

Lesson # 35 The Two Witnesses

Revelation 11:1-6

Date: April 17, 2011

Revelation 11:1-6 (ESV)

¹Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, ²but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. ³And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. ⁶They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

Introduction to Chapter 11

The Tribulation Period is depicted in the OT as “the time of Jacob’s Trouble”, and as “the seventieth week of Daniel” (of his people, the Jews). These prophetic nametags put a decidedly Jewish stamp on this final week of normal human history, and the absence of the church since chapter 3 has had an affect on the narrative as well. We’ve seen 144,000 Jewish evangelists sealed by God, with no mention of the church being evangelists or even being there. Later on, we’ll see an angel flying in the heavens proclaiming the gospel – again, where is the church? ①

Chapter 11 now helps to sharpen the focus of the world’s death throes on Israel as once again we see the Temple mentioned at Jerusalem, 2 OT style witnesses who will prophesy from Jerusalem, and they are called “2 olive trees and lampstands”, and their ministry includes OT style signs & wonders akin to the times of Moses and Elijah.

As these 2 are finally killed and ascend to heaven, the 2nd woe is ended with an earthquake that targets Jerusalem. The 7th Trumpet finally sounds and the end is so near that v. 15 tells us, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.” The chapter ends with a glimpse into the heavenly Temple to see the long lost Ark of the Covenant, and a continuation of judgment – now compressed and urgent.

I. The Temple

vv. 1-2b

John is given a reed and instructions to “rise and measure the Temple of God, the altar and all those who worship there.” But he is not to measure the court outside the Temple. The strong angel from 10:9-11 is the one who most likely gives this reed to John. A reed was often used for measuring in the early centuries. It was usually about 9’ long, hollow and lightweight. The reeds used often grew to 15’ long before being cut for this task. It was also used for writing and as a walking stick, so it had some strength to it as well. Ezekiel used such a reed in Ezek. 42:16-19 to measure the Millennial Temple.

Based on the flow from v. 1-3ff, the command to measure comes from God or Christ, not the angel. This measuring of the temple is a symbolic action, paralleling some OT symbolism of prophet’s actions. For example, Isaiah walking naked and barefoot as a sign of Egypt’s impending captivity to Assyria in Isa. 20:2-5; or Ezekiel digging through a wall and carrying his luggage out before Israel as a sign of coming exile – Ezek. 12:1-7; and in Zech. 2 & Ezek. 40, measuring symbolized future judgments and restorations. Sometimes the meaning depicted was of coming destruction – II Sam. 8:2; II Kings 21:13; Isa. 28:17ⁱ, etc.

This act of measuring the temple by John is not to record its’ physical dimensions, and in fact, none are recorded here. The popular consensus of commentators is that this measuring is a symbol of preservation from destruction and danger. This idea does have scriptural support – Ezek. 40:2-43:12; Zech. 1:16; 2:1-8; Jer. 31:39. The question is: what is the danger? Well, the next verse, v. 3, talks of the gentiles trampling Jerusalem underfoot for 42 months. If, as some say, the temple & worshippers are the church and the holy city is the church, where is the protection – millions will be martyred? Therefore, it is unlikely that the measuring is for protection. ②

Another view of this measuring sees it as: to form an opinion of something as in Matt. 7:2; or as a mark of God’s favour. This is seen as a sign that henceforth, John’s prophecy will delineate God’s favour towards the sanctuary, the altar & the worshippers versus his disapproval of the gentile enemies of His people who are profaning the temple for ½ of the Tribulation periodⁱⁱ. This is seen almost immediately by the record of the 2 witnesses & their divine protection for 1,260 days (42 months) from who? The unbelieving gentiles.

The temple being measured is not the church, as much as many are led to believe that. Although there are times in the NT when the church (or even individual believers) is called the temple of Godⁱⁱⁱ, that is not what is in view here. It is the Jewish temple and Jerusalem which exist just prior to Christ’s return – the one^{iv} which the Antichrist will defile by entering it and claiming to be God (II Thess. 2:4) which alone provides the contrast between the temple and the gentiles who are against this temple and the worshippers in it.

The worshippers John measures are almost certainly a future godly remnant in Israel who will worship God in the rebuilt temple. Many will come to Christ as a result of the evangelistic efforts of the 144,000 and the 2 Witnesses.

II. Authority of God for Evil & Good vv. 2b-3

The courts outside of the temple is not measured. It was an uncovered yard consisting of 2 areas. A door and wall surrounded the whole complex to separate it from the street and the outside world, and a second wall separated this yard from access to the buildings. Gentiles could enter the outer court, but not the 2nd, under pain of death. John is told not to measure this outer court because “it is given over to the nations for 42 months.” The gentiles would control the outer court and defile the holy city for 42 months.

The gentiles are basically those unbelievers who are not Jews. They are in rebellion against God and will oppress the city of Jerusalem prior to Christ’s return.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, in his excellent commentary, states, *“This measuring of the temple & the worshippers therefore shows that the Father is watching over those whom He has separated unto Himself. His honor & holiness will be vindicated in the perfect completeness of the judgment that shall come upon the followers of the Antichrist...a part of the temple, however, is cast out. The Greek word is a very strong one. It does not at all signify mere omission. The court which is outside the inner temple is to be cast without....God will take no care of it. It is to be trodden in the winepress of His wrath. The followers of Antichrist have profaned it and they shall be allowed to trample it under foot for a determined time. Then God will take charge in His own moment.”*^v ③

The “holy city” is undoubtedly Jerusalem on earth – not the New Jerusalem of Rev. 21:22 which has no temple, and this is in fact, proven by Rev. 11:8. It is not the temple of Herod that was standing prior to AD 70 either, because that one was gone for 25 years before John wrote Revelation. It must be a temple not yet built even in our lifetime since none exists at this moment in history.

What about this period of 42 months? Is it literal or symbolic? If it is literal, is it the first ½ of Daniel’s 70th week or the last ½? How does it relate to the 1,260 days of Rev. 11:3; 12:6; the times, time and a half time of Rev. 12:14 and the other mention of 42 months in Rev. 13:5?

There is no compelling reason short of protecting a theological position to see this number as symbolic rather than literal, because the literal 42 months makes perfect sense. It is ½ of the Tribulation period, thus ½ of Daniel’s 70th week, and this connects it with the 1,260 days. The fact that the period of time is described as a period of months, then days, then as a “time, times and a half a time” is telling us it is literal. The context of what follows fits best with these 42 months being the first ½ of the Tribulation.

Opposition to the Jewish worshippers in the first ½ of the Tribulation would be relatively small due to the peace treaty with Antichrist & the false peace, but vv. 3-13 here describe huge opposition against God's 2 witnesses and God Himself during the 42 months. That makes sense because people will be so enamored with the rule of this man who has finally brought peace, and being deceived as a result of God's sending a spirit of deception upon them (cf. II Thess. 2: 11-12). Once the covenant (between Antichrist & Israel) has been broken (½ way through the 70th week), the real persecution will blossom, and God's series of judgments will begin in earnest.

Verse 2b goes on to predict that the nations (gentiles) will trample the holy city for 42 months (cf. **Luke 21:20-24**). Covenant theologians see this as proof that the book of Revelation presents a preterist or historical record of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, because the siege which ended in the AD 70 destruction began 3 ½ years before that. However, historically, the siege began in AD 66. The main problem for this view (and there are many problems) is that this would necessitate a writing of Revelation in the early 60's AD, which we have already shown in our earlier studies is virtually impossible. The description here is more consistent with a prediction of a future time prior to Christ's return, something that obviously did not take place in AD 70!

Notice in v. 3, "I will grant authority", and compare that to v. 2b, "it is given over to". Once again, almost imperceptibly, we are confronted with the evidence of a sovereign God. Not only was the city and temple given over to the gentiles to trample underfoot for 42 months, but God also grants His authority to the 2 witnesses to prophesy for 1,260 days or 42 months. This ministry of the 2 witnesses is connected to v. 2 with the word "and" so these 2 things are related. The main point is that, despite fierce opposition & deadly persecution, God will still get His message out from Jerusalem. ④

The OT required 2 witnesses for legal acceptance of testimony – cf. Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30; and in the NT – Heb. 10:28; Matt. 18:16, 19-20. These 2 witnesses are future "I will grant", not "I have granted" – they do not signify the church (people use this view as a comparison of v. 4 to Rev. 1:20 where lampstands are churches, and the fact that the Antichrist would hardly make war against (v. 8) only 2 people, and how could the whole world witness their demise?).

Objections to this view are simple. They are individuals – 2 of them – they wear sackcloth, they have specific power and distinct identities. "They will prophesy" cannot be referring to some corporate entity like the church, or "she" or "it" will testify would be used. Not only that, but v. 5 virtually seals the deal. The description of the 2 detailed to represent a group, and they are also martyred – so if they are "the church", is the whole church martyred?

Well, the big question in this section always seems to be related to the identity of these 2 witnesses, so if they are specific people, can they be identified?

Ever since the book of Revelation was first read and right up to today, it has become almost an obsession to figure out who these 2 witnesses are. In the early church, it was virtually agreed upon that they are Enoch & Elijah. Why? Because they are the only 2 men in the bible who did not physically die. Enoch was taken up to heaven alive by God – Gen. 5:24 – and Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot – II Kings 2:11. Since Hebrews 9:27 says that “it is appointed unto man once to die”, it is assumed that these 2 must return to earth in order to experience their physical deaths.

However, this is no airtight case. How many will escape death in the rapture? Also, some of those who are saved and left alive as the Millennial Kingdom begins may live until the eternal state starts, and those born during the Millennium who get saved before it ends will survive to go into heaven alive. Astonishingly, some biblical people have also died twice. How about the widow of Nain’s son, Lazarus (JN 11), Jairus’ daughter and many others raised from the dead by Jesus, Elijah, Paul of the other apostles? They all were raised to physical life after having died, but they did die again at some time which is unrecorded for us, so they physically died twice.

Another problem with Enoch is that his brief account in Genesis does not provide sufficient evidence of his having the ability to do what these 2 men do. Of course, the power is not their power – it is God-given – but the 2 witnesses are able to perform amazing signs & wonders on top of preaching the gospel. The book of Jude – vv. 14-15 – does indicate that Enoch was certainly a prophet so he may have had other abilities as well which have not been recorded for us. ⑤

Another popular idea is that this pair consists of Moses and Elijah. It seems almost universally agreed upon that Elijah is one of the 2. The prophecy that seems to supply solid evidence that Elijah is one of the 2 is found in **Malachi 4:1-6**. Notice the context: he will be sent “before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” This prophecy has a contrast in **Mal. 3:1** which is talking about John the Baptist, and **Matt. 11:1-15** & **Mark 9:9-13** support that. However, as many OT prophecies do, a secondary fulfillment is in sight, but not at first. Since Jesus will come twice, this prophecy was not completely fulfilled by John the Baptist, but another Elijah (probably the actual Elijah) will be there at the end and I am convinced that he will be one of these 2 witnesses in Rev. 11. All things were not restored when John the Baptist arrived.

At the Mount of Transfiguration in **Matt. 17:1-4**, who are the 2 prophets with Jesus? Moses and Elijah. **Luke 9:29-31** gives us information regarding what they discussed – Jesus’ “exodus”. The other most popular choice for the 2nd witness is Moses. Although his death is recorded in **Deut. 34:1-7**, there are some mysterious circumstances associated with his death according to **Jude 9**, so did God have some other use in mind for Moses’ body? It is mysterious. Based on what these 2 witnesses do, their ministry ‘fits’ the styles of ministry of both

Moses & Elijah, so if these 2 are OT personages, my guess would be Elijah and Moses. One other OT possibility is found in **Matt. 16:14**. Here, some apparently thought that Jesus might be Jeremiah, so were they expecting Jeremiah for some reason as an end time prophet? This one reference is hardly enough evidence to draw an inference from for seeing Jeremiah as one of these 2 witnesses however.

Of course, since these 2 men are not named, they may simply be 2 future people who look and act like OT prophets, but most theologians expect actual OT people. It is my belief that these 2 men are in fact, Moses and Elijah.

The Time of Their Ministry v. 3

Verse 3 says they will have God's authority to act & prophesy for 1,260 days, while clothed in sackcloth. That is 3 ½ years. The sackcloth is meant to represent the needed repentance of the people as well as approaching judgment. This gives us a clue as to which 1,260 days they minister in. Is it the beginning, end or middle of the Tribulation?

Remember that the start of the Tribulation is the First Seal being broken – the rider on a white horse (Antichrist) who brings false peace which lasts for 3 ½ years until it is broken by the temple defilement by Antichrist. The other seals, trumpets and bowls follow that. It is consistent and most contextual to see their ministry in the beginning or middle third of the Tribulation. It may end just before the Abomination that causes desolation – their taunting and preaching may be the very impetus for the Antichrist to enter the Temple and proclaim himself to be God. That would coincide with Satan being tossed out of heaven in Rev. 12:9. In Rev. 13:5-9, the Antichrist (“the Beast that comes up out of the Abyss”) makes war against the 2 witnesses and is given authority for 42 months to make war on the saints & to conquer them. It is unlikely he will conquer these 2 right at the end, and a great show of power by him would result if he kills them just before he claims to be God in the temple, after others have tried and failed to do so for 3 ½ years. I think this rules out the last ½ of the Tribulation for their ministry. That would have them dying just before Christ returns which I find highly unlikely and leaves no time for the celebration of the people on the occasion of their deaths according to **Rev. 11:10**. ⑥

I believe they start their ministry close to the start of the Tribulation – the church has been raptured, and the world is without a solid evangelical witness for a time. These 2 could fill that gap until others are saved and begin to evangelize, and until the 144,000 come on the scene and begin to evangelize. The earthquake mentioned in Rev. 8:5 in relation to the 7th seal may be the earthquake mentioned here in v. 13. Note that a tenth of Jerusalem fell & 7,000 people were killed versus 1/3rd of mankind later on. I think the earthquake is ½ way through the Tribulation and coincides with the death of the 2 witnesses.

III. Of Olive Trees and Lampstands

v. 4

This verse is one that compels us to see the 2 witnesses as OT characters who have been returned to earth for God's purposes. It is an allusion to **Zech. 4**, so let's turn there.

I do not believe the passage in Revelation is telling us to identify the 2 characters as Zerubbabel and Joshua (from chapter 3), and virtually no one else thinks that either, but the ministry of the 2 witnesses of Rev. 11 is similar to that of Joshua and Zerubabbel. The background of both pairs is the restoration of the land to Israel. The gentiles have overrun Jerusalem in both cases, and Israel is not only persecuted under Satanic attack, but ultimately the people will be restored to their land.

Zech. 4:6 brings in the Holy Spirit's role, pictured by the oil that fuel the lamps on the lampstand. In Zechariah, the olive oil from the trees was fuel that provided the emblem of the light which Joshua and Zerubabbel brought. There is 1 lampstand in Zechariah, but 2 in John's vision to depict the 2 witnesses, and in Zech. 4:11-14, the 2 olive trees depict the same people. That they stand "before the Lord of the earth" is emblematic of their readiness to serve and their source of authority. Once again, Revelation draws on OT images to demonstrate a cohesive unity in the plan of God as parallels, types and prophecies knit together to present a consistent final portrait of God's control over every event.

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IV. Opposition & Defense vv. 5-6

These 2 men are under God's authority for 3 ½ years, so it stands to reason that although they will be opposed – their message will be very unpopular – they will be divinely & providentially protected from harm until the 3 ½ years is up. Their message will be unpopular in the first half of the Tribulation because people will want to enjoy the peace that this world leader has finally wrought for them, and these 2 pesky irritants will spoil it for them.

Verse 5 indicates that people will attempt to harm them, but their efforts will be fruitless and fatal. The witnesses will have the ability to spew forth fire out of their mouths to consume their enemies. There is again an OT precedence for this sort of defense in the ministry of Elijah in **II Kings 1:10-14**. Ahaziah had sent messengers, an army of 50 along with their captain because Elijah had given an unwelcome prophecy and rebuke (cf. II Kings 1:3-4) to Ahaziah. Elijah's response is to call forth fire from heaven to consume the 50 and their captain. A second squad of 51 meets the same fate and when a third comes humbly and respectfully to Elijah, he is directed by God's angel this time to go with them.

In Rev. 11, the fire comes from their mouths, but it is still literal fire, and the end of Rev. 11:5 makes it clear that this is the sort of death God had marked out for those who would dare oppose his witnesses. This is how they can survive for 3 ½ hours in such a hostile environment. In the midst of a worldwide peace, they

will stand as harbingers that this is a false peace and that God's judgment is on the horizon, so people need to repent and turn to Christ.

In the NT, James & John requested such a power from Jesus in **Luke 9:54-55** but it was refused. Their request was not for a self-defense mechanism but because of a vindictive and prideful spirit as a result of the people of Samaria not welcoming Jesus and His disciples as they made their way to Jerusalem.

In v. 6, we come to a description of the power these 2 witnesses have been given by God in order to provide a foundation for their testimony to be believed. Just as signs and wonders were performed by Moses to validate his God-given authority over Pharaoh, and Jesus' miracles validated His heavenly authority, so these 2 will have not only defensive capabilities but an offensive array as well.

They have the power to shut the sky so no rain will fall during the time of their prophesying - a direct parallel to Elijah's authority in I Kings 17:1,7; 18:1, and it covers the same time period - 3 ½ years (cf. Luke 4:25; James 5:17). In I Kings, the drought was punishment for Ahab's & Israel's rampant sin and in Rev. 11, it will be because of the world's sin. Now, is this worldwide or localized to Israel? It is likely worldwide and will set the stage for the war and famine which follow the false peace. It may or may not be a full 3 ½ year drought, because the text says they have that power, not that they enforce it for the full time.

They can also turn the water into blood, reminiscent of Moses' time and the first plague against Egypt in Ex. 7:14ff. In fact, their power rivals Moses' OT powers because it is at their command "as often as they desire". This plague is also part of the 3rd Trumpet in Rev. 8:7 & the 3rd Bowl - Rev. 16:4. On top of that, they can strike the earth with "every kind of plague" as often as they wish to. ⑧

In our next lesson, we'll examine the battle, death, resurrection and ascension of these 2 men, along with the celebration created in honour of their deaths by a sin sickened world, and God's response to it.

Next lesson - Lesson # 36 The War on the Two Witnesses - Rev. 11: 7-14

ⁱ Robert Thomas; Revelation 8-22; pp. 79-80

ⁱⁱ IBID; p. 80

ⁱⁱⁱ I Cor. 3:16; 6:19; II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; I Pet. 3:5

^{iv} Dan. 9:27; 12:11; Rev. 13:14-15

^v Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation - God's Last Word", Zondervan, 1971, reprint 1977; pg. 195.