

*All Things New: The Two Witnesses*

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*Genesis 5:21-24; 2 Kings 2:11-13; Luke 21:10-19; Revelation 11:1-14*

Our final Scripture reading is from Revelation 11:1-14. Listen now to the holy, perfect, and faithful Word of God. "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."

Many people are witnesses, but few testify. We're all witnesses, right? We witness all sorts of things every day. Sometimes we witness big things: a car crash, a robbery, a wedding. Other times what we witness is pretty typical – people going to and from the mall, shopping at the grocery, going to school, going to work. We see things all the time. But only occasionally do we testify about them. Some of you know we went to John King Books for the first time on Jackson's birthday this week. We put up a couple of testimonies about our experience on Facebook. We talked about how there are four floor of books floor to ceiling, and how I accidentally got ahold of a first edition James Bond novel. We testify to things we like – our new bookstore, the great new restaurant we found, a good movie – and to things we don't like – like a cable company's customer service.

But to be a witness in the legal sense means to testify to the truth of a matter. I never stepped foot into a courtroom, so I've never testified quite in that sense. But I've signed a couple of marriage licenses because the state authorizes me as a pastor to be a witness. Maybe you've had to testify in court; maybe not. But as witnesses to what God has done, as people who have been changed by the power and sacrifice of Jesus Christ and touched by the work of the Holy Spirit, part of our job is to testify to what God has done.

Today's passage in Revelation has two key sections: one about the temple and one about two witnesses. We're going to talk about both today and some common interpretations of this passage, because there are several, and more than one may be right. What I pray will happen today is that we'll take home some ideas about who we are in Jesus, how we fit into the message of Revelation 11, and see that it is not as foreign to us as we might think.

We might remember that last week, we learned that God has reminders of His promises to us with Him in His throne room in heaven. We learned that not every mystery, even some mysteries revealed to John in the course of his vision, is meant for us to understand. And we talked about a scroll John was given to eat, what we called the "sweet and sour scroll," how we are called to remember and to preach the full gospel, not just the good news that Jesus Christ has come to rescue us, but the bad news that we need rescue and are helpless without Him. God's last word to John in last week's passage was that he, John, must continue to testify to people throughout the world of what God is doing.

So now we move into the first of those prophecies, and it is weird. First, God calls on John to measure the temple of God and the altar and to count the worshipers. But he's not to measure the outer court because it has been given to the Gentiles, the unbelievers, who will trample on the holy city for 42 months. Now it's not every day that someone hands you a tape measure and says, "Go measure my temple." The best thing we can do is understand that there may be both literal and figurative meanings going on here.

We aren't sure when the book of Revelation was written. Many scholars believe it was written around AD 90, but a fair number believe it was written before 70 AD. The reason there's a lot of confusion is that Revelation talks about the temple as if it is still standing. In 67 AD, there was a Jewish revolt against Rome, a revolt decades in the making. (We know that a lot of people were upset over thirty years earlier that Jesus didn't come to defeat the Romans!) After a three plus year revolt – which could be roughly equivalent to 42 months – and a siege against Jerusalem, Rome broke through the city's protection and burned it down, committing wholesale slaughter and utterly destroying the temple, leaving only a small section, what we now call the Western or "wailing" wall of the temple, intact. So in a very real sense, the Gentiles did trample on the holy city, in fact trampling on the entirety of the temple which was never rebuilt.

There is a real sense that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is one possible version of these events. Because Jesus warned Christians to flee Jerusalem when outsiders were clearly going to attack, that it was no longer their true home, it appeared to the Romans that Christianity might have been destroyed with Jerusalem. But in fact, Christianity continued not only because it had already spread throughout the Roman Empire, but because many Christians, heeding Jesus' warnings, were not part of the massive destruction that left over a million Jews dead.

But there's another possible meaning to this that should be important to us, and it's this: *we are the temple John is measuring*. You see, in the book written by the prophet Ezekiel, the nation of Israel is in exile in Babylon, and Ezekiel has a vision of a bronze man measuring up the city and temple of Jerusalem with a reed. It's very much like our passage. But in Ezekiel, everything is measured in great and exacting detail; it's kind of like a blueprint for the days when the Jews are able to return home.

Here in Revelation, there are no details given, and what is just as important, what's a clue, is that John is to measure the number of worshippers. There are no symbols associated with John's measuring the temple. The measurement is not taken in inches or cubits or arm's lengths. That's because the temple has fundamentally changed. The temple is us.

There is a fundamental change in the way things work in God's Kingdom with the coming of Jesus and His sending us the Holy Spirit. God once was pleased to dwell in a temple, but even a thousand years before Jesus' coming, leaders like King David and King Solomon stated the obvious truth: God can't be contained to a temple. He created the whole universe; He is in a sense bigger than the whole universe. He can condescend to be present in a place, but it's not like He's stuck there. And with the coming of the Holy Spirit to all believers, the temple shifted. No longer did you have to go to Jerusalem to worship near the presence of God. God is present within every believer in a real and living way, guiding us, shaping us, steering us.

As we study Revelation and hear about this final battle between good and evil, when we realize the depths to which the human heart can sink, we realize the reason why we as believers want to steer clear of sin. As the temple of the Holy Spirit, as the place where God now dwells on the earth, we want to provide Him a place that's suitable. When we live and act like temples of God, as the dwelling place of the Spirit, people take notice. They recognize our kindness, our love, our mercy, our graciousness.

A worn-down, worn-out, sin-ridden temple stands out too, and if we're not careful, we'll never even notice it. I still remember the first time I ever walked into Church of the Covenant nearly 12 years ago, the church where most of us were before CrossWay. Right in the entryway, the brick was falling apart, first thing you saw as you walked in. I was like, "Wow, that needs to be fixed; that looks bad." After three months, it was clear nobody wanted to spend the money to fix it. After four months, I'd forgotten about it; I'd gotten used to it.

If we are not careful, we will let our temples get into disrepair. Now before we get too far, yes, exercise is good, eating healthy is good so we can keep going a long time. But that's not at the core of our temples. Are we regularly building up our temples through prayer, through asking the Holy Spirit's direction, through reading Scripture, through practicing our faith? Or are we neglecting our temples through sin, either through doing those things we know we shouldn't or ignoring those things we know we should do? We are being counted. Our temple is being measured. We are a part of God's Kingdom this way. Let's make sure we don't come to the end of our days embarrassed because we don't measure up.

Now let's talk about these witnesses. This part is hard to interpret because it sounds like we're dropping the metaphors and similes we've been working with up to this point. Part of this sounds like a news report. So let's take into account a couple of interpretations over the years have been and what is our best takeaway from the witnesses in Revelation 11.

There is a very literal interpretation of this passage that I'm going to mention, and it ties into the passages we heard read earlier today. There are three core candidates for the two witnesses in a literal interpretation. The first is Enoch. Enoch is an interesting character because there's so little about his life in the Bible, and yet he gets several mentions.

The most important thing is that he walked with God throughout his whole life, and at age 365 – in a time when many people were living 600-900 years – God took him away. Because of his righteousness, God seems to have removed him from the wickedness of his time. Luke includes Enoch in his genealogy of Jesus, and both the book of Hebrews and the book of Jude mention him. There's a thought that one of the witnesses might be him.

Another thought is that it's Elijah. Elijah too did not die; instead, God took him up to heaven in a chariot through a whirlwind. Elijah was the mightiest of the prophets, and Scripture said he would return to herald the messiah. Jesus said that the spirit and power of Elijah was on John the Baptist; it wasn't Elijah literally coming back, but figuratively.

The third and final possibility is Moses. Now Scripture tells us that Moses died; it says that God buried him. Yet no one ever saw that he died, and no one knew his gravesite. Jewish lore was convinced that perhaps one as righteous as Moses, God would just take to be with Himself. And Moses and Elijah did appear as witnesses to Peter, James, and John on the mountainside when Jesus was shown to them in all His glory.

Some readers believe that Revelation 11 is literal – that during the last days, Moses and Elijah (and/or Enoch) or two witnesses in their stead will come to speak in Jerusalem for three and a half years, pointing to Jesus and lamenting the wickedness of the world. They'll have incredible God-given power, and at the end of the three and a half years, they will be murdered and people will celebrate, only to be resurrected and taken to heaven. Some will glorify God, while others die in the rubble of the portion of the city that collapses during an earthquake.

I have to admit, I like this interpretation because it's easy. If it happens far enough in the future, even if my interpretation is wrong, nobody will be around to point out my failings. But as a news report about two people in the far-off, it doesn't say much to me about who I am and who we are in Christ. It could happen just this way. But I also think it's responsible for us to take into account another interpretation that affects us significantly and both comforts us and calls us to action. Here's the second interpretation, the one that you might write down to think about this week: *the two witnesses are the universal church in a time such as this.*

Note that Jesus refers to the two witnesses as the two lampstands. In the earlier part of the book, Jesus refers to the churches throughout the province of Asia the same way. Now, if it is the church, why are there two witnesses? Think of the pattern in Scripture when Jesus sent out the disciples to tell Israel that the Kingdom of God had arrived. He sent them out two by two. In the Bible, judgment was withheld unless there were at least two witnesses; no one could be found guilty on the testimony of just one witness. The church is a multiplicity of witnesses, right? All of us together. But we stand together as a valid witness, one whose testimony is valid. Those who hear our message are responsible because they've heard from reliable observers.

If this is cyclical, then we have seen cycles like this before. We may be seeing them again. Think about the church in Europe...utterly decimated from what it once was, down in many places to weekly attendance hovering around 11% in France and Great Britain. Yet we think of ourselves as a Christian nation, and we are around 22% in weekly attendance. But you know what? God's church comes back from the dead.

Church attendance was less than 2% weekly in the Soviet Union – that’s up to 7%, and where at the end of the Soviet Union only 30% of Russians considered themselves any form of Christian, it’s now closer to 75%. And Africa, the continent the American church most tried to educate about Jesus – do you know that many African nations have a church attendance rate between 70%-90% weekly? The church comes back and is revived by God after looking like it was all but dead.

Of course, we also live in a time when many think the church would be better off dead. They celebrate when churches close or when they are hit with a scandal. It is not hard to imagine a world where the two witnesses would be considered a menace. We also live in a time where, whether this passage is figurative or literal, we have the means to see events globally within moments. We have seen witnesses to Jesus martyred for their testimony. We can see how this passage could apply to us today, God’s people called to witness to a world that is falling into spiritual darkness and sin. And we know God has given us authority to testify in power, power that can conquer spiritual strongholds and everything opposed to God’s reign in this world.

So if the witnesses are the church, and this is the time for the witnesses to speak, then what’s the conclusion for us? *As members of the church, we as the children of God have the duty and privilege to testify.* When we testify about what Jesus has done for us and who He is, it spreads through a network that we rarely see but that God uses for His glory.

A few of us got to watch episodes 5-6 of *The Chosen* Friday night, and those particular episodes centered on the wedding at Cana where Jesus did His first miracle, and then the healing of a leper and the healing of a disabled man lowered through the roof of a house where Jesus was preaching by his friends. While the episodes were fascinating to watch, what was really incredible was seeing the connections that the Bible mostly leaves silent. A servant at the wedding of Cana sees the miracle, and he tells his friends that include a leper who comes to be healed. An Egyptian woman sees the healing of the leper, and she tells her friends, who then bring the man who couldn’t walk through the roof. Each time, word of Jesus spreads and miracles happen and people are blessed because someone told what they they had seen. They testified to Jesus.

So many people are afraid they don’t know much theology. That’s perfectly OK. The servants at the wedding and the leper and the paralyzed man and their friends, they didn’t know any more theology than we do. They didn’t go out and spout theological truths. They went out and said, “This Jesus has done great things. He has healed the lame and sick; He has made wine from water. He has changed me. Come and find out how He can heal and change you too.” That’s testimony. Not explaining what happened, just stating what happened. In a courtroom, a witness doesn’t interpret, they tell what they saw. That’s our job too. We state what we’ve seen.

As we continue through the book of Revelation, may we remember that we are the new temple of God, built to house the Holy Spirit, built to do His good works. We are God’s witnesses as well – His adopted children speaking for the goodness of our Father. No matter how we interpret Revelation 11, this is the truth – may we live into these truths this week.