

The Power of Witness

Revelation 11:1-14

John Breon

Revelation is fairly unique among books of the Bible. There are some sections of the Old Testament and a couple of places in the Gospels that are similar. Even though so much of Revelation is unlike the rest of the Bible, we can see connections between it and the rest of Scripture. The basic principles for reading and understanding the Bible apply to Revelation. At the same time, because it is so different, we look at it in some ways we don't apply to the rest of Scripture. Almost all the numbers and images in Revelation are symbolic. They appeal to our imagination as they represent another reality. We don't look for that same symbolism in most other Bible books.

Because it's not always clear what the symbols represent, there are various ways to interpret them. There are at least four major ways to approach Revelation and understand it. Within those approaches, there are various ways to understand the different parts of John's vision. If we were doing a class on Revelation, we'd compare various interpretations. But as it is, in these sermons I'm just giving you the interpretation that seems most likely to me—based on the research I do.

Several writers point out that Revelation 11 seems particularly challenging. But it's an important chapter. It introduces and summarizes a lot of what's to come. If you think of Revelation as being like a symphony, chapter 11 is like the overture that introduces themes which will appear again. Today, we're looking at just the first part of the chapter. We'll explore the second part later and tie it in with some of the later chapters.

In this part of the vision, John is told to measure the temple. He hears about activities that occur during a specific time period: forty-two months or 1,260 days, or three and a half years. He hears about God's two witnesses who have amazing power, but who are conquered and killed by the monster that comes from the pit. But then they're raised to life and taken into heaven. This section concludes with a severe earthquake and destruction of part of the city.

What's all that about? What did it communicate to the first people to hear it and what does it say to us?

Just to jump right in: *We* are the temple. *We* are the two witnesses. That is, the church, the people of God, God's community or family, is represented here as the temple and the two witnesses.

In the Gospels, especially John, we see Jesus taking the place of the temple in Jerusalem. God dwells among us in Jesus. In Jesus we see God's glory. Jesus is the meeting place of heaven and earth. After Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and sending the Holy Spirit, the people of God are seen as the body of Christ and God's dwelling. The apostles Paul and Peter both talk about the church as God's temple and each of us who are part of it as living stones within it (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10).

Why is John told to measure the temple? It's kind of like in chapter 7 when God's people are marked or sealed as belonging to God. This measuring marks out the people who belong to God.

Measuring could also have to do with building and repairing. John is given a measuring rod so he can restore and revive the church (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code* 69). That needs to happen in every generation.

In the early 1200's, a young Italian man named Francis was praying in a chapel. He heard the voice of Christ speaking to him: "Francis, go and repair my house, which you can see is all being destroyed." Francis went to work on the physical church, going around his hometown of Assisi and asking for money to restore broken down chapels and working on them. But there was a spiritual dimension to Francis' call as well. He helped bring much-needed renewal to the church in the Middle Ages, renewal that continues to this day (Mark Galli, *Francis of Assisi and His World* 36, 50).

Where do we need to be rebuilt and renewed as the church? Where do we need to be refreshed in our relationship with God? One of my prayers, for this church and for the church in general, is that God will send revival. That the power of God's Spirit will sweep through the church and give new life. That we'll be humbled and empowered, broken and made bold. One part of the church's life that will come alive in new ways is our witness. May God make us into vibrant, authentic, prophetic, winsome

witnesses. Witnesses who tell God's good news, who testify about God's great acts, who announce God's kingdom.

In the vision, John is told to measure the inner part of the temple, but not the outer court of the Gentiles. It'd be nice to stay inside all the time and just enjoy life in God's presence. But it's in the outer court where we meet people who need the good news, people God loves. That outer court is where the church encounters the world and can meet resistance from the world.

The forty-two months here represent the whole time between Jesus' first coming and his return. When Revelation calls this time forty-two months, it's picturing this time as one of opposition and persecution. When it's called 1,260 days or "a time, times, and half a time" (that is, three and a half years), it's pictured as when God provides for and protects the church in the world, enabling us to face the opposition.

God gives authority to two witnesses during this time. They're clothed in sackcloth, which indicates repentance. They call people to repent, to return to God. They're called "the two olive trees and the two lampstands" who stand before the Lord of the earth. That comes from the prophet Zechariah (chap. 4). Who, by the way, was instrumental in helping get the Jerusalem temple rebuilt after the people came home from exile.

We've already seen in Revelation that lampstands represent the churches John writes to and, by extension, the entire church. Olive trees could be a symbol of Israel. Olive oil was burned in the lamps on the lampstands. So the witnesses have within them the fuel for their fire.

God wants to fill us with the Holy Spirit to empower our light to shine, to enable us to be witnesses. God does that for each of us and for all of us together as the church. The power to witness effectively isn't ours; it's God's. As Zechariah says to one of the leaders represented by the lampstands and the olive trees: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" (4:6).

These witnesses in Revelation have tremendous power. Fire comes out of their mouths to destroy their enemies. They can shut up the sky so it won't rain. They can turn water to blood and strike the earth with plagues.

What Old Testament characters do those powers remind you of? The two witnesses are like Moses and Elijah. Moses was the great liberator and lawgiver. Elijah was a powerful prophet who confronted idolatry and injustice in Israel. At Jesus' transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with him about his mission and his upcoming death and resurrection. They represent the Law and the Prophets. The Old Testament witnesses to Jesus.

Both Moses and Elijah were prophets who confronted the powerful rulers of their day. Through Moses, God showed his power over the Egyptian gods. The plagues certainly disrupted life in Egypt. Through Elijah, God restored dead people to life and provided food for hungry people during a famine. God also showed his power over the Canaanite god Baal. Elijah's ministry certainly disrupted the royal court and the life of many people in Israel.

We generally talk about our witness for the Lord being winsome and gentle—and it should be. But even when it's spoken with respect and gentleness, Christian witness can be confrontational, disruptive, and upsetting to people. The good news of salvation includes the truth that we need a Savior, and not everybody wants to admit that. The good news calls us to give up trying to prove ourselves and simply trust God's grace, and that's hard to accept. The good news tells us to lose our lives in order to find real life, to surrender in order to have victory, to die to sin and selfishness so we can be raised to walk in newness of life—and that can be a hard word to hear.

The good news of Jesus confronts idols and false security. It challenges worldly power. If we take it seriously, it overturns a lot of what we think life should be. As Jesus sent his disciples out on a mission, he also told them to expect persecution (Mt 10). Jesus himself was rejected and killed by people who wouldn't accept what he did and said. The leaders were afraid of losing control and said, "Look, the whole world's going after him!" (Jn 12:19). At one point, the followers of Jesus were said to have caused trouble all over the world, or turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The churches John was writing to in Revelation were chastised for

going along with the world's ways or were commended for resisting the worldly culture that surrounded them.

All through Christian history, Christian witness challenges and disrupts the world and those who hold power. That's why the Romans and others persecuted and executed so many Christians. In the 1500s in Germany, Martin Luther had to hide out from the powerful people who were threatened by his message. In the 1700s in England, John Wesley and the early Methodists were often harassed and assaulted as they tried to preach the good news. In the 1960s in America, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the Civil Rights Movement were beaten and jailed and King was finally assassinated. All of those witnesses were seen as threats.

We don't have to be on the national stage or go out of our way to confront people in order to witness. Sometimes our presence can be a witness. When I was in junior high, one day before one of our football games, a man came in to give a devotional to the team. He said we weren't required to be there, that anyone could leave. No one did. He told us that by staying we were being a witness. I liked that.

We'd love to be able just to let our light shine and not have to say anything. But Christian witness needs speaking as well. Our lights don't shine bright enough, our lives aren't good enough to tell the good news with enough clarity. A lighthouse isn't always enough; sometimes a foghorn is required (D. Elton Trueblood, *Confronting Christ*).

We need to speak the truth. God speaks and calls us to speak. Eugene Peterson reviews the speaking that goes on in Revelation:

The words we speak to God (the incense-prayers) are powerful; we are assured of that. The words God speaks to humankind (the trumpet-preaching) are awesome; we are convinced of that. But how about the words we speak that report on our God-directed speech, and God's earth-targeted gospel? In comparison with such praying and preaching, can it mean much that I stutter out God's word in my daily conversational encounters among people who would rather hear almost anything else? That is the hesitancy addressed by

Revelation 10 and 11, and the answer is emphatic: by all means, yes!
(*Reversed Thunder* 103)

Our witness—even if it's feeble, even if it's not polished, even if it's incomplete—matters. With John, we hear God's word, take it into ourselves, and hear the call to speak. We bring our witness about the truth to the world.

In the vision, the two witnesses who represent the church come to the end of their time of witness. Then they're conquered and killed by the beast that comes up from the Abyss. We haven't met this monster yet in Revelation, but we'll see more of it in chapters 13 and 17. The beast is the power of pagan empire. In John's day it was embodied in Rome. It's Fallen Babylon that we've mentioned before and that's revealed more fully in later chapters.

The point is that the witnesses, the church, follow Jesus in being faithful until death. As Jesus was crucified in the great city, his witnesses testify about him in their deaths. The great city here is called Sodom and Egypt. Sodom represented immorality and injustice. Egypt represented idolatry and slavery. The city where the Lord was crucified was Jerusalem. But the picture here may be of the whole empire that rejected and killed Jesus.

Are we willing to follow Jesus in the way of the cross? What does it cost us to be faithful witnesses? I remember a story about Clarence Jordan. You may remember the name Clarence Jordan as the translator of the *Cotton Patch Version* of New Testament books. He inspired Millard and Linda Fuller, the founders of Habitat for Humanity. Jordan founded an interracial community in 1942 called Koinonia, the Greek word that means "communion," "fellowship," or "participation." He faced the trials of shootings, bombings, and boycotts, but he held to his mission, and called upon others to be faithful to Christ as well. Clarence Jordan's brother, Robert, had his eyes on the future, and would later become a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court. The story goes that Clarence asked Robert to represent Koinonia Farm as their attorney. "Clarence," Robert said, "I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I

represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got." "We might lose everything too, Bob," Clarence said. "It's different for you," Robert said. "Why is it different?" asked Clarence. "I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior.' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?" "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point," his brother answered. Clarence asked him, "Could that point by any chance be—the cross?" "That's right," Robert answered. "I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross." "Then I don't believe you're a disciple," Clarence said. "You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple" (Versions of this are told in several online sites, for example, <http://heroesfoundfaithful.blogspot.com/2010/11/true-saints-never-dwell-in-splendid.html>). Today, we hear about not just being a fan of Jesus, but being a follower.

For a time, the rebellious world thinks it's defeated God and his people. The world's people celebrate the death of the witnesses. But then the breath of life from God enters them and they stand up, alive. This is a bit like Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. When he prophesied to the wind or breath or spirit, the Spirit brought the scattered bones together, put flesh on them and then gave them life. That was a picture of God's people being restored. God still wants to breathe new life into his church, wake us up, and stand us up to live the life he has for us.