

Revelation 11

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Date: 25 August 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] God's Word is sweet and sour. Now, that's not my take. It's not my opinion. It's what John is told by the angel as he is invited to take and eat the little scroll, the vision that we were exploring last Sunday morning recorded in chapter 10 of Revelation. Now, chapter 11, which we've read, has its fair share of shower. Cities trampled, enemies devoured by fire, water turning to blood, the earth struck by every kind of plague, God's witnesses massacred with their corpses left to decompose in the city square. And we could go on. It's not pretty, but it is God's Word. What's going on? Last week, we noted that chapters 10 and 11, certainly the first 14 verses of chapter 11, serve as an interlude between the sounding of the sixth trumpet that we read of in chapter 9 and verse 13, the sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and the sounding of the final trumpet, the seventh trumpet of which we read of chapter 11. The seventh angel sounded his trumpet.

And that part of the chapter we'll be thinking about, God willing, next Sunday morning. So, there is this interlude between the sounding of the sixth and the final, the seventh trumpet.

And what we noticed last Sunday morning was that the interlude provides an answer to a question. The question being, what are we to do? As the world endures temporal judgments and as God's people suffer trials of every kind, what are God's people to do? In chapter 10, we discovered what John had to do.

He had to take and eat God's Word, the little scroll, and as he eats, he has to prophesy to peoples, nations, languages, and kings. There, the final verse of chapter 10. The vision of the two witnesses that concerns us this morning continues to answer the question, what are we to do as we await the sounding of the seventh trumpet that will usher in or accompany the return of Jesus to judge the living and the dead?

Well, how are we going to tackle the vision and draw out the big truths? We're going to focus on four visual aids spoken about in the chapter that will help us to draw out four big truths about God's people and our mission in the here and now. The four visual aids that we're going to draw out from chapter 11 are as follows. First of all, the temple of God. We'll think a little bit about what is going on when the temple of God is spoken of in the vision. But then we're also going to think about the two witnesses who are at the very heart of this vision, the two witnesses. What do they tell us? What truth can we draw from them? But then we're going to think about the beast, the beast from the abyss. What does that tell us about God's people? And then finally, we're going to think about the breath of life that is also spoken of in the course of this vision. So, the temple of God, the two witnesses, the beast and the breath of life. Let's start with the temple of God. And the big truth that I'm proposing that the reference to the temple of God here in the vision provides is that God's people, we as God's people are protected.

[3 : 52] Verses one and two, let's read them again. I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, go and measure the temple of God and the altar with its worshipers. But exclude the outer court, do not measure it because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. Now, the truth is when we read those verses, perhaps without any kind of background or context, it's difficult to know really what is going on here. Let me suggest three aspects of the temple that we can consider. First of all, I want to think about the temple identified, then the temple measured, and then the temple trampled. Let's think of each of these and perhaps when we have all three of these together, we'll get a sense of what is going on here. First of all, the temple identified. What is the temple that John is instructed to measure? He's told, measure the temple of God. But what is this temple? I think it's clear that the temple is not to be understood as a physical structure, just like the temple in Ezekiel's vision is not to be understood, I would contend, as a physical structure, but as a symbol for God's people or the church. Indeed, the reference to worshipers supports this contention. You know,

John is told, go and measure the temple of God and the altar with its worshipers. So, at the very heart of this picture are the worshipers who are within the temple. Again, that points to not a physical structure as being predominant, but rather the temple as symbolizing God's people. And of course, we also have in the New Testament numerous occasions when the church of God is described or compared to God's temple or dwelling place. And they really are numerous occasions when we find that. Let's just limit ourselves to one, to illustrate that reality in Ephesians 2. And reading from verse 19, what does Paul say to the believers in Ephesus and by extension to us? Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

The church of Jesus Christ, the people of God as a temple, God's temple, God's dwelling place. So, the temple here, I think, is identified as a symbol for God's people. But then we have the temple measured. Why is John to measure the temple? Now, the picture of a temple being measured is drawn from Ezekiel's vision. Remember when we read in the first three verses of chapter 40, there was this man with a measuring rod. And that vision occupies the chapters that follow in Ezekiel. And Ezekiel's vision does not provide a physical master plan for a future building project, but is rather a symbolic assurance that God is committed to His people and will dwell with them. Indeed, the new city with which the temple stands is giving that beautiful and revealing name, the Lord is there. In John's vision, the call to measure the temple is a reminder that Ezekiel's vision is being fulfilled. The church is being built by God, following God's master plan. And critically and wonderfully, the Lord is there. He is there. He is here to accompany and protect His people.

[7 : 53] It's striking that John is called to measure the temple with its worshipers. How are worshipers to be measured? Well, I think the word that we would use is they are to be counted.

In chapter 2 of Revelation, God's people are described as a great multitude that no one could count. And yet God can and does count His people. He knows us each by name and cares for every one of His children.

And that includes you. And so when we read of the temple being measured with its worshipers, that is to remind us that God knows His people. He counts His people. He knows each and every one of us.

Those of you who are of my generation may remember the late Brian Hanrahan, who was a BBC journalist. And he was the BBC war correspondent during the Falklands War. And he is most famously remembered for a news report following a Harrier jump jet mission at a critical juncture during that conflict.

Now, Hanrahan was not authorized to reveal the number of jets involved in the mission. But he memorably reported, I counted them all out, and I counted them all back.

[9 : 09] God sends out His church and every member of His church to do His mission in a hostile world. But we can be sure that just as He has counted us all out, He will count us all back.

He is with us to protect us and bring us all, bring us all safely home. The temple measured. But then thirdly, the temple or the holy city trampled.

We read of that in these verses and we're struck by the seeming contradiction. We've just spoken of how the picture of being measured or counted speaks of God's presence and protection.

And yet now we are confronted with this brutal reality. God's enemies will trample on His temple. They'll trample on His holy city, on the church of Jesus Christ.

But the seeming contradiction is actually a striking reminder of the nature of God's protection. He does not promise to protect us from persecution and violence and death, but He does promise to protect us in and through these experiences.

[10 : 23] The reference to 42 months there in verse 2 serves to assure us that the trampling, though brutal, will end at the time determined by God.

And the time reference, 42 months, also points to when this will all happen. The 42 months refers to the period encompassed between the first and second coming of Jesus, the last days or the gospel age, the time during which the six trumpets are being sounded.

Now, I'm not going to try this morning to decipher why a period of 42 months is chosen, but we'll draw your attention to the fact that the 42 months is the same time period as the 1260 days spoken

of in verse 3, during which the two witnesses will prophesy.

If you multiply 42 by 30, a round number for the length of a month, you come to 1260 days. And the point is simply this, that the trampling and the prophesying coexist.

We are to prophesy as we are being trampled. Notice also that in chapter 12, and we'll come to chapter 12 subsequently, the woman and the dragon, the woman is, we're told in verse 6, is taken care of for 1260 days, the same time period.

[11 : 49] And it's clear in that part of the vision that the woman represents the church, and the church being cared for during this same period, the last days or the gospel age.

What are we to conclude? The church has been, is being, and will continue to be trampled by God's enemies. It has ever been so. But in the midst of the trials and tribulations, God is with His people to protect us, as He determines, be that from death, in death, or through death.

The temple of God. But then the second visual aid are the two witnesses. And I think the truth that we can draw out from the true witnesses is this, God's people commissioned.

We've seen God's people protected, but now we think about God's people commissioned. What are we to do as we live and endure and wait for Jesus to return? Well, the two witnesses provide us with the answer.

And again, there are three aspects of the two witnesses to consider. The two witnesses identified. Who are they? The two witnesses commissioned. And the two witnesses empowered.

[13 : 03] First of all, the two witnesses identified. The ones who are spoken of there in verse 3, and I will appoint my two witnesses.

Who are they? Are they two identifiable characters in history called by God? I think again, as with the temple, the two witnesses symbolize or represent the church or all of God's people.

Notice how in verse 3, the two witnesses are described as two lampstands. And the language reminds us of language that we've encountered already in the first chapter of Revelation in verse 20, where we discover that the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Lampstands symbolize churches. And the two witnesses are lampstands symbolizing the church. Notice also that their ministry encompasses the 1,260 days, the totality of the gospel age or last days.

Such a ministry cannot be accomplished by any given individual or two individuals, but is the ministry a mission of the church throughout the gospel age, the age in which we live, between the coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection and ascension, and His return.

[14 : 23] But why two witnesses? Why not one or seven or some other symbolic number? Well, this is likely to be explained by the need for two witnesses in a judicial setting as established in the law, and we don't have time to look up the references.

The church is giving testimony to Jesus, and that testimony is valid, it's trustworthy, and importantly and solemnly will serve as the basis for future judgment against those who reject the testimony provided by God's people, provided by the two witnesses, testimony that is reliable and true.

And yet when it is rejected, that will serve as the basis for God's judgment and punishment on those who do reject that testimony. So the two witnesses identify, but also the two witnesses commissioned.

What is their commission or God-given mission? Well, we're told the witnesses are to prophesy, and they are to do so, and we are to do so, exercising our God-given status as prophets, priests, and kings, or certainly ambassadors of the king.

And where do I get this from? Well, the two Old Testament allusions in the vision direct us to this conclusion, or two of the Old Testament allusions direct us to this conclusion, that as witnesses, we fulfill our mission as prophets, priests, and kings.

[15 : 54] In verse 4, we find a deliberate allusion to Zechariah's vision that we read a few moments ago. The golden lampstand and the two olive trees. Now, in Zechariah's vision, the lampstands fueled by the two olive trees are Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the king.

That becomes clear as we continue to read in Zechariah, something we weren't able to do this morning. And by making reference to Zechariah's vision, the intention is to establish that the two witnesses in John's vision are to be identified as priests and kings, or certainly those who enjoy kingly authority.

And this is what we are. As God's people, we are His royal priesthood. As priests of God, we represent God in and to the world, and we do so invested with royal authority.

Then in verse 6 of chapter 11 of Revelation, the Old Testament references are clearly intended to point in the direction of Elijah and Moses. This is what is said.

They have the power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying. We think of Elijah and how he exercised that power. The verse continues to speak of the witnesses having the power to turn water into blood and strike the earth with every kind of plague.

[17:16] And again, our thoughts go to Moses and how he was given power in that regard. Elijah and Moses, the two iconic Old Testament prophets, compared to the two witnesses.

So, the two witnesses, the church, we are prophets of the Most High. We are a royal priesthood. We exercise our commission with that God-given status. But then finally, the two witnesses, empowered, as John's readers knew, and as we know, it's not easy to testify for God.

To testify faithfully is to provoke opposition and even hatred. We cannot fulfill that mission in our own strength, and we aren't asked to. God empowers us.

We are empowered by God's Spirit and for God's mission. When we think of how we are empowered by God's Spirit, we go back to the olive trees and Zechariah's vision that Revelation picks up on.

[18:22] The purpose of the olive trees revolves around the fuel, the oil that is produced by them. And the olive trees provide fuel for the lampstands.

In the absence of the olive trees, the lampstands could do nothing. They could shed no light on anybody. They would be ornaments in the absence of the olive trees. And the olive trees represent God's Spirit, empowering and enabling God's people.

We are, you are, empowered by the Spirit of God and empowered for God's mission. The message of the two witnesses, the church, is one of life and death, of blessing and curse.

The gospel brings life to all who repent and death to all who refuse to repent. And such a message will result in opposition.

Verse 5 of Revelation 11 takes as a given that many will seek to harm God's witnesses. If anyone tries to harm them, the implication is that many will. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies.

[19:31] Many will try and harm God's people, but they will not be successful, not ultimately successful. In fact, the reverse will be the case. God's enemies will be consumed by fire.

The language, again, like so much of Revelation is symbolic. None of us are, as far as I know, fire-breathing evangelists. But the message we proclaim is like fire in its effect.

It purifies those who receive it. It consumes those who reject it. The two witnesses empowered. So we've thought about the temple and how that speaks of God's people protected.

We've talked a little bit about the two witnesses. God's people commissioned. Let's move on to the beast from the abyss. And here, the truth that is drawn out is not a pleasant one.

God's people massacred. We read from verse 7, Now, when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will attack them and overpower and kill them.

[20:34] We've read the passage already, all that follows. And it's a horrible scene that is painted of these faithful witnesses massacred by the beast and laid to lie, decomposing in the city squares.

And the enemies of God rejoice. It's not a pretty picture. What can we say about the beast and the beast's lust for blood? There are two aspects to note.

First of all, the beast identified and then the beast unleashed. The beast identified. Well, the beast, I think, very clearly is a satanic figure, perhaps not Satan, but one who serves Satan and does the work of Satan.

He comes from the abyss. And the beast is unleashed. Now, at one level, we can say that the beast is unleashed by Satan, but, and this is crucial, he is unleashed under God's overarching direction and control.

And we see that very clearly in what is said at the beginning of verse 7. Because notice what is said, the very first thing that is said, and it's very significant. Now, when they, the two witnesses, when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will attack them.

[21:50] Only when they had finished, only when they had accomplished what they had been given to do, only when the church and those of us who form part of the church have accomplished that which God has given us to do, only then is the beast enabled or able to come and to destroy and massacre.

God has control of the situation, even the violent massacre of the beast.

The beast can do nothing until God says so. The beast cannot stand in the way of the witnesses finishing or accomplishing. The idea is of not only just finishing, but of accomplishing their God-given mission.

But when he is unleashed, he wreaks havoc. He massacres God's people with evil relish and brutal power. He attacks, he overpowers, he kills, and God's enemies rejoice.

And we see this. We see this in the real world. It's not just in Revelation. We don't need to do it in Revelation to see this. We see this in the world we live in. God's people massacred by God's enemies.

[23 : 00] It has ever been so in every generation. It's happening even now as we gather in great comfort here in other parts of the world. God's people are being massacred by God's enemy.

The beast has been unleashed. Has God abandoned his people when this happens? He's not abandoned his people.

He's calling them home. He's calling them home. When the beast massacres Christians, God is calling them home. He's eager to direct to them the words, well done, good and faithful service.

When you hear of God's people being massacred by ISIS or Boko Haram or some unnamed despot, by all means weep at the pain that is caused for them and their loved ones.

We ought to weep. But in your weeping rejoice that this is not defeat, but victory. They have accomplished their mission and are being called home.

[24 : 07] Now given the manner in which we're understanding the chronology of the vision, I think it's necessary to speak of multiple unleasings of the beast. Not just one unleashing at some future point in history.

Throughout history, the beast has been unleashed and the saints have been massacred. It's happening today. But only once they have accomplished their work. The beast, God's people massacred.

But finally, the breath of life. And the truth that I want to draw from the breath of life that is spoken of here is this. God's people vindicated. We read in verse 11, but after the three and a half days when the corpses were lying, humiliated in the town squares, but after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them.

The breath of life clearly identified here. The breath is from God. This is God's life-giving breath. And we hear echoes of Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones.

This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you and I will give you life. What can we say about the life imparted as God's people are vindicated?

[25 : 26] Well, it is new life from God. This is both resurrection life for each saint massacred by the beast, but it is also in history the life-giving breath of God reviving His church following periods of persecution and seeming extinction.

We see that in history. We see that in the flow of history. The church is decimated and the enemies of God pronounce its demise. And what happens?

Well, the years pass and the enemies die and the church rises up again. The breath of life comes again and the church rises up again. New life from God, but also new life with God.

God breathes new life into His servant, but He does more. He extends this beautiful invitation to those into whom He breathes new life. Verse 12, we read the invitation that is extended.

Then they heard a loud voice. These martyrs who have been raised to life again, they hear a loud voice from heaven saying to them, Come up here. Come up here.

[26 : 36] Be with me. I'm not just giving you breath so that you can live and exist. I'm giving you new life that you might live with me.

It's new life from God, but it's new life with God. I think also as we draw these things to a close, I think we also have a hint here in the passage of new lives for God.

At the very end of the passage we read in verse 13, we're given an insight into the reaction of the enemies of God to the vindication of God's people. We read that at that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed.

7,000 people were killed in the earthquake. And then we read, and the survivors. So these are those who were the enemies. These are those who were looking on at the corpses and mocking. But they've survived this earthquake. And we read, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. Is this grudging acknowledgement of God's sovereign power?

[27 : 45] Or is the picture that is painted here one of genuine repentance? Well, the people are described as giving glory to God. And this is language that I would suggest points to repentance and faith.

God's enemies have become God's friends. And in this too, God's people are vindicated. The seed that was sown, the suffering that was endured, brings a harvest, as even the enemies are brought into friendship with God.

What are we to do as God's people as we await the return of Jesus? We who are a people protected, we who are a people commissioned, we who are a people who will be and often are opposed and trampled and massacred, we who are a people who enjoy the assurance and the hope of ultimate vindication, what are we to do?

Well, we will be trampled, but we will be protected. We may even be massacred, but we will be vindicated. What we are to do is to proclaim God's Word.

We are to tell the good news concerning Jesus. We are to testify to Him, to hostile and unbelieving and apathetic world, empowered by God's Spirit and resting in God, being the one who will take our testimony and use it as He sees fit.

[29 : 14] That is what we are to do. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that You are sovereign over history. You are the one who establishes the times and the seasons.

We thank You that You are the God whose purposes are never frustrated. We thank You that You have chosen us as Your own. You have called us to be Your special people.

You have promised to dwell with us. You have commissioned us to do Your work. And we pray that You would help us to be faithful in fulfilling that commission, that we would be faithful witnesses as we testify to the world the good news concerning Jesus.

And as we do, we pray that by Your Spirit, You would draw those who are Your enemies and make them Your friends. and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.