



## Part 24 – The Two Witnesses

### Revelation 11:1-14

There is perhaps no more hotly debated passage in the Book of Revelation than chapter 11. It is a particularly complex passage filled with challenging allusions to various Old Testament texts such as Zechariah, Daniel, Exodus, 1 Kings, and Ezekiel. It is a passage filled with temple imagery and the symbolic use of numbers. Revelation 10-11:14 is a theological break in the action between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Much like the break between the sixth and seventh seals (chapter 7), this break directs our attention to the church as she makes her way between Christ's incarnation and his return. And just like the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal, the break between the sixth and seventh trumpets looks at the church from two vantage points. In 11:1-14, we see the church as the persecuted, but ultimately triumphant, witness to Christ.

### **Measuring the Temple**

**Vs. 1** – The command to measure the temple with a rod or staff links with Ezekiel's vision in which he saw an angel measuring the temple (chapters 40-42) and Zechariah's vision of a man measuring the temple (2:1ff). These visions have nothing to do with the actual dimensions of the temple but serve as metaphors for the temple's protection (or destruction). The New Testament's redefinition of the temple (or sanctuary) as the people of God has already been seen in Revelation (3:12; 13:6; 21:2, 9, 22). The "worshippers" are the multitude assembled before the throne and sealed by God. John's measuring of the temple with its worshippers points directly to the New Testament's emphasis that the body of Christ is the true temple of God.<sup>1</sup> The prophet Ezekiel looked forward to the day when God would rebuild his temple. He gave dimensions of every room, doorway and piece of furniture demonstrating how God would protect every square inch. John now sees that is precisely what the Lord has done through his presence with his people, the church. "That assurance of spiritual protection buoys us and keeps us engaged in the Lord's work, to be a prophetic people."<sup>2</sup>

**Vs. 2** – John is instructed to not measure the outer court of the temple. "This prohibition shows that what is measured is placed under Divine protection, and what is not measured is exposed to assault by the nations."<sup>3</sup> The 42-month time period is symbolic and connects to Daniel's prophecy (7:25; 9:27; 12:7). The number 42 is that of "the 'stations' or places where God's people camped during the journey through the wilderness according to the listing in Numbers 33."<sup>4</sup> The time of the trampling may allude to Israel's wanderings which some believe lasted 42 years (rounded to 40 years – Acts 13:18).

- Some have interpreted these verses as meaning that a third temple will be built in Jerusalem prior to Christ's return. But this interpretation misses the symbolism of John's vision. Further, such a view receives no support in the New Testament which repeatedly portrays the church as God's temple. In Matthew 24, Jesus foretold the temple's destruction (which happened in A.D. 70). But he promised that he would raise up another temple in its place, one not made by human hands (John 2:19, Matthew 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58). Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Later he writes, "For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:16).<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere the church is likened to a holy city (Matthew 5:14; Ephesians 2:19-20). In Revelation 21, the "new Jerusalem" is described as a bride adorned for her husband, a clear allusion to the church. The theological trajectory of the city of Jerusalem (and the temple) is that God's dwelling place is ultimately with his people, the church.
- Given that the temple is symbolic of the church, the outer court may represent 1) the apostate church (those professing Christians who have turned away from Christ), or 2) the gentile nations, or 3) the trouble and persecution that the faithful church must suffer in this world. In either case, the sense of the imagery of the first two verses is that the church must face great difficulty, but she will be preserved by God from any spiritual or lasting harm. Given the pattern already seen, I take the temple as symbolizing the church

<sup>1</sup> Ian Paul, *Revelation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 196

<sup>2</sup> Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then, Now, and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2023) p. 164

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 167

<sup>4</sup> Ian Paul, 197

<sup>5</sup> See also 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:2; 1 Peter 2:4-5

in her victory and the outer court as symbolic of the church in her earthly spiritual warfare. In this way the “outer court” and “the holy city” give us “a contrasting perspective on the same true church that is pictured in the measured sanctuary.”<sup>6</sup>

- The period of 42 months (three and a half years, half of seven years, seven being a number of completeness) is taken from Daniel and is both there and in John’s usage here a numeric symbol for a limited period of time in which evil will be allowed to advance and in which the church will suffer tribulation. The description of the same period as 1260 days in verse 3 is a literary variation as is the description of the same period as “time, times, and half a time” in 12:14.

### ***The Ministry of the Two Witnesses***

In the temple (and the Holy City) John sees the church from one vantage point. Now, in the two witnesses, he sees the church from another. This is the same pattern as the two vantage points of the church seen in chapter seven.

**Vs. 3** – The significance of there being two witnesses is tied to God’s law that two witnesses were required to establish trustworthy testimony in court (Numbers 35:30). The church’s warning to the world of the coming judgment is therefore established testimony.

**Vs. 4** – More proof that the two witnesses are symbolic of the one people of God – the two olive trees remind us of God’s people prior to Christ’s first advent, and the two lampstands are symbolic of the church between Christ’s first and second advents. This imagery may also indicate the power of God within his church (olive oil was used to power lamps).<sup>7</sup>

**Vv. 5-6** – The power of the church here is described in symbolic ways which echo the phenomena associated with Moses and Elijah as they prophesied against the nations. Moses and Elijah are also representative of the law and the prophets (God’s Word). Here we are assured that the Lord will use the witness of the church in mighty ways as she proclaims his grace and judgment. To Jeremiah the Lord says, “I am making my words in your mouth fire and this people wood, and it will consume them” (Jeremiah 5:14). This is a sober reminder that the church is to be a faithful steward of not only the promises of God’s salvation but also of his coming judgment.

### ***The Two Witnesses Killed and Raised***

The two witnesses are symbolic of the church in her God-given power as witnesses to the world and of the suffering she will endure on account of that faithful witness. Nevertheless, the church’s victory is assured. The church militant will become the church triumphant.

**Vs. 7** – This has always been the response of the world and the demonic hosts to God’s warnings of judgment. The church has always been persecuted for her faithful witness. Here, Satan is once again depicted as a beast from the abyss coming to make war against the church.

**Vv. 8-10** – This is a picture of the hatred that Satan and the world have for Christ and his church. The world has always treated God’s people with reproach. The church’s enemies are compared to Sodom and Egypt which were symbolic of wickedness and oppression. Jerusalem is alluded to as the place of Jesus’ crucifixion. And so, in John’s vision, Jerusalem is now classified along with Sodom and Egypt. Later, John will see Babylon as symbolic of wickedness and violence against the church. For “three and a half days” the church will appear as though she has been defeated and the world will rejoice.

**Vv. 11-12** – After “three and a half days” the Lord will prove his faithfulness as he preserves and saves his people. John’s imagery comes from Ezekiel 37:5 (“This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: ‘I will make my breath enter you and you will come to life.’”). This is a picture of God’s persecuted church being made victorious in a way that alludes to resurrection and ascension. This may indicate the Day of the Lord, the resurrection of those who died in Christ, and the taking up of the redeemed into the new creation. Or it is possibly a reference to the entire church age as the Lord continues to preserve his people through tribulation, culminating in the return of Christ.

**Vs. 13** – I believe this indicates that verses 11 and 12 do not refer to the very end of the age. In Revelation, when we see certain percentages recorded, it indicates only partial fulfillment. God’s judgment at this point in the vision is still being restrained.

**Vs. 14** – This theological interlude is complete, the second woe. The vision offers two pictures of a church threatened and persecuted but preserved by God (first as the temple/city and second as the two witnesses).

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Johnson, 168; This is also the view of Caird, Baukham, Wall, and others.

<sup>7</sup> Zechariah 4: “Not by might, nor by power but by my spirit says the Lord of hosts.”