
The Witnesses

Revelation 11:1-14

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A reminder of where we are:

Seven seals and a scene in heaven...

Six trumpets and horrors on earth...

The pause between the sixth and seventh trumpets brings us:

A scroll – Chapter 10

Two witnesses – Chapter 11

The context prepares us for what is to follow.

⁸ Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” ⁹ So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, “Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.” ¹⁰ And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. ¹¹ And I was told, “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

The vision we are about to look at follows immediately after verse 11. What happens in chapter 11 is John prophesying about many peoples, nations, languages and kings. As we think about the two witnesses, we have to keep that in mind. Two important observations will help frame chapter 11.

John will be prophesying about the Gentiles. That is clear from the language. This is exactly how God, in the book of Revelation, speaks of all the people groups.

John will be prophesying about the church. From the context, we have seen that movement from 144,000 Jews to all the people groups before the throne. We saw that the words used there and here seem to refer to the church, the saved from all the people groups.

Many commentaries see what follows as Jewish centric, I do not. As we work through the text I believe the flow and words will bear that out.

Their Measured Space**(v. 1-2)**

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.

John is handed something that is to be used to measure. We might think of a yard stick. He is to measure a space, not to know its dimensions, but to know its capacity. Is it full yet?

What is he to measure? Well, that is a difficult question. Remember that by the time John write the Revelation, the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed for almost 20 years. Is this a reference to a future temple that will be rebuilt? Possibly. There are indications in Scripture that seem to point to a future building planned for Jewish worship but which is profaned on the day of its dedication at the mid-point of Daniel's seventieth week. And so the city, Jerusalem, will be under the heel of Gentile rule during the rest of those seven years.

But what is given here doesn't synch well with those texts. In this text, the temple of God with its worshippers and altar more likely is referring to the true church. The church is now the temple of God, His dwelling place by the Spirit of God. We are the living stones that make it up. As one commentator put it,

Similarly, *the outer court* and *the holy city* together represent the world outside the church. It is a bold transformation, but v 8 implies that the one-time *holy city* has now become one with sinful Sodom, Egypt the oppressor of God's people and the tyrannous empire that wars against the Messiah. [New Bible Commentary]

The idea of the forty-two months is drawn from Daniel 9 and 11. It is half of Daniel's seventieth week. This is the anchor for a thread from 11:2 through 11:3 to 12:6 and 13:5. In prior studies, we have established that the 70th week, the seven years, is still future. Then these days and months seem to be within that time period.

As this text looks back over the first half of the Seventieth week, two things are being asserted which are comforts to God's people. He knows the dimensions and fullness of His spiritual habitation. As the last days escalate towards the end, every living stone will be set in its place. And, the church will suffer under the trampling feet of unbelievers.

Their Heavenly Authorization

(v. 3-4)

³ And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

So much has been written about who these two witnesses are. Some say they are Moses and Elijah, connecting them to the transfiguration. That may be supported by the reference to the miracles those two prophets wrought in the powers granted these two witnesses.

Others think that this is simply a continuation of what has gone before. The two witnesses are the Word and the Spirit functioning within the church. Much is made of the lampstand and the two trees which stand by the throne of God.

I have struggled much to try to understand this. So much about the description of these two witnesses alludes to Old Testament and gospel texts.

Two witnesses are needed to verify the truth of something. A charge against someone was considered to be true if there were two reliable, court recognized witnesses.

The time period comes from Daniel 11. It is thread from 11:2 through 12:6 and 13:5. It is a period of 3 ½ years corresponding to Jesus’ ministry and to the second half of Daniel’s Seventieth week.

They are dressed in sackcloth invokes many Old Testament prophets (e.g. Isaiah 20:2. They are calling people to repentance.

They are identified with the lampstands and olive tree of Zechariah 4. Let’s go back to that text and see how it shapes our understanding of what John is seeing.

Zechariah 4 (ESV)

¹ And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. ² And he said to me, “What do you see?” I said, “I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. ³ And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.” ⁴ And I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” ⁵ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, “Do you not know what these are?” I said, “No, my lord.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. ⁷ Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of ‘Grace, grace to it!’ ”

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁹ “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹⁰ For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

“These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth.” ¹¹ Then I said to him, “What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?”

¹² And a second time I answered and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out?" ¹³ He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." ¹⁴ Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

This lampstand is similar to the one in Revelation 1 where there are seven golden lampstands representing the churches. In Zechariah, the two lampstands flank an olive tree which is tapped to supply endless oil to the lamps. When Zechariah asks what these represent, the angel answers with an epigram, pointing to the coming of the Lord Jesus. He will come as the top stone. He will bring down the mountain of pagan kingdoms (see Daniel 9, 11 and Matthew 24-25). He will do so by speaking, "Grace, grace" to it. So the angel's answer to Zechariah is not clear to him but is certainly clear to us. These two anointed ones stand by the throne of God as two lamps and eventually two trees. The idea is not think in terms of exact replacement but in terms of similarity. We should expect that it may appear different in the New Covenant.

So, here they are. Two witnesses authorized by God, preaching to bring repentance, connected to Zechariah. So, who are they? At this point in the text, I cannot answer that question. What we have so far is like the first steps in sketching a portrait. You can see the outline and maybe know whether it is a man or woman. You might even be able to identify the features. But you don't know who it is.

Going through this text will be like watching a sketch fill in. What is fuzzy and obscure now will become clearer as we move through. If we arrive at a "they are..." too early, we will begin reading that into the text instead of letting the text fill in the sketch for us.

Their Miraculous Powers

(v. 5-6)

⁵ And 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. ⁶ They 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 witnesses are invested with great powers to destroy their opponents. These powers, these miracles the witnesses can do are not randomly chosen. The powers given these witnesses invoke Elijah and Moses.

The fire reminds us of Elijah on Mount Carmel facing the false prophets of the false god, Baal. There, through His simple faith and prayer, God sent fire down to consume the altar. It was demonstration of the folly of the wicked and the greatness of the God. Elijah is also invoked in the shutting of the sky and the resulting droughts. Elijah was confronting the wicked king and queen of Israel and calling God's people back to their true King.

Moses is alluded to in the striking of the earth with plagues. We are reminded of God's systematic dismantling of Egypt's pantheon of false gods and idols through the plagues he brought. He was confronting the false god, Pharaoh and leading God's people out of bandage into their redemption.

It is significant that Elijah and Moses were also with Christ on the mountain when He was transfigured. What happened there has great significance for what John sees here. Listen to Matthew 17:1-13.

¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" ¹¹ He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Here is the Old Covenant having conversation with the New Covenant. Here are the representatives of the Law and Prophets talking with Jesus. The disciples are not to tell what they saw till after the resurrection. Imagine walking around with this secret in your soul?

Also, Jesus clarifies for them that the prophecy of Elijah coming before the great and terrible day of the Lord has been fulfilled in John the Baptist. As we have mentioned before, most prophecies have a near, middle and far fulfillment. Yes, Elijah *will come* but his coming has also been fulfilled in John the Baptist. Why is this significant? Because the first coming and the Jews rejection of John the Baptist leads to the death of Christ and the eventual destruction of the nation of Israel. Here, the rejection of these two witnesses, one whose coming is the final fulfillment of Elijah's coming, leads to the destruction and doom of all unbelieving humanity and the consummation of the kingdom (Revelation 11:15-19 – *next week*).

The two witnesses then come with the power to confront the pagan world, its kings and its idols. Like Moses and Elijah, they will dismantle the pagan leaders and false gods. They will show that the kingdoms of this world are not the kingdom of God nor can they ever be. They will be able to systematically and powerfully show the folly and futility of following the world's system of values and vices, of rules, masters and idols.

Their Celebrated Martyrdom**(v. 7-10)**

This great confrontation will lead to their death.

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.

These two witnesses will only come to die when their work is finished. Their testimony is done. Now, the beast makes war on them, conquers them and kills them. Using the language of Daniel, the one who destroys the witnesses is the beast from the pit. In God's timing and at God's permission, he brings about the martyrdom of the witnesses.

And the world is glad. These witnesses have been a torment to the lost. They will rejoice and establish a world holiday. They will not allow their bodies to be buried and leave them in the street for public display. The general locale is Babylon and Egypt representing the world's system of power, pleasure and commerce. The specific locale is the city where Jesus was crucified, namely, Jerusalem. John is then identifying the earthly Jerusalem as being a part of the world, the system of living that includes Rome, Egypt and Babylon.

Their Glorious Resurrection**(v. 11-13)**

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.

For three and half days they lie rotting in the streets. But, then, God sends a breath of life into the bodies and they come to life. They are resurrected. They stand up on their feet. I imagine this brought a sudden and decisive end to the partying over their death.

The two witnesses are not raised from the dead but they are caught up to God. They are summoned by a loud voice from heaven. In full view of their enemies they go up into the clouds.

So much of this is evocative of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is also connected to the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The reader and expositor of this has to take note of those connections. Is the vision blurring the three: the witnesses as the lens with Christ and His church being seen through the lens like a 3D picture?

Yes, and there is enough specific detail to say that this event will actually happen. On the day of the resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses there will be a horrible

earthquake in the city of man, in the city where the Lord was crucified. Thousands will die. But the calamity there is nothing compared to the dooms and disasters about to happen.

And so we have the end of the second woe. The final condemnation of the world is secured by two divine witnesses. They come with heavenly authorization. They come fulfilling Elijah's role before the second coming. They come to condemn and dismantle the false rulers and religions of the world. They come as two personages and a portrayal. In their personage and in their portrayal, they bring the power of God through the Word and Spirit, through His power to call out the living stones to fill up the full measure of God's Temple, the church. And they condemn the world while calling for repentance. Martyrdom may await many in that day, but the resurrection and ascension into heaven to meet our God is sure.

And then the kingdom of God will be brought to earth and Christ shall reign forever and ever. Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

