

## **The Two Witnesses**

**Revelation 11:1-18**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial.

The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever."

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because You have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence Your name, both small and great-- and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within His temple was seen the ark of His covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm. (Rev 11:1-19).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the two visions of chapters 10 and 11 provide us with an interlude before the seventh trumpet is blown (11:15ff). These visions provide John with both motivation and challenge to continue as a faithful herald of God's truth. In chapter 10, we have seen how the apostle is re-commissioned to the work of prophetic ministry. John "must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings" (10:11).

The vision of Revelation 11:1-13 is one of the most difficult in the entire book of Revelation. It is both terrifying and reassuring. There are elements of persecution, death, the miraculous and the fantastic about it. Interpreters all agree that there is much use of symbolism here even if they are not agreed as to what is being symbolized! Most significantly, it is a message of reassurance to the people of God that are surrounded by enemies. As they bear testimony to the gospel, and suffer the consequences of faithful testimony, God will protect them. This had also been the point of the interlude in chapter 7 between the opening of the sixth and seventh seal. In the midst of God's judgments and the activities of the evil one, such reassurance is necessary and welcome.

A point that needs to be settled quickly is the time when the contents of this chapter are thought to occur. It is standard teaching among those who interpret Revelation from a Dispensational, or pre-tribulational rapturist point of view, to understand the contents of this chapter as taking place during the Tribulation Period that comes after the rapture of the saints. During this period the Jews will build a third and final earthly temple in Jerusalem. During this period, two

witnesses will appear and engage in a miraculous ministry. Their identity is as yet unknown.

Those who understand Revelation from a futurist point of view (the contents of the Book largely describe a period just prior to the return of Christ) also view these two witnesses as appearing in the end times.

The view we have been adopting in this study is an idealist one. The contents of the six seals and six trumpets describe events that have been taking place simultaneously during the entire period from the ascension of Christ to his final return. What is being described in chapter 11 is, according to this view, something that is happening right now!

This will become especially clear as we identify the 1,260 days of 11:3 with that period that followed the first coming of Jesus Christ as described in 12:5-6 (c.f. 14:14-20).

Several important truths emerge from this passage:

### **The Numbers Game**

The vision begins with a command to John to go and measure the temple with a "reed like a measuring rod" (11:1). He is to measure the temple and the altar, but not the outer court of the Gentiles (11:2). Why not the outer court? Because they "the Gentiles" will "trample on the holy city for 42 months" (11:2). The "holy city" is to experience a period of persecution for a period of time designated as "42 months."

We have already seen how important numbers are in the symbolism of the Book of Revelation. The number "seven" is especially important. There are seven letters written to seven churches, followed by a vision of Christ opening seven seals of a scroll. There follow seven trumpets and seven thunders, followed by seven bowls of wrath. Finally seven aspects of God's final victory bring the book of Revelation to its close.

This repetitive nature of the number seven offers us a clue as to how Revelation is to be read. It is offering us several glimpses of the same picture from different perspectives. There is a cyclical nature to the book that offers us repeating glimpses of the work of Christ in the unfolding of his providential purposes. But if the number "seven" is important so are multiples and divisions of seven. Thus we will come across "42 months" and "1,260" days (11:3). The number 42 is  $7 \times 6$  and the number of days in 42 months (assuming each month has 30 days) is 1,260. The two are identical in length and have similarities to their usage in the book of Daniel (7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11-12, note also the expression "time, times and half a time" is also used to convey the same idea, Dan. 12:14). Forty-two months

is three and a half years, and three and a half is half of seven. John is playing with numbers! The "holy city" is to experience persecution for a period of one half of the duration of seven years which would symbolize a complete period of suffering.

Some have attempted to pin-point this in the period of time leading up to the destruction of the temple in 70 a.d. But fascinating as that proves to be, the fact of the matter is that according to Revelation 11:1, the inner part of the temple and the altar are preserved and there is nothing in the events of the first century to equate with that.

In the background lies an especially difficult section in the Book of Daniel, in Daniel 9:27. In bringing God's redemptive purposes to completion, Daniel is told that this will take place in "seventy weeks" (9:24). Remember that Daniel has just experienced a period of captivity that would last seventy years and it would make sense to him to portray redemption and deliverance as lasting a similar period of time. In verse 22-26, Daniel is told that "Messiah the Prince" will come following the first 69 of these symbolic weeks. That leaves just one week, the seventieth week, in which the rest of God's purposes in redemption and judgment are fulfilled. In a way that sounds very similar to Revelation 11 (forty-two months is 3.5 years!), that final week is divided into two halves of 3.5 years, the first half probably referring to the period up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. and the second 3.5 referring to the period of time from 70 a.d. until the coming of Christ.

John is telling us that for 1,260 days (42 months, 3.5 years — the equivalent of the second half of Daniel's seventieth week, the period from the destruction of the temple in 70 a.d. to the second coming) there will be persecution.

All that sounds hugely complicated to us, and possibly to John's hearers, but in effect all he is saying is this: "There will be terrible times in the last days." (2 Tim. 3:1), understanding "last days" to include the entire period between the two advents of Christ. In this elaborately numerical fashion, John is giving testimony to the church that it can expect trouble. We are not to be surprised by the hostility the church encounters. This is the first truth.

### **The Safety of God's People**

In the picture that John paints for us, he is measuring the inner temple and the altar, and more significantly still, he is counting the worshipers. It is unnecessary to think here of a literal temple, one that might be built in the future, for we are dealing here with symbolism. This is a representation of the people of God who are God's temple (We have already noted how significant the number 144,000 was in chapter 7, representing as it did God's worshiping people. Assembled around the throne in heaven much the same way as the tribes assembled around

tabernacle as described in Numbers 2, they are symbolic of the church triumphant in heaven. Here in Revelation 11, the picture is not so much the departed (and martyred) saints in heaven so much as the saints who are still on earth during this persecution. Measuring, as Ezekiel 40-41 tells us, signifies the care and protection God affords to all his children. Whatever may be happening in the world, and however the church may be affected by it, there is no question but that God cares and superintends and governs. His control is irrefutable. His love is unremitting. This is the second truth.

## **The Two Witnesses**

Another metaphor of similar difficulty emerges. The whole point of ensuring God's care for His people in the opening two verses is to prepare us for what He expects the church to engage in during the inert-adventual age: witness to a hostile world of His Word and His ways.

John introduces us to two witnesses whose ministry takes place during this 42 month, 1,260 day period—that is, the inter-adventual age. Though their identity is sometimes likened to others, including Enoch, Peter, Paul and the two Jewish high priests killed in A.D. 68, the description of their ministry resembles more that of Elijah and Moses (11:6). It is important to note the symbolism once more. These figures are like Elijah and Moses. They are not to be identified as Elijah and Moses. John gives us further symbolism: "these are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (11:4). The allusion here is to the architecture of the temple where the lampstands represented the presence of God, or the Spirit of God (Numb. 8:14; Exod. 25:30-31; Zech. 4:2-5). The church's testimony or witness is to be by the power of the Holy Spirit. The oil for the lampstands come from the two olive trees (11:4), an allusion to the prophecy of Zechariah 4 in which the prophet describes the assurance of the completion of the Second Temple "not by might nor by power but by My Spirit." (Zech 4:6).

During the last days, there is to be a powerful testimony to the grace of God in the world after the spirit of the ministry of Elijah and Moses. In the same way that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17), the people of God are likewise to exude the same spirit. They are to function like "lampstands" (cf. John 5:35). In 1:20 the lampstands alludes to the churches. Why two and not seven witnesses continuing the figure of chapter 1? Perhaps because here the point is to establish the legal basis on which this testimony proceeds (the law requiring two witnesses for validation, Numbers 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 1 Tim. 5:19). There is in this picture an allusion to the commission given to the church in Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Rejected as these witnesses will be by the world, their divine validity and authenticity remains in no doubt.

There is an invincibility about their witness (11:5). They cannot be ultimately harmed in any way. " The fragile vessels which make up God's church may be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down, but not crushed or in despair or forsaken or destroyed (2 Cor. 4:7-9). God told Jeremiah that the word in his mouth would be a fire that would consume the faithless (Jer. 5:11,14; c.f. 1:9,12,19). If the book of Revelation intends to encourage the people of God as they face persecution, it could hardly do so with greater force than to suggest that the power of the gospel to which they witness is like that of Elijah whenever he prevented the rain from falling (1 Kings 17:1), or Moses when he turned water into blood (Exod. 7:17-25). The church, as Jesus told Peter, has the power of the keys, a power that both liberates and condemns (Matt. 16:19; 18:18,19). The word which the church gives witness to is the Word of God. Its covenantal aspect ensures blessing to those who heed it and cursing to those who do not. This is the third truth.

### **The Beast that comes from the Abyss: The End Game**

Verse 7 introduces us to a figure alluded to in 9:11 and who will figure to a far greater extent in chapters 13 and 17. The "beast that comes up from the Abyss" is named as "Abaddon" and "Apollyon" in 9:11, Hebrew and Greek words which both mean "Destroyer." Behind the anarchy and rebellion lies the activity of Satan, the prince of darkness. His malevolence knows no abating during the last days and the people of God are to cognizant of his every stratagem and wile (Eph. 6:11, 13; cf. 1 Pet. 5:8).

The passage assumes that the work of the witnesses is done (11:7). In the symbolism of this chapter, during the closing 3S days of this 3S year period, Satan will be loosed to do his worst. This anticipates Revelation 20:3 when Satan is "set free for a short time" at the close of which there is a 1,000 year period. The numerology is different, but the point is the same. It is of a piece with other New Testament statement regarding the appearance of an Antichrist figure, or what Paul refers to as the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thess 2:1-12; 1 John 2:18), a figure who appears in some form or another throughout the last days, but seems to appear in a definite and personal way towards the close of this age.

What follows is parallel to that found in Daniel 7:21, the prophecy of the final kingdom that will appear to persecute the people of God. It is the fourth beast of Daniel's vision, which has ten horns on its head and out of which emerges a little horn. Its ferociousness is depicted, but is of no interest to us here, and further allusions to this figure will emerge in Revelation 12, 13 and 17. Though this antichrist figure is to emerge at the end of the age, John has already informed us in his first epistle that this has been anticipated already in the Satanic eruptions that have occurred in the experience of the first century Christian church (1 John

2:18; 4:3). Though we are not told it here, this Beast is to be destroyed in the end (19:19-21).

The end is characterized here as especially difficult for the people of God. They will be killed and their ability to witness ended. The picture given in verse 8 of the bodies of the witnesses lying in the streets of the great city for three and one half days is particularly gruesome. The great city is not to be identified with the "holy city" of verse 2, but with its more usual connotation, Babylon. Together with other Old Testament names for wickedness, the name of Babylon is joined with Sodom and Egypt. Jerusalem has become like Babylon, Sodom and Egypt. This trilogy of wicked names is a way of depicting the world in its faithlessness.

The picture now changes and is reminiscent of Ezekiel 37, the valley of the dry bones coming to life. Three and one half days pass by during which onlookers seem to stare with scorn at the corpses of those who have died in the streets, when suddenly these bodies come to life (11:11). The cause? "A breath of life from God entered them" (11:11). This is the end, and following a voice of command from heaven, the bodies rise into a cloud and disappear from the disbelieving gaze of their enemies (11:12). There is no secret rapture! While all this is going on, the city experiences an earthquake in which a tenth of the city collapses and seven thousand are killed (11:13-14). It is symbolism again, of course, that at the moment of Christ's return, death and destruction will occur in the godless city that is opposed to Christ's kingdom and his rule. The survivors will acknowledge His glory (11:13), though it is doubtful that this means that they will be converted. They will acknowledge God's glory but it will be too late for the seventh trumpet is about to sound (11:15).

Though the closing days of this age will be troublesome, the victory of God's people as they are taken to heaven is assured. There is coming a day when the people of God, those who have died and left rotting in the streets, will hear the voice that says, "Come up here." Not even Satan can prevent this.

Following the rapture of the saints in full view of their enemies, there is the immediate sound of the seventh and final trumpet (11:15). The end has arrived. And there is rejoicing in heaven. There is the sound of acclamation:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever" (11:15)

And again:

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your

saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great--and for destroying those who destroy the earth (11:17-18).

John pictures in heaven a temple with the ark of the covenant. God has kept His covenant. His purposes in redemption and judgment have been fulfilled. Not one promise has been broken.

The work which his goodness began, The arm of his strength will complete; His promise is Yea and Amen,

And never was forfeited yet. Things future, nor things that are now, Not all things below or above, Can make Him His purpose forgo, Or sever my soul from His love. Augustus Toplady (1740-78).

This is the fourth truth.

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