

The Apocalypse | Finding Composure in the Unveiled Christ

“The Witnesses”

Revelation 11

6.6.21

Then there was given me a measuring rod like a staff; and someone said, "Get up and measure the temple of God and the altar, and those who worship in it." ² "Leave out the court which is outside the temple and do not measure it, for it has been given to the nations; and they will tread under foot the holy city for forty-two months. ³ "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵ And if anyone wants to harm them, fire flows out of their mouth and devours their enemies; so if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this way. ⁶ These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not 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 plague, as often as they desire. ⁷ When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them. ⁸ And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹ Those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. ¹⁰ And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them. ¹² And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." Then they went up into heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³ And in 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.

¹⁴ *The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly.*

¹⁵ *Then the seventh angel sounded; 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 will 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 You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. ¹⁸ "And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth."*

¹⁹ *And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm.*

We're looking at the Book of Revelation and have now entered the hard part where interpretations differ even among Christians in the same tradition. Last week Phil preached. We

heard Phil's sermon as we drove home from Chattanooga. I left a stack of Phil's printed sermons in the back. I made a few corrections. No, actually we did listen and it was excellent (really!).

This week we come to a much-disputed section – the Two Witnesses of CH 11. One scholar says that within this mysterious Bible and this MOST mysterious part (The Revelation) that THIS chapter is maybe the most mysterious/disputed section of all.

Again though, we're not out to answer every question or solve every puzzle but to get the big idea, which is: "Fear not! God, in Christ, will save this planet; He will make it better than it was and He will rescue His people – EVEN IF they're troubled by life on earth and even if they're resisted by others or even killed...God will make all things new! Read about and take it to heart and be blessed!" THAT'S the BIG IDEA!

I THINK I can get us to the Big Idea of this chapter by focusing on the two dominant symbols: 1) The Temple that gets measured and 2) The two witnesses who are powerful, then killed, then raised.

And these two images (Temple and Witnesses) point us to the main task of the Christian Church and then offer us some important implications for OUR own local congregation – so let's look at:

1) The Temple and the Two Witnesses

2) Implications for this Church's Mission

Last week, the Apostle John (human writer), was given a book to eat. It was sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. And then (end of last chapter) John is commissioned by the angels to preach or prophesy. "And they said to me, 'You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.'" (10.11)

But immediately, John is then told to measure the TEMPLE of God, the altar and the people at worship there. It's a way of saying, "Determine the boundaries of who is IN the house of God – set the border and confirm or seal them (like the 144,000 in Ch. 7)". John's prophesying, his measuring and the sealing are all determining/defining who's under God's eternal protection and who is NOT.

THIS Temple is NOT the physical building in Jerusalem where Jesus Christ worshiped and where He drove out the money-changers... That Temple had been destroyed by this time (or shortly after). THIS temple is the one Paul had in mind when he asked the Corinthians: "Don't you know that you ARE God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1Cor 3.16)"

This is the Living Temple where God resides that St. Peter also had in mind when he wrote, "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Pet 2.5) "

The outer courts of this living Temple are “cast out” – it may be a way of saying, “Only those who press IN to the place of worship, NOT those who loiter among the religious trappings outside...are included.”

Jesus Christ is building a New Temple made of people from all nations... This is where God can be found.

Then God authorizes these two witnesses, two olive trees, two lampstands who preach/prophesy for a period of time. These images are taken from the Prophet Zechariah; he prophesied when Israel returned from the Babylonian Exile and they were rebuilding Solomon’s Temple that was destroyed.

And Zechariah saw that the rebuilding of the Temple had a good beginning but then the work stopped – there was opposition. So Zechariah prophesied that this building could only be completed in the strength of God’s Spirit: “Not by might – not by power but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts...” (4.6)

And God gave His prophet a vision of olive trees and a gold lampstand as a kind of guarantee that the Temple would indeed be rebuilt in the power/gifts of God’s Spirit. God told Zechariah, “These are the two anointed ones” ...probably a reference to the anointed king (Zerubbabel) and the anointed priest, (Joshua) – these men were gifts to guarantee the mission would be accomplished.

So when we come to Revelation – these witnesses are ALSO a guarantee that the New Living Temple will indeed be built...“These witnesses are the anointed ones, but instead of two individuals (a king and a priest) these witnesses stand for the Kingdom of Priests – the Church – Jews and Gentiles who agree on one message – the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God gives the anointed church power to do wonders – they are like a community of prophets (1Cor 14.5) – like Moses and Elijah but multiplied. The Church calls people to repent and believe the Good News and she mourns over sin and shows signs of judgment (plagues, water turned to blood, drought) – like Moses and Elijah.

Then they’re killed by a beast from the abyss (the world-spirit) and their bodies left in the streets of the great city (mystically called Sodom and Egypt) where their Lord was crucified (This is likely Jerusalem which is now NOT the holy city but a counterfeit; some say Rome...more on that later). And they will disrespect the bodies of the martyred church... They celebrate that the witnessing church will no longer torment the world. They give gifts to celebrate that the witnesses are dead (like when the villain Haman died in the Book of Esther [9.22] – “purim”)

And now the church is gone and the world-spirit is happy ...for a time... Until God raises the anointed community of prophets, the witnessing Church; God breathes His Spirit of life into the

Church and she's raised and ascends into God's presence for everyone to see and this self-righteous city, the enemies of the Church, watch her exaltation.

Then there's an earthquake and a tithe of the fake city dies (7,000) and THEN there's a mass conversion as (v. 13) "the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."

Then the final trumpet sounds (7th) and those words sung in *Handel's Messiah*: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Anointed; and He will reign forever and ever." (v.15)

Then worship breaks out in heaven starting with the 24 elders in the "thrones-room" – God has begun to reign in a New Way... Nations were enraged (Psa 2) judgment and destruction on those who destroy the earth and rewards for all those counted holy in the sight of God, small and great.

And finally... the Temple in heaven is opened and the sign of God's presence, the Ark of the Covenant is THERE and rumblings and awe...

Now, IF our big idea is correct, it says two things about the Church and Her Mission – 1) The Church is a community of witness AND 2) The most effective way for the Church to be that community is by living the cruciform life.

This whole chapter is a reiteration of The Great Commission: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Act 1.8)

What God said at the start of the First Creation He now says again at the start of the New Creation: "Be fruitful and multiply" – It's in the NATURE of a living organism to reproduce!

It's why Emil Bruner famously said, "**The Church EXISTS by mission as fire exists by burning.** Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith." Proclamation and multiplication isn't peripheral to the Church's life – it's central!

Do away with this IMPULSE or INSTINCT to mourn over our own sin and to mourn over the sin of the world and to want GOD to be known and worshiped, do away with the DESIRE FOR EVERY LAST STONE TO BE ADDED TO THE LIVING TEMPLE WHERE GOD DWELLS...and we cease to be the Church.

But secondly, the best way the Church has for carrying out this reproductive impulse is to live the cruciform or cross-shaped life.

Notice it in the witnesses – how they are so like Christ in the way they are empowered by the Spirit just as Jesus Christ was – “not by might, not by power but by My Spirit’, says the Lord.”

They speak with authority like He did (“they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.” [Luke 4.32] ... “The officers answered, "Never did a man speak the way this Man speaks." [John 7.46]) We hold out life and death to people when we speak about the “doing and dying of Jesus Christ”. He is the Word come down from God – NOT an opinion.

And this message of God’s grace given to sinful and undeserving people cuts against the grain of our society. It presupposes that “there is none righteous, NO NOT ONE” (Ps 14, 53; Rom 3) and everyone who hears it must stumble and fall before it – it’s the great scandal (Rom 9.32ff; 1 Cor 1.23ff) and everyone has to trip and fall over it – that we are SIMPLY not good enough. We all fall short. He alone is worthy.

There is NO CLIMBING up to God – He came down in Jesus Christ to rescue bad people and law-breakers and people weighed down with guilt and moral weakness and failure AND “rage” (Ps 2) and resentment toward God. To hear that, humbles us – it knocks us off our “high horse” (Acts 9.4) and it frustrates my unending quest to show how good I am (that “I’m NOT perfect but ...at least I don’t do what _____ does” – insert the name of your enemy there, a person who’s tempted in a way that’s never appealed to YOU.)

And for this truth-telling... the messengers of grace or salvation by sheer grace, forgiveness received by repentant faith... we will be opposed.

So the witnesses are killed by the world-spirit (the Zeitgeist) who comes from the belly of this world and opposes God and His grace...the spirit who fosters pride and self-obsession – he hates God and hates grace.

But when the church IS opposed (not for our moral stands or our politics but for our insistence on grace received by humility and trust, repentance and faith) when we are filled with God’s Spirit and opposed – it’s not our strength but our weakness that fills people with holy fear leading to conversion. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

When we look like Jesus Christ and His resolute insistence on the Cross – when we have this attitude in us that was also in Him (Phil 2) and we exude the fragrance of love and self-sacrifice – the fragrance of heaven (2 Cor 2.15ff)... when we give up our precious rights in order to get up from the table, gird ourselves with an apron and serve (John 13) – when we die to ourselves – then people see Jesus in us...the earth quakes...eyes are opened, people are terrified and give glory to the God of heaven.

Now you may be thinking, "Yeah...good point! I gotta try a lot harder to be more Christ-like..." THEN please remember, what Zechariah wrote, the undergirding truth in this whole mysterious passage: "It's NOT by might, not by power but by My Spirit says the Lord."

The Living Temple will not be built by will-power or human determination. It will rise as we face our weakness and see the love of Jesus for un-worthies like WE... God will confound the world by weak people when we see both OUR need and HIS great love and forgiveness. When we trust Jesus Christ's doing and dying, the Spirit fills us (Gal 3.1-5) and we will rise up... churches will be planted and people (even those we "know" will never believe) they will come in holy fear and give glory to the God of heaven – and they will join the everlasting song:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever. Amen"