

The Temple and Two Witnesses
(Sermon 18 – Rev. 11)
2.12.17

Please turn in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 11.

As we've made our way through half of the Book now, we have seen a few repeating themes:

- We've seen the glory of God in the person of Jesus, who is the central focus of Revelation.
- We've seen the power of God in His just judgments to come, poured out on all who reject Christ as Savior.
- We've seen the mercy of God, in giving sinners time to repent.
- And we've seen the faithfulness of God in preserving His people through persecution.

It's the preservation of God's persecuted people that our text today highlights.

That's something John's original audience needed to hear. The 7 churches of Asia Minor were facing intense persecution from the Roman government, from Jewish religious leaders, and even their own family members.

So, in the middle of all the end-time judgment that John is being shown, Revelation 11 is an intermission, a break in the action, for God to encourage His people.

Using two different metaphors – the measuring of the temple and the martyring of two witnesses – the Lord reminds us He will preserve His persecuted people as we preach His word to a hostile world.

Let's read Rev. 11:1-14, then we'll pray...

Revelation 11

[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." [4] These are the two

olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. [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.

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

(PRAY)

Voice of the Martyrs is a Christian organization that serves persecuted Christians around the world. One of those ways is to share stories of Christians from around the world. In a recent edition of their newsletter, they relay the story from Africa...

"Mahamat, a young Christian living in northern Cameroon, was imprisoned by his parents. Mahamat was studying to become a teacher of the Quran when he rejected Islam and turned to Christ. In January of this year, his parents learned of Mahamat's new faith and tried to convince him to recant. When that failed, they locked him inside a house. They also summoned Islamic clerics to persuade him to return to Islam. But when a relative who had also become a

*follower of Christ learned what was happening, she rescued Mahamat, who had been held captive for about a week. Front-line workers rejoice that Mahamat is free and are thankful for the rescue because they worried he could be poisoned or forcibly married to a Muslim woman. They request prayer for Mahamat and his Christian relative: for safety, for Mahamat to continue growing in his faith and that 'every evil plan from the kingdom of darkness against his life will be destroyed'."*¹

While we rejoice that Mahamat was rescued, we know that is not the case for the vast majority of persecuted Christians today.

In fact, there are more Christians that have been killed in the last 100 years to the present day than any time in history. The latest statistics show that 350 million Christians across the globe face daily persecution for their faith. That's 1 in 7 Christians worldwide.

Jesus told us the world would hate us – because it hated Him first. And Jesus said that we would suffer for His name - whether that means being rejected by family, or if that means laying down our lives. But in it all, we can be assured of this central truth this morning:

PROP: Even though Christians will face persecution, Jesus will preserve His people.

Whatever suffering we endure for the name of Jesus in this life, no one can snatch us out of God's hands. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This truth gives us courage to endure whatever suffering we may face in this life, knowing Christ preserves us in the life to come.

And to drive this home, the first of two metaphors the Lord shows John is...

I. Measuring the Temple

[11:1] 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..."

¹ <https://www.persecution.com/stories/christian-convert-rescued-from-captivity/>

Now this mention of a temple has set off all sorts of interpretations. Some think this refers to the temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed in 70 AD. But that doesn't seem to fit the context.

Others believe this is a prediction that the literal, physical temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt as a sign that Christ return is near. Now, whether that temple is rebuilt or not, that's not what this verse is talking about. In fact, if we see a physical temple rebuilt, that's not an act of obedience, but disobedience to God.

Here's what I mean: The physical temple in the OT was the place God's presence dwelled. It was also what God's people encamped around. It was the place where animal sacrifices were done to shed blood as atonement for the sins of Israel.

But Jesus came and changed all that. God no longer dwells in a physical temple, because Jesus fulfilled all the OT Law. There are no more animal sacrifices because Jesus is the final sacrifice, cleansing our sins in His blood. God no longer dwells in a building or a central location, but in a people – in His Church. So, to rebuild an earthly temple is a sign that you don't believe Jesus came the first time.

In addition, every time the word "temple" is used in Revelation it refers to the church, not to a literal temple in Jerusalem. The only exception is in Rev. 21 when John tells us there is no temple in heaven, because the Church, the gathered people of God, we are God's temple. So, this temple in verse 1 represents the Church, God's people redeemed in Christ. That means, if you want to see the temple of God, look in the mirror. You are the dwelling place of the Spirit and presence of God. We see that clearly in 1 Corinthians 6...

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own...

- 1 Corinthians 6:19)

We also see it in the Book of Hebrews. In fact, the point of that entire Book is that Jesus is our High Priest, who has fulfilled the Law, who is our final sacrifice, who has enacted a better covenant through faith in Him. He dwells with His people, and His people are the temple of God.

So, a heavenly voice commands John to "measure" this temple and "those who worship there". This is connected to a similar vision in the Book of

Ezekiel, where the prophet watched as the physical temple was being measured, pointing forward to the Church.

And to measure something means there are specific limits and borders and identity for something. This act of John measuring it is to show that God knows who are His. Back in ch. 7 that was communicated by God “sealing” His people. Here it is shown by John “measuring” the temple.

Now, look at v. 2...

[11:2] 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.

So, John is told to measure the temple and its worshipers, but not the outer court, because the nations will trample the outer court.

This distinction between the protected inner court and the unprotected outer court is to remind us that God promises that we may suffer physical harm at the hands of wicked men, they cannot harm us spiritually. They cannot take our salvation. Jesus will protect and preserve all who are His.

Now, the “holy city” mentioned in v. 2 is not Jerusalem. It is another symbolic way of identifying God’s people. We are His temple. We are the holy city of God.

So, the measuring of the inner court symbolizes Jesus spiritually protecting His Church, while not measuring the outer court and “giving it” over to the nations to be trampled symbolizes the world persecuting and even killing Christians.

And it says the church will be trampled for 42 months. Now, we are going to see this repeated, so let’s take a moment to understand this. When you see numbers in apocalyptic literature, you should always assume they are symbolic, (not literal).

This 42 months is expressed in different ways in this chapter and those following:

- 1260 days (back in v. 3, and also later in ch. 12)
- In Daniel 7 it was called “time, times and half a time”.

All of these equal the same duration: 3 and a half years. But what does 3 and half years represent?

-In a general sense, the number 7 represents completion in Revelation. That means half of 7 would likely represent incompleteness, or in this case, a limited measure of time.

-Also, 3.5 years had a specific meaning to the Jews. A couple of hundred years before John wrote Revelation, Jerusalem was captured by Syria. It was a defeat prophesied in Daniel 8. And this was a time of great suffering for the Jews. That suffering lasted (can you guess?) 3.5 years. Since then, especially in Jewish literature and symbolism, 3.5 years represents a temporary, limited period of time of suffering for God's people before a time of deliverance.

-In addition to that, Jesus' earthly ministry lasted for 3.5 years before He was crucified.

All of this shows us 3.5 years is a symbolic time period that represents the time of the church on earth – the time between Christ's ascension and His return – where the church will do the work Christ called us to, to be witnesses on the earth. And in that time, we will be persecuted. We will suffer at the hands of ungodly of the world. And that persecution will incrementally increase. So, in that sense, the Tribulation is going on right now, but the intensity described in these chapters will increase in the future.

But God is telling His church - don't despair. This vision of the temple being measured tells us that God knows who are His. And even though we will go through tribulation, we will not be forsaken. God will preserve His people. We will be persecuted, some even unto death, but we will be preserved.

No doubt this was great encouragement to those 7 persecuted churches who originally received this letter. And it is meant to encourage us today. We will suffer. Especially as we are being obedient to the mission He has given us to take the gospel to the world, we will be persecuted. But we are not to fear man. God has promised to keep us, to spiritually preserve us. For those in Christ, death is simply a doorway to eternal life.

(Transition): And that's the link between the first metaphor of the temple being measured, and now the second metaphor of the 2 witnesses. The temple reminds us God will preserve His people through persecution. The

2 witnesses now illustrate for us, that even in the face of persecution, *God's people are called to witness to a hostile world.*

II. Martyring the Two Witnesses

[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.

Their Identity

Who are these two witnesses? Let's look at the clues...

-As we've already seen, this 1260 days, or 3.5 years represents a limited time of suffering. Likewise, these 2 witnesses are given the task to preach for a limited time. They are clothed in sackcloth, representing mourning. To preach the gospel includes communicating God's wrath to come, and that should include a measure of grief. So these two are prophesying, or preaching, God's word.

-In addition, they are identified as “the two olive trees and the two lampstands”. This comes from Zechariah 4, and a similar vision God gave the prophet, showing two olive trees, which produce olive oil, as a representation of the Holy Spirit. Also, the meaning of the lampstands is clearly identified in Rev. 1 as a symbol for the church. This indicates that these 2 witnesses are not 2 literal people, but another metaphor representing the Church.

But why 2 of them? Because under Jewish law, you had to have at least 2 witnesses for the truth to be established. This illustrates that Jesus has provided all the world needs to hear and obey the truth. So, these two witnesses represent the church, particularly the church who will witness to the nations and be heavily persecuted just before Jesus returns.

Now, in the next verses, we see these witnesses were given great power...

Their power

[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.

Now these verses have caused some to think these two witnesses are actually Moses and Elijah, seeing the similarity of God using Elijah to call a drought upon Israel (which just so happened to last 3.5 years), and God using Moses to turn the Nile to blood. But that does not mean these two witnesses are literally Moses and Elijah walking the earth again. Instead, these similarities are to show us how the witnessing, persecuted church is supernaturally empowered by God, much like the prophets of old, to preach the gospel to the world.

And the description of this power – like the “fire” coming out of their mouths, is a symbolic way of describing the fiery message of the gospel that the church must preach.

So, just before Jesus comes, the Church is preaching the gospel around the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And because of that, the devil is stirred up and opposes God’s people...

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...

It’s no coincidence that the word “witness” is literally translated “martyr”. That’s what happens next – these two witnesses are martyred. They are killed at the hands of the “beast”. We will say more about him later, but for now, see that as the devil, the one who has opposed the church from the beginning.

Notice the beast “makes war” on them. That phrase shows us this really isn’t two literal people, but a large group. Just another evidence that these 2 witnesses represent the witnessing, persecuted church.

And here in v. 7, we have one of the most encouraging passages in this whole chapter. ***“And when they have finished their testimony”***. Why is that encouraging?

Because it reminds the 7 churches John is writing to, who were enduring persecution and suffering for the gospel, and it reminds us today – ***nothing can happen to you until God is finished with you***. Just as these 2 witnesses could not be killed until their task was complete, the

same is true for every Christian. Those who belong to God don't have to fear death. We don't have to live in doubt or worry or anxiety. We can live boldly on mission, knowing that we cannot die until God is done with us.

Now, from our vantage point, death always comes too soon. We always desire more time, just a few more moments with our loved ones. But God's timing is always perfect. He is sovereign over every detail of our lives, including the time of our death. The Psalmist declares,

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:16)

(Story about mom – "When God is done with me, I don't want to stay a moment longer.")

God wants to encourage us with that truth. He is sovereign over every aspect of your life. He has called each one of us to fulfill a purpose, to glorify God with our lives. And that includes witnessing to the truth of the gospel and point people to Christ. And when He's done with us, God will take us home.

Now, these two witnesses – representing the persecuted witnessing church – were not only killed... (look at v. 8)...

[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.

So they were not only killed, but their bodies were left in the streets. To not bury someone was to show the ultimate dishonor and contempt. And who was showing contempt toward the church? Here, they are referred to as the "great city", Sodom and Egypt. These are different symbols that represent all who hate God, hate Christians, and those who will actively persecute the church.

- Sodom represents great immorality.
- Egypt brings to mind oppression and slavery of God's people.
- And "where the Lord was crucified" does not mean the literal city of Jerusalem, but most likely Rome and the worldly systems of men that are behind all persecution of the saints.

How long did this dishonor go on?

**[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.**

All of the wicked people of the world will rejoice at this increased persecution of the church. This doesn't mean that every Christian will be martyred. But many will be. And the world will rejoice, even acting like it's a holiday by throwing parties and giving each other presents. The church is hated by the world for preaching the gospel, and now that the church has been temporarily silenced, the world rejoices.

Notice in v. 9 the shift in numbers from 3.5 "years" to 3.5 "days", which represents an even shorter, more limited time. We know that while Christians will die, the Church will never be defeated. Notice what happens next. Look in your Bibles at verses 11-14...

Their Resurrection

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

So, the 2 witnesses are martyred, left in the street, and while the world is celebrating, much to their horror and amazement, God brings them back to life. And not only does God resurrect them, but He calls them up to heaven to be with Him.

And all of the ungodly people who persecuted these witnesses, who persecuted the Church, they were in awe. 7,000 died in an earthquake, which represents a limited number, a limited judgment, and the rest were "terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven". That does not mean they got saved, but it means that these acts of judgment were enough to cause even sinful men to recognize only God could do it.

This part of John's vision is meant to communicate to the 7 churches in John's time, and to us, a couple of things:

-That the persecuted church is the witnessing church. Persecution is linked to obedience, to witnessing of the grace of Christ given to the repentant and the judgment to come for those who reject Him.

-And, we are meant to be encouraged, that any persecution the Christian may endure for the moment does not mean defeat. The pains of the present do not nullify the promises to come. We are promised that death is not the end. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, those who trust in Christ are promised a glorious resurrection.

Evil may prevail now, wickedness may seem like it has the upper hand, injustice may seem to be rampant, but it will not be that way for long. The church will suffer and many will die, but the gospel cannot be stopped. Jesus said He would build His Church and the gates of Hell would not prevail against it.

Paul said, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;"* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

There is no greater comfort, no greater encouragement. But this encouragement is not for us to be passive and inactive.

"The church is a powerful church only when it is penitent. A comfortable, easy-minded church has no power to stir the world either to salvation or to opposition." ~ Leon Morris

We are not shown these things so we will sit back and wait. We are called to be on the offensive, to be pushing ahead, to be living lives of obedience, celebrating God's grace, preaching Christ's gospel to the world, and encouraging one another with these promises.

The faithful will suffer. If you and I venture out of our comfort zones, if we lay our reputation on the line, we put to death our fear of man, and we tell others about Jesus, we will face consequences. We will suffer – either rejection and emotional pain, or violence and physical pain. But it will be worth it all, knowing that even if we have to pay the ultimate price for sharing Christ with others, He is worth it all.

Conclusion

This momentary life is significant - it matters. God gave us this life to glorify Him, to obey Him, to tell others about His saving grace through Jesus Christ. We need to be about our Father's business. And we need to be prepared to suffer for it.

But in it all, know this: The God who saved us from our sin is the same God who will resurrect us on the last Day.

So take courage to know that ***even though Christians will face persecution, Jesus will preserve His people.*** Because our Savior has defeated death. The devil does not have the final say. Jesus does.

And Jesus has given you this iron-clad promise: He has promised us that in this life, He will be with us. And when this life is over, we will be with Him.

(Let's Pray)