts about physical reality, but meaning, value, purpose, morality, and especially theology and eschatology, God and the future, all of this must remain nothing more than personal preference. And that is so even though we must then admit that everything that makes our lives important and worth living is nothing more than a useful illusion.

So the world thinks. Let them think what they will. I don't care about that nearly so much as this, *we Christians must not think this way*. We must not give an inch to them in this way of thinking. What God has told us in his word is not opinion, it is not a value, it is not a personal preference. *It is knowledge* nothing more nor less. *It is truth*. It is true for those who believe it and true for those who will not. This is fundamental. The entire Bible happily rests its case on this understanding of its contents. If Christ were not raised from the dead, says the apostle Paul, then the Christian faith is fantasy. Paul was entirely willing to say that and not only because he knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. He was willing to say that because of the honesty and the clarity of his thinking. A resurrection that is not *true* is of no help to dying men and women! Illusions are nothing to build one's life on. That is the basis of the Bible's terrible condemnation of idolatry. Gods of man's creation are illusions and illusions will not help a man in this world or the next. The Bible is relentlessly honest about this. Allusions are of no value. We need the truth.

You and I need to be careful to keep ourselves free of the insidious influence of the fact/value or knowledge/belief distinction now so thoroughly a part of the modern mind and so constantly intruding itself into modern thinking and speaking. Every time we open a newspaper, every time

we turn on the television set, every time we watch a movie and very often when we speak to a friend. We need to catch ourselves when we find ourselves speaking about what we *think* and about what we *feel* as Christians as if we too are simply delivering our opinions. Paul was more adamant. “I *know* whom I have believed...”

G.K. Chesterton famously said something that, however true in his own day in the early twenty-first century, must be much, much more the case in ours:

“What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.” [*Orthodoxy*, 234-235]

All of what we have read this morning in Revelation 10 concerns the certainty of our knowledge of what is to come to pass. The message comes from heaven, it is delivered by a mighty angel, with one foot on the sea and one foot on the land, the angel swears by the name and the authority of the living God who made the world and everything in it, the God who has spoken through the ages through his holy prophets. *That* is not opinion, or preference, or a personal value; it is not even belief if by belief one means nothing more than a conclusion to which we personally have come. It is *knowledge* and nothing less; it is the facts; it is objective reality as reality will prove itself to be.

It is a happy thing that there is so much in life to confirm this picture of reality. It is a comfort that the Lord does not require us to check our minds or our hearts at the door when we seek to think our way through this world. Nevertheless, it is reality not because we can find so many good reasons to believe it; it is reality because God has made it so. It is his great kindness to us that he has also revealed it to us, but it would be real and true even if he had not revealed it to us. But, and this is John’s great point, it is also a great duty for us who have this knowledge to live in the light of it and never, ever, ever give others the idea that what God has revealed to us about the meaning of life and the future of mankind is only our opinion! It is *not*.