

Series #17 Revelation

Scripture Revelation 11:1-13

We are about half-way through the book of Revelation. Today our passage is the first 13 verses of chapter 11. Chapters 10 and 11 are one continuous section. They are an interlude inserted between the 6th and 7th trumpet judgments. You may remember that there was a similar interlude inserted after the 6th seal judgment.

These interludes contain visions specifically for the Church — visions which are intended to encourage believers during the final period of world history. The Scriptures inform us that hostility toward, and persecution against, God's people will increase greatly near the end of the age. In chapter 7 we learned that believers will be sealed by God so that they will not have to face the wrath of God which will be poured out on non-believers, but this special protection does not mean that believers will be exempt from the wrath of Satan and people of the world. Believers are expected to be faithful to God even though they will face hostility — faithful unto death if it comes to that.

The series of judgments we have recently thought about are directed toward those who will “not stop worshiping demons and idols,” and will not “repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, and their thefts.” That's how the behaviors of non-believers are described at the end of chapter 9.

In chapter 10 we learned that John was given a scroll and told to eat it. He was warned that the scroll would “turn his stomach sour” even though it would taste like honey in his mouth. The scroll represented the word of God. To “eat” the scroll meant that John had to take the message of God to heart, to internalize it, and be ready to explain it to others. Indeed, as soon as he had eaten it, he was told to prophesy again, and chapter 11 is another of his predictions of future events.

Knowledge of God's sovereign will is sweet to a believer. John knew that God's people would ultimately be vindicated and rewarded for their faithful obedience. The theme which runs through the numerous visions he saw is “The Victory of Christ and His Church Over Satan and the World.”

On the other hand, such knowledge was bitter to John because he understood how much suffering and persecution God's people would experience. He knew that the power of evil would be at its greatest level just before the end of the age. He knew that many believers would be killed.

The emphasis of today's reading is, first, on the protection of God's people, and then, second, on their ministry activities.

Read Revelation 11:1-14.

In his vision, John was given a measuring rod and told to "measure the temple of God" and the "altar," and to "count the worshipers." John undoubtedly recognized that these actions would be a reenactment of one of the experiences of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. This was the second time that John was told to duplicate a prophetic action previously performed by Ezekiel. Eating the scroll was the first. Several chapters at the end of the book of Ezekiel describe the methodical way in which an angelic being measured the temple complex. The purpose of the measuring had very little to do with determining dimensions. Rather the temple was being prepared for the presence of the LORD. It was marked out to make it holy. The measuring signified God's ownership.

The word used in Revelation for "temple" refers to the two rooms known as the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The priests were permitted to enter the outer room, the Holy Place, each day to add incense and coals of fire to the altar of incense. The high priest was the only individual permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, and he could do that on just one day each year, on the Day of Atonement. The Ark of the Covenant was located in the Holies of Holies. The cover of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat. That was the place where God said He would dwell among His people.

After taking the measurements, John was commanded to count the worshipers in the temple sanctuary. This meant that the worshipers were in the presence of God and under His protection. In the New Testament, the word "temple" was often used to signify the Church. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote: "Don't you know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you? God's temple is sacred; and you are that temple" (*I Corinthians 3:16-17*).

In another letter he wrote, “We are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (*II Corinthians 6:16*). Back in chapter 7 the people of God were numbered and sealed as a sign of God’s acceptance and protection. The measuring of the temple was another way of symbolizing the acceptance and protection of God.

It is important that we understand what the protection of God means. As I indicated several times previously, the protection of God does not mean that He provides security against physical suffering and death. His protection is against spiritual and eternal doom. Back in chapter 6 (verses 9 through 11) we read that the Church will go through many sufferings, and many believers will be martyred, the consequence of their obedience and faithfulness to God in the midst of evil. However, God promised to be with those who would be “overcomers,” that is, those who would remain faithful in spite of threats and persecution. God has guaranteed that “overcomers” will emerge victorious through all the physical challenges which will confront them.

Later in this 11th chapter, we have a perfect example of what will happen to many believers. A “beast from the Abyss ... will attack the two special witnesses of God, and overcome and kill them.” The dead bodies of these witnesses will be on public display for three days, but then God will give them resurrection bodies and raise them up to be with Him. Thus, the witnesses will triumph over their enemies. As overcomers they had remembered the words of Jesus, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell” (*Matthew 10:28*). These words will be especially important to believers at the end of the age.

John was specifically commanded to exclude from his measurements the outer court of the temple complex. The reason? Areas outside the sanctuary building had been given to the Gentiles. When Ezekiel measured the temple in his vision, he was instructed to exclude from the sanctuary “the foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh” (*Ezekiel 44:6-9*). The “uncircumcised foreigners” were pagans who did not worship the true God and whose presence would desecrate the sanctuary.

The first part of John's vision was focused on people in the inner area of the temple. These people were acceptable to God. They were secure from spiritual harm and defilement. In the next part of the vision, the focus is on believers who were at risk of physical harm. Gentiles would be permitted to enter the outer court and to trample on the "holy city" for a limited time. The word "Gentile" has a very specific meaning in the book of Revelation. It refers to those people who are in rebellion against God. The word is sometimes translated "nations," but it refers to "the inhabitants of the earth" as opposed to those who have citizenship in heaven.

Symbolically, the inner court represents the place of spiritual security of believers, but the outer areas represent where believers will suffer persecution and danger. Outwardly, members of the Church will suffer persecution and martyrdom, but those who are numbered and qualified to be in the presence of God are eternally spiritually protected and are assured of their ultimate triumph.

The word "trample" indicates the hostility of the Gentiles toward the people of God. The "trampling" of the "holy city" will extend for 42 months. There are several verses in Revelation which refer to this period of time. In verse 3 a period of 1260 days is mentioned. This is 42 months of 30 days each. In other places the period is referred to as "a time, times, and half a time," which is a formula for one year plus two years plus half a year. All these terms equal three and one-half years.

This interval of time was first mentioned by the prophet Daniel, and I'm sure that John made the connection of his visions with the writings of Daniel. Daniel predicted an individual who would increase in power and influence until he "reached the host of heaven and threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them." This man would make a determined effort to destroy the Jewish faith and the chosen people of God. Daniel predicted that the man would "become very strong, and cause astounding devastation." He would speak "against the Most High" and "oppress the saints," and that the saints would be handed over to him for a time, times, and half a time" (*Daniel 7:24-25; 8:10-11, 23-24*). The intermediate fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy was in the 2nd Century B. C., but Christians through the centuries have believed that these events will have a final fulfillment at the end of the age, and, in fact, represent the last months of this age.

We have spent a lot of time on the first two verses of chapter 11. In these verses believers are informed that they belong to God and will be spiritually protected by Him even though they will be trampled on and suffer physically for a short period of time. In verses 3 through 13 we are given an example of the difficulties to be faced by believers, and their ultimate triumph. The “tramplings” and the “triumphs” are portrayed in the lives and ministry activities of two unique witnesses. Chapter 11 begins with a taste of the sweetness of God’s promises, but then quickly illustrates the bitter aspects of the Christian life.

The word for witness is “martyr,” a word used to describe those individuals who testify to the quality of their faith by laying down their lives. These witnesses not only testify about the truth of God through their proclamations, but the genuineness of their faith is revealed by their faithfulness unto death. The concept of witness originated with Jesus. He was the “faithful witness” to the world (*see Revelation 1:5 and 3:14*), and, hence, is the model for believers.

The verses do not explicitly state that the 42 months of witness by the two men is concurrent with the 42 months of trampling by the Gentiles, but that is the implication. The “two witnesses” are called “prophets” in verse 10. They will have a two part ministry of judgment and proclamation. In verse 3 we are informed that God will “give power” to His witnesses so that they will be able to prophesy and to perform great miracles. Verses 5 and 6 describe the power that these two witnesses will have. They will be extremely effective in their ministry activities. God’s sovereignty will be displayed in who they are and what they do. Let’s examine in detail their identities and activities.

There are two witnesses because the Old Testament law demanded that “a matter must be established by the testimony of two or more witnesses” (*Deuteronomy 19:15*). The reference to “two olive trees” is drawn from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. In Zechariah’s vision, the olive trees referred to the two men who were anointed to “serve the Lord of all the earth.” They were responsible for the Babylonian exiles who had returned to the promised land. (*See Zechariah 4:1-14*). The exiles faced a lot of opposition in their efforts to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. The message in Zechariah’s vision was that these men would not be able to accomplish their work through their own strength. They were told, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty.”

In Zechariah's vision, the olive trees supplied the lampstand with oil. This was symbolic of the work of the Holy Spirit. It was the purpose of the lampstand to provide light. In the early chapters of this book, John saw a vision of Jesus standing in the midst of seven lampstands, which were identified as church fellowships of Asia Minor. (*See Revelation 1:20*) Jesus wanted these church fellowships to shine out in brilliant witness to Him, and He advised them about what was necessary to keep their lampstands shining brightly. The two witnesses in chapter 11 were brilliant examples of the kind of people Jesus wanted. They were both "olive trees" and "lampstands," indicating that they were empowered to be vehicles of the Holy Spirit, and to proclaim God's presence and sovereignty in the dark world of the end times.

Verses 5 and 6 describe the incredible powers that these two witnesses will have. Surprisingly, there are similarities between the abilities of these two witnesses and the first four trumpet judgments which we previously thought about. At the sounding of the first trumpet, fire fell to earth and one-third of the earth was burned up (*Revelation 8:7*). In the case of the witnesses fire will come from their mouths to devour their enemies. After the second angel sounded his trumpet, a third of the sea turned into blood (*Revelation 8:8*). The two witnesses will also have the power to turn water into blood. According to verse 6, the witnesses will be able to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. In addition, they will have the power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the months of their prophesying. There is the implication that the two witnesses will minister in connection with the first four trumpets.

The powers of the two witnesses are very similar to those exercised by the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Moses. Elijah was given the "power to shut up the sky" for three and one-half years (*1 Kings 17:1; Luke 4:25*), and to call down fire to destroy enemies (*1 Kings 1:9-14*) and burn up the sacrifice in the presence of all the prophets of Baal (*1 Kings 18:36-38*). Moses was given the power to "turn waters into blood" (*Exodus 7:17-21*) as well as to "strike the earth with other kinds of plagues" during his confrontations with Pharaoh.

It is probably not a coincidence that it was Elijah and Moses who appeared with Jesus at the time of His transfiguration. Mark 9:2-4 explains: "He (Jesus) was transfigured before them (the apostles Peter, James, and John). His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus." It is not hard to see why many commentators have linked the two witnesses in Revelation in some way to these Old Testament prophets.

When their ministry is completed, the two witnesses will be killed by "the beast that comes up from the Abyss. They had been obedient "overcomers" for 3 and a half years. Their deaths would not represent defeat; rather, their lives and their faithfulness unto death would be a display of their triumph.

We were introduced to the creatures from the Abyss in chapter 9. It is possible that the beast who attacks the witnesses is the creature previously described as the "king" and "angel of the Abyss whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek, Apollyon" (Revelation 9:11).

It is interesting to note what will move people to repentance. The supernatural powers of the two witnesses did not cause people to give glory to God. Neither did the trumpet judgments, including the judgments in which the demonic armies tormented the inhabitants of the earth and killed a third of them. The result of the judgments? "The rest of mankind that were not killed by the plagues still did not repent" (*Revelation 9:20*). It was the resurrection of the bodies of the two witnesses which changed the attitudes of earth dwellers. After the two witnesses were killed, and their bodies desecrated, and the inhabitants of earth had their time of "gloating" and celebration, it was the unanticipated display of power involved in the resurrection of the witnesses which caused at least some of the people on earth to finally "give glory to the God of heaven."

The punishments inflicted on humanity during the judgments failed to bring people to repentance. However, verse 13 indicates that some people were able to recognize in the martyrdom of the two witnesses and the subsequent act of resurrection that God exists, that He is sovereign, and that His power is beyond the limitations of the earthly physical realm. The death and resurrection experience of the witnesses parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death led to elation and celebration on the part of Satan and the enemies of Jesus, but His resurrection was the triumphal evidence that evil and the consequences of evil were defeated. Jesus' death and resurrection was the basis of the good news of the gospel. In a similar way, it was the dramatic resurrection of the two witnesses that brought about the evangelistic victory of verse 13.

A brief explanation of my views concerning the interpretation of this portion of Revelation.

Commentators hold numerous interpretations of chapter 11. In fact, chapter 11 is considered to be the most difficult portion of Revelation to interpret. Opinions vary according to the theological schemes held by the commentators and the subsequent hermeneutical perspective through which they filter the words of the Apostle John.

The major debate is whether the temple described in chapter 11 is a literal temple reconstructed in the last days or symbolic of the Church in a hostile world. There is also the complicating factors of whether the chapter describes circumstances of John's lifetime, or timeless interaction between God and the forces of evil (the Church and the world) between the first and second advents of Jesus, or the circumstances of Gentiles or Jews or both, or a location of the vision in heaven or on earth.

Interpretations fall into three main views (there are several variations): Commentators who are “strict dispensationalists” interpret the passage literally. They assume a rebuilt Jewish temple in the city of Jerusalem at the end of the age and that chapter 11 depicts the struggle between Jews and the Beast known as the Antichrist. These commentators emphasize God’s preservation of the nation of Israel up until the spiritual conversion of a remnant of the Jews just before the return of Jesus. They assume that chapter 11 is referring to the 144,000 [literal Jews] who were sealed and protected in chapter 7.

Other commentators agree that John is describing the “preservation and ultimate salvation of the Jewish people” but they do not accept that the temple is literal. Rather, they say that the temple, altar, worshipers, and “holy city” mentioned in the passage represent either a believing Jewish remnant or the Jewish people who will be under Gentile oppression in the last days.

Both of the above groups state that chapter 11 is John’s way of predicting the preservation of the Jewish people and their final salvation. Both groups quote several verses in Romans 11 to back up their positions. See, for example, the statements of the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:1-7, 25-29. Jesus implied the salvation of Israel when He said, “Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).

Advocates for the third view believe that the inner temple is symbolic of the Christian Church. They base their conclusion on the overall theme of the book (Jesus Christ and the Church overcoming Satan and the Forces of Evil) and the general context of chapters 10-11, where the focus is on the Church. According to this view, the “worshipers” in verse 1 represent all the true followers of God who are enduring persecution. The measuring has the same context as the prophecy given in Ezekiel.

The setting of chapters 10 and 11 appears to be on the earth. John saw a “mighty angel coming down from heaven.” This angel “planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land.” John took the scroll from “the hand of the angel who was standing on the sea and the land.” The temple he was told to measure, the city which would be trampled, and the ministry of the two witnesses were all on the earth.

The temple in verse 1 must be an earthly temple because the outer court will be trampled by the Gentiles. Therefore the word “worshippers” would represent believers who are still on earth. The measuring symbolizes their recognition and position in the presence of God.

In the following section of this appendix, I want to explain my views on “the great city” which is mentioned in verse 8. The Gentiles will “trample on” this city for 42 months. There is little doubt that the great city is Jerusalem, although it is “spiritually called Sodom and Egypt.” The term “spiritually” is often translated “figuratively.” The term can also apply to the place “where also the Lord was crucified.” The allusion to Sodom refers to the low level of morality of the city. The name Egypt calls attention to oppression and slavery. Jerusalem is linked to Sodom in Isaiah 1:9-10, Jeremiah 23:14, and Ezekiel 16:46-49. Jerusalem is like Egypt in Hosea 8:13; 9:3; and Joel 3:19.

In John’s vision, the city of Jerusalem is under the power of the beast/Antichrist. The beast which comes up from the Abyss to attack and kill the two witnesses. The great city had killed Jesus, who had borne witness to God’s salvation and judgment, and, in the last days, it will be the place where the last witnesses of the present age will be killed because of their witness to salvation and judgment.

For Christians today, the issue of Jerusalem raises many questions. How should our faith in Jesus affect our attitude to this unique city? What precisely is the significance of Jerusalem in God’s purposes? In the book of Revelation it is linked with Babylon, Rome, and Sodom. It represents all cities that oppose God. How should Christians support Israel and Zionism? Should it matter to Christians who controls Jerusalem? How should we “pray for Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6)? How should we understand Jerusalem today in the light of biblical teaching?