

“Witnesses” (Revelation 11)

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We’ve been studying the book of Revelation since the beginning of this year, and it is clear that the book often talks about a final judgment. There will be a day of reckoning, when all stand before God. God will purge the earth of evil, he will destroy sin and death, and he will remove sinners from the earth—unless they have been redeemed by the Lamb that was slain, Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became a human to rescue us.

But what does Revelation have to say about how we live now as Christians? Today, we’re going to see both the present and the future depicted in Revelation 11. We have a lot to cover today, so we’re going to jump in.

Before we start reading today’s passage, however, there are at least two important things we need to know. One is the theme of the temple in the Bible. This theme actually starts in the beginning of the Bible, though the word “temple” isn’t used until later. Many scholars believe that God made the world and the garden of Eden to be temples, theaters of his glory, places where God dwells with his people. That’s really the basic point of the temple: It is the place where God lives with his people, where he is worshiped. Adam, the first human, might be regarded as a priest who was supposed to minister in God’s temple, along with his wife, Eve, his helper. But those first human beings sinned against God. They didn’t trust him. God can’t have rebels living directly in his presence. So, God removed them from his temple.

But God did not quit dwelling among his people. Fast forward to the book of Exodus. God rescued Israel out of slavery in Egypt. After Israel left Egypt, God met with them at Mount Sinai. He made a covenant with them and gave them his law. He also gave to Moses the design for a tabernacle, a portable temple. God dwelled with Israel as they wandered through the wilderness, until they entered the Promised Land.

Centuries later, the temple was built in Jerusalem by Solomon. At the tabernacle and temple, not only was God said to dwell in the Most Holy Place, the inner chamber of the building, but sacrifices were offered on behalf of Israel, supposedly to atone for their sin.

But sacrificing animals could never atone for human sin (Heb. 10:4). These sacrifices foreshadowed the coming of the true Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of his people by dying for them. And this Lamb is also the true temple, the “place” where God dwells on earth,

where God dwells among his people. (John has both the tabernacle and sacrifice in mind in John 1:14, 29.) We might say that Jesus is the true temple, the true sacrifice, the true high priest.

After Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life and died an atoning death, he was buried and then raised from the dead on the third day. He later ascended to heaven, where he is now. But, metaphorically speaking, Jesus' body is on earth. The church is Jesus' body, and the church is now the temple of God. God doesn't dwell in a building. He dwells in a people, in Christians (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:5.) In the end, God will remake the whole world to be a Most Holy Place, a holy temple. We'll see that in Revelation 21.

Another thing to keep in mind as we look at Revelation 11 is what we read at the very end of chapter 10. John, the author of Revelation, was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings" (Rev. 10:11).¹ Much of chapter 11 is about the church's role as a prophetic witness during this age, the time between Jesus' first and second comings to earth.

Without further ado, let's read Revelation 11:1–3:

¹ Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, ² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. ³ And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."

John is told to measure the temple. Remember that this is an image. If John wrote this book around the year 95, which is the most likely time frame, the temple in Jerusalem was already destroyed. That temple had an inner courtyard, where the temple building and the altar were. But there was also an outer court. John is told to measure the building and the altar, but not the outer court. Measuring in the Bible is a sign of protection. We'll see at the end of the book an angel who measures the new Jerusalem, which is the new creation (Rev. 21:15). The same thing occurs at the end of Ezekiel, when that prophet is given an image of a new temple (Ezek. 40:3).

Now, some interpreters think this image refers to a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, which will be under attack sometime in the future. I think that is wrong. The temple here is most likely the church. There will be no need for another temple or sacrifices, for Christ has come. What is measured, or protected, are the souls of Christians. But the outer court represents their bodies on

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

earth, which can be attacked. The forty-two months, or 1,260 days (based on 30-day months), is half of seven years. That also has an Old Testament background. It comes from the book of Daniel, where it is described as “a time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25; 12:7). That means a year, two years, and half year, or three and a half years. Remember that in the conceptual world of Revelation, the number seven is a perfect number, a number of completion and fullness. Three-and-a-half is half that number. It’s a time of tribulation, a time that is definite in length, but a time that doesn’t last forever. I don’t think it means a literal three-and-a-half-year period. I think the time period is the entire time between Jesus’ first and second comings.

It’s hard to explain quickly why that is the case, but I will say that much of chapter 11 in Revelation seems to parallel chapter 12 and even chapter 13. (We know that because the end of chapter 11, verses 15–19, is the very center of the book, and the sections on either side of the center seem to parallel each other.) And in chapter 12, the church is described as a woman who will be nourished in the wilderness for 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6). Here, the church is described as two witnesses, who go around in sackcloth, clothing that is associated with grieving and repentance. The church continues to prophesy, to declare God’s word, throughout this age, just as John was told he must prophesy. Now, unlike John, we don’t get special revelations from God. We don’t write the Bible. But we can repeat what God has revealed in the Bible. We are God’s witnesses.

I realize that some interpreters have thought of these two witnesses as two individuals who will come to earth in the future. But I think that also is wrong. To see that the witnesses represent the church, we must continue to read. Let’s read verses 4–6:

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. ⁶They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

These two witnesses are called two olive trees and two lampstands. This is a reference to the book of Zechariah. In chapter 4 of Zechariah, the prophet sees a lampstand that gets oil from two olive trees. The lampstand seems to represent the temple, which was going to be rebuilt in Zechariah’s time. The olive oil seems to represent the Holy Spirit. In Zechariah, the point was that God would build his temple, which was indwelt and empowered by his Spirit. After all,

God says that the temple would be built “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zech. 4:6). The olive trees in that vision represented Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest.

Here, the olive trees are the two witnesses, who are also lampstands. Remember that the lampstands in Revelation are churches (Rev. 1:12, 20; 2:1). Jesus stands in their midst (Rev. 1:13; 2:1). Churches are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and they are called to witness, to tell the world about Jesus. The reason that there are two witnesses here is because in the Bible, testimony was supposed to be received by two or more witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Remember that Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs of two (Luke 10:1–24). Also, two of the seven churches mentioned earlier in Revelation were faithful lampstands (Rev. 2:8–11; 3:7–13).

But the church is also described as two witnesses because the description of the witnesses intentionally recalls two great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. Elijah called fire down from heaven to destroy his enemies (2 Kgs. 1:9–12). Elijah also proclaimed that a drought would occur because of Israel’s idolatry (1 Kgs. 17:1). And, by the way, that drought lasted for three and a half years (Luke 4:25; James 5:17). Moses was the prophet during the time when God sent plagues upon Egypt, which included turning water to blood (Exod. 7:20). Here, both prophets are said to do both things. That fact, plus the fact that the prophets are not given the names of Moses and Elijah, suggests that this is not to be taken literally as a second coming of these two prophets. And while Elijah called fire down from heaven, fire didn’t come from his mouth. But fire comes from the mouth of these two witnesses, and that fire is the word of God, which is elsewhere in Revelation is likened to a sword (Rev. 1:16; 10:15, 21). In the book of Jeremiah, God’s word is likened to a fire (Jer. 5:14; 23:29). God’s word can save, and God’s word can condemn. It can build up and tear down. These witnesses warn of a coming judgment for those who continue to reject God.

Let’s see what happens to these witnesses. We’ll read verses 7–13:

⁷ And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, ⁸ and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, ¹⁰ and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because

these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³ And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Both Moses and Elijah spoke truth to power. Moses spoke to Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth. Elijah prophesied in the time of Ahab and Jezebel, the king and queen of Israel. While God protected Moses and Elijah, he won't protect his church from physical harm. The powers of the world don't like it when prophets speak against them, and they have a way of striking back. Here, we're told of a beast who rises from the pit to make war on these witnesses. We'll hear more about this beast that rises from the pit later in Revelation (Rev. 13:1; 17:8). Suffice it to say that this beast represents a power aligned with Satan. This beast conquers and kills the witnesses, leaving their bodies to lie unburied on the street.

It would be disrespectful in just about any culture not to dispose of the bodies in some way, usually through burial. That was particularly true in Jewish culture. These bodies are left to “lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” Jesus, the Lord, was crucified in Jerusalem, of course, and it's surprising to hear Jerusalem called Sodom and Egypt. These were places that were known for being wicked, places where God judged those who were against him. That shows how wicked Jerusalem was. But “the great city” more generally be the city of man, the city of sinful people opposed to God. That's generally what “Babylon” means, and elsewhere in Revelation, Babylon is referred to as “the great city” (Rev. 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21).

The sinful powers of earth put Jesus to death, though ultimately this was God's plan to rescue sinners. The witnesses here are treated like Jesus. Jesus had a ministry on earth of perhaps three and a half years. He was killed. (Though he was buried.) And on the third day, he rose again from the dead. As for the witnesses, they remain dead for three and a half days, during which time “some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies,” and they will rejoice. Just as people from every nation will be redeemed (Rev. 5:9; 7:9), people from every nation will be opposed to God. But after three and a half days, they will be

resurrected, brought back to life by the breath of God. That's a deliberate reference to Ezekiel's famous "dry bones" passage (Ezek. 37:5, 10), where God says he will make Israel live again.

When they come back to life, God calls out to the witnesses to "come up here," the same words John heard earlier (Rev. 4:1). Some think this is a reference to the rapture, which is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. When Jesus returns to earth, we're told that those who are in Christ, both the resurrected dead and whoever are still alive, will be seized or snatched, brought into the air to meet the Lord Jesus, who is descending to earth. That may be what is happening here. But since the language of "come up here" was first used of John, not to rapture his body, but to give him a view of heaven, perhaps that is what is happening here, too. I don't think we're meant to read the details of this in a literal fashion. Richard Bauckham, a New Testament scholar, says, "The two individuals here represent the church in its faithful witness to the world. Their story must be taken neither literally nor even as an allegory, as though the sequence of events in this story were supposed to correspond to a sequence of events in the church's history. The story is more like a parable, which dramatizes the nature and the result of the church's witness."²

The point is that the church will prophetically witness to the world, warning them of judgment and encouraging them to repent and put their trust in Jesus. These witnesses are empowered by the Spirit, and as they witness, God's temple is built. God protects the souls of his people. No one who belongs to him can be snatched out of Jesus' hand (John 10:28). But God does not promise that Christians won't experience physical harm, and even death. The world may think it has won when the church is persecuted. People may think Christianity has died or is about to die. But God will vindicate his people. He will cause his church to live. The vindication of God's people may lead others to repent and give glory to God.

We're told that when that vindication occurs, there will be people who are afraid, and rightfully so. We're told that there was "a great earthquake," which usually means that the end of history has come. But here only a tenth of the city fall, and only seven thousand were killed by the earthquake. The rest give glory to God.

What is happening here? I don't think we're intended to take these numbers literally. I just referenced Richard Bauckham. He also points out that in the Old Testament, there are times when we're told that only a tenth of Israel were faithful or a tenth would be spared judgment

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84.

(Isa. 6:13; Amos 5:3). Also, Elijah was told that he was not alone in resisting idolatry; seven thousand people refused to worship the false God Baal (1 Kgs. 19:18). Here, the numbers are reversed. Instead of only ten percent of the world being Christians and spared judgment, only ten percent are condemned. Instead of a faithful remnant of seven thousand people, there are only seven thousand people who are condemned. Does this mean that ninety percent of the world (or ninety percent of Jerusalem) will be Christians in the end? That would be nice, but we have no reason to believe that that is the case. Again, the numbers aren't meant to be taken literally. If they were, then seven thousand would equal ten percent of the city. That might have been approximately the case in the first century, but the population of Jerusalem now is closer to a million. And it's not clear that this city is supposed to be Jerusalem anyway, which isn't mentioned by name, just as Moses and Elijah are not mentioned by name. That's a hint that these things are to be taken symbolically. But the idea is that the number of believers will expand. God's judgment against sin is fierce, and it is coming. There will be many who are condemned. But God's mercy will extend to many. The small number of faithful Israelites is expanding to a large company of the redeemed, from every tribe, language, people, and nation.

Before we start to think about how this text applies to our lives, I want to make sure we read the rest of the chapter. Let's read verses 14–19:

¹⁴ The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying,

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
¹⁸ The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

¹⁹ Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Back in chapters 8 and 9, we were told of three coming woes, which were the last three trumpets (Rev. 8:13; 9:12). The first two woes, or the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, occur throughout this age, or at least prior to the final judgment. We've been waiting for the last woe, the seventh trumpet. Now, it comes.

When the seventh angel blows his trumpet, we're told, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Those familiar with the "Hallelujah" chorus of Handel's *Messiah* will recognize those words. This is a picture of the end, when God's kingdom will swallow up the kingdom of the world.

We also know that this is the end because the elders, those beings who worship God in heaven, say that God "is and . . . was." Normally, we would expect to hear that God is and was and is to come (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8). Why don't the elders say "and is to come" here? Because he has already come! This is the end, when Jesus returns to earth to judge the living and the dead, and to bring about a new creation. He will judge those who rage against him. Those who refuse to repent, to turn away from their sin and idols and turn to God, will experience God's wrath. But that day of the Lord will also be a day of rewards for God's servants, those prophets and saints who fear God. The destroyers of the earth will be destroyed and those who trust in Jesus will be spared.

That last verse seems to be a bit odd, and it deserves some commentary. The temple was opened, and the ark is seen. What is that about? It may be that this is connected to the seven trumpets, which are based upon the events of the fall of Jericho, as told in Joshua 6. Israel was told to march around Jericho, with the ark, seven days in a row. On the seventh day, seven priests blow seven trumpets and then the walls fall, and the enemy is routed. Something similar happens here. The seventh trumpet is blown, and victory is secured. But the fact that the temple is open and the ark can be seen means that no veil separates God from his people. God will dwell directly with his people. When the judgment comes, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of God, and the earth will be renewed. God will dwell with his people directly, without the veil of sin that separates us from him. We who trust in Jesus will see him, and we will worship him in peace and righteousness.

So, that is Revelation 11. What does it mean for us? Let me start with the non-Christian. To you, this passage may seem exceedingly strange. And, in a way, it is. It's full of symbols that I've tried to explain but may still seem unintelligible. But know this: The human condition is that we sin against God. We don't want him. We don't love him as we should. We certainly don't obey God. God is patient. He could have poured out his wrath long ago. But he won't wait forever. This great day of judgment is coming. However, God is merciful and gracious. He has provided a way for us to be forgiven. That way is Jesus, who alone lived a perfect, sinless life and who died a sacrificial, atoning death. Those who bow before Jesus, who confess their sin and trust him alone for salvation, are credited with his righteousness and are completely forgiven. God can forgive you for all that you've done, even the worst, most shameful thoughts and desires that you've had, if you turn to Jesus. Do that now. If you have questions, please talk to me.

If you are a Christian, know that one of the things we need to do is bear witness to Jesus. Not all of us will be super evangelists. Some of us aren't outgoing. Some of us aren't great speakers. Some of us have a hard time articulating what we believe. But we are called to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). We need to do that even if the world around us is hostile to our message. God never promised us that we would be free from persecution, hate, harm, or even death. But he has promised us that he will be with us through such things, and that even if we should die, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Recently, I read a book called *The Road*, written by Cormac McCarthy. I first read the book fourteen years ago. I more recently watched the movie version, starring Viggo Mortensen, and then I decided I should read the book again. The story is about a man and his son who are struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. The details of the story are all intentionally vague, but it seems that some terrible event, probably a nuclear disaster, has killed most people and has destroyed the world. Everything is gray, decaying, dead, and covered with ash. The boy and his son are traveling along a road, pilgrims on the way to the coast, where the man hopes there will be something, anything, to give them hope and a chance to survive. The few people who are alive are often evil, and there are people who have resorted to cannibalism. The boy asks his father if they would ever eat other people, and the father says no. He says that they are the good guys, and that they are carrying the fire. That phrase, "carrying the fire," is repeated

throughout the book.³ We're never told what the fire is, but it seems to represent civilization and hope. The book is bleak, but it contains a glimmer of hope.

That made me think of the Christian life. The world can be bleak at times. Of course, not everything is gray and dead, but everything does die, and the world is full of evil. Christians are pilgrims on a road, though we know where we're going. And we carry the fire, or, to put it in more biblical terms, the light. Jesus is the light of the world. The gospel is a light in a dark place. We are carrying the light, point to what is true and good and beautiful. We want to pass that light onto others, so they can see the truth about God, about sin, and about salvation in Jesus.

We carry the fire, or the light, into a dark, cold world. Our message is priceless. It is desperately needed. So, let us go and tell.

³ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 83, 129, 216, 278-9, 283.