

## “THE TWO WITNESSES.”

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**Scripture Texts: Revelation 11:1-14**

### Introduction

I know it's a little tough to remember where we are and what's going on when we have these breaks between preaching on Revelation. We have heard six trumpets sound and we are now in a two chapter intermission. In chapter 10 there was an angel with a scroll who told John to eat it.

Now we come to the second half of the intermission in chapter 11. We are still waiting for that seventh angel to sound the seventh trumpet.

As you know every chapter of Revelation is an invitation to all kinds of wild interpretations, and this chapter has been subject of some of the most diverse interpretations. I haven't spent a lot of time talking about other interpretations, I have mostly just tried to give the sane balance that takes in the OT allusions and the symbolic rather than literal approach.

But just to give you a taste of what's out there let me briefly mention two other prominent perspectives.

The *Preterist interpretation*, so named from the Latin word for past, views most of Revelation as having already happened in the first century before and leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. They take Revelation and this chapter very literally, that it's about the real temple in the real Jerusalem. The two witnesses are either the religious and civil authorities, or some say they are James and Peter.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum is the *dispensational, pretribulational (or futurist) interpretation* which says all of this is yet in the distant future. This is a time when the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem and the worshippers will be faithful Jews. There will be a final 7 years of tribulation the last three and a half years of which will be particularly severe. The witnesses will either be Moses and Elijah themselves or two people who speak and act much like them. At some date in the future two great preachers are going to rise up in Jerusalem and witness for three and a half years and then be martyred, after which there will be a resurrection and rapture.

I believe that Revelation as apocalyptic literature like in Ezekiel and Daniel is to be taken symbolically, not literally, and is applicable to the whole church through all the church age, from the time of Christ first coming to the time of His second coming. The message is not just for the seven churches in the first century, and the message is not just for some yet far distant Christians.

## **Measuring the Temple.**

Remember before the seventh seal was opened there was an intermission and in the intermission there was a vision of God's people being sealed. They would suffer but they would be ultimately protected and preserved to the end. They are spiritually protected from God's wrath but still subject to suffer at the hands of a hostile pagan world.

That appears to be what is happening here in this very different vision. Remember we have been saying these visions of seven are cycles, the same story being told with different visions and with increasing intensity. So again this pause before the end is to remind and encourage the early Christians and us that God will protect and preserve His own.

In chapter seven God's people were numbered, the 144,000 counted and sealed. Measuring is a similar meaning. Measurement means knowledge of and care for. They are known to God and they are safe in His care. He knows who His people are and He knows where they are and what they need. None of His will escape His watchful care.

Before they were numbered, now they are measured, both mean protection.

Some, of course, as you might suspect interpret this vision to just be about the Jews and how God will protect them in the end. That God will deal with them in a special way.

I don't think this is a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem because that's not the trajectory of the Bible. Jesus replaces the temple in the NT. He replaces the sacrificial system, He pours out His Spirit and makes the church the new temple. There is no need or goal to rebuild a physical building. We look forward to a new heavens and a new earth and a new Jerusalem

We know in the NT that the church is the new Israel, the new people of God.

**I Corinthians 3:16** Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

**I Corinthians 6:16** We are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

**Ephesians 3:19-22** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This reminds us that in the NT the temple should no longer be taken literally. Christ is the cornerstone, the prophets and apostles are the foundation.

This sanctuary represents the people of God, those in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells, the true church of God. They are safe under the wings of God. They are upheld by His righteous, omnipotent hand.

## **Figuring out the Figures.**

The numbers here and in Revelation 12 all refer to the same number. 42 months equals 1260 days which equals three and a half years, half of seven.

Are these numbers chronological (literal) or are they theological (symbolical)? As we have said before most of the images and numbers in Revelation are symbolic. They represent something.

The three and a half years leads us to a clue in the OT.

**Daniel 12:5-7** Then I, Daniel, looked, and behold, two others stood, one on this bank of the stream and one on that bank of the stream. 6 And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, "How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?" 7 And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for *a time, times, and half a time*, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be finished.

The time, plus a times, plus a half a time is three and a half years, the same time frame in Revelation.

Daniel's prophecy suggests this time frame covers the time of the holy people of God, meaning the saints on earth and when their time on earth is over, when their power is shattered, then the end will come.

The three and a half years is symbolic of the Gospel age, the church age, the time from Christ's first coming to the time of Christ's second coming. It's a symbolic number for a time of persecution and distress.

During this time there is a great growth in the spread of the church. The Gentile world may persecute the church all through this time, but the gates of hell will not finally prevail and God will preserve to the end His own and gather us all into His perfect paradise.

## **The two witnesses, two olive trees and two lampstands.**

We still have a lot of symbols and images and OT allusions to cover so you will excuse me if I cover this quickly.

John is told these two witnesses will have great power and authority for 1,260 days. At the end of this time the two witnesses will be killed, but the rejoicing will be cut very short because the two witnesses will be brought back to life.

*Who are these witnesses?* Some like to compare them to Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. But in keeping with the rest of Revelation, it is better to see them *as symbols of the witnessing church* scattered among the nations through the whole world. We have already seen that the lampstands in chapter one and two are meant to be symbols of the church on earth.

The beast making war on the church makes more sense than the beast coming out of the abyss just for two people. And the nations wouldn't be looking on two dead bodies. This is the worldwide church of Christ.

The Bible teaches that everything must be confirmed on the authority of two witnesses. Remember how Jesus sent out the disciples two by two and how in the OT two witnesses were necessary to validate something. This tells us that this message is true, for it has the testimony of two witnesses.

**John 8:17-18** In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. 18 I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.”

If we are right about the time period and who the witnesses are then other elements in the vision make sense.

The *sackcloth* in verse three is symbolic of repentance and suffering, both key parts of the age of the Gospel, the Gospel call to repentance and the call to sacrifice and suffering in this life.

Four OT images of God preserving the prophetic witness and confirming its authority follow, two olive trees, fire consuming Elijah's enemies, no rain, and the plagues.

The prophet Zachariah saw a vision of two olive trees next to two lampstands pouring out the oil for the lamps and an angel tells him the meaning, these are two anointed messengers or witnesses who serve the Lord.

**Zechariah 4:2-3** 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.”

**Zechariah 4:12-14** 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.”

The *oil* from olive trees is symbolic of the pouring out of God and the anointing of God. The lampstands are symbolic of the church and Christians being the light of the world.

The next three miracles here remind us of the miracles of Moses and Elijah.

Moses received power and authority to turn rivers into blood. Elijah prayed and stopped up the heavens for three years and called down fire on his enemies.

The message of the miracles is that God has the power to save and the power to punish. The Gospel is a call to repentance in light of a coming judgment. Repent while there is yet time.

The power is real. The Word of God is sharper than a double edged sword. God makes the words of the mouths of His messengers a fire.

**Jeremiah 5:14** Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts:

“Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.

The *murder of the two witnesses* is symbolic of Satan’s attack on the church and his attempt to destroy it which at times seems like he has succeeded.

Persecution and martyrdom have been a constant part of church history. There is nothing new here. This is not one moment in the past or the future, but the perennial attack of Satan.

The world hates the light, the world receives the churches message as torment. We see this today when they call the churches witness to the truth hate speech.

We need to remember the fundamental reality in this open universe of ours. There is a great conflict between God and His enemies, there is a pitched battle in the heavenlies between the principalities and powers. This vision exposes in black and white fashion the conflict between good and evil. Revelation pulls back the curtain and gives us a glimpse at the hardness of hearts and the viciousness of the enemies.

Beneath the veneer of civility there is a deadly opposition. We must witness to the truth in the power of the Spirit. We should witness boldly for as long as we have voice, that some might be saved.

Despite how great the miracles or how clear the message or how fierce the judgment, we know that through ages many are unmoved to turn to Christ. The greatest natural disasters are dismissed as Mother Nature and not messengers from God to repent lest you to perish (Luke 13).

The world has been warned again and again and again, yet remains unrepentant. There is no blindness so great as those who refuse to see.

The *resurrection of the witnesses* shows that when the world celebrates the death of the church it rises again. God will be vindicated.

In every age there have been great attempts to kill the church. The Roman Empire, the Spanish Inquisition, communism in Russia, Albania, China and North Korea, the Muslim states, ISIS.

The three and a half days represents a cutting short of the suffering and it reflects Christ’s three days of suffering. God controls and limits what must be endured.

Those who share in Christ’s suffering will share in His victory. A martyr’s death is never a defeat, but always a victory, a sharing in Christ’s glory.

## **Our Witness.**

**2 Corinthians 6:16** We are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

**I Peter 2:9-10** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

We are God's people, we belong to Him. Our security is our faith in our crucified and risen and ascended Lord. He is on the throne with all power and authority and His Spirit fills His Church. God protects His people from Satanic attack.

We are living in the three and a half years. We are part of the great witnessing church and we are individual witnesses in it. We are to proclaim the Gospel in all its fullness, law and prophets, no matter how much there is opposition until the Kingdom of God comes in glory and power.

The purpose to God's preserving us to bear witness to Him for as long as He ordains.

**I Corinthians 15:58** Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

**Ephesians 6:10-13** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

**Hebrews 12:1-2** Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

**Galatians 6:9** And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

**Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.