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Sermon Summary #23

The Church: Prophesying and Persecuted Revelation 11:1-13

What are the prospects for the church of Jesus Christ all across the earth, as we await the second coming of our Lord? What I mean by that is, what should we *expect* in terms of our relationship to the broader culture and the world of unbelievers as a whole? What should we *do* as we look to the end of human history and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom?

Those are the two questions I want you to consider today: *what should we expect and what should we do?* My belief is that those questions are answered in Revelation 11. It's important for you to know that Revelation 11 is generally the subject of more interpretive mysteries and disagreements than any other chapter in the book. As you can see just from our reading of the text, it is filled with strange images of a temple and two unnamed witnesses and odd references to forty-two months or 1,260 days and fire and blood and a sadistic beast and death and resurrection and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom.

We could easily spend several weeks unpacking all the details of this chapter and debating the various attempts to make sense of it. But I don't think that is the wisest thing for us to do. Instead, I will simply present to you what I think this chapter is all about. I won't spend much time describing alternative views or refuting them but rather focus on what I believe John is describing for us. And what I believe is that we have here a description in highly figurative and extremely graphic language of what the church of Jesus Christ can *expect* during the time between the first and second comings of Jesus and also what the church should *do* as we await our Lord's appearance. The church can expect persecution and severe opposition but in the midst of its prophetic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ it will be protected and preserved.

Measuring the Temple of God (vv. 1-2)

Most of you have probably been led to believe that the temple, altar, and outer court in vv. 1-2 all refer to a literal physical temple in literal geographic Jerusalem to be built just before the second coming of Christ. You've been taught that the worshipers are faithful, believing Jews of the so-called tribulation period who will have reinstated the sacrifices and rituals of the Mosaic economy. Their activity, however, will be terminated by the Beast who will bring desolation to the temple service and subject the holy city of Jerusalem to severe affliction for the last (literal) 3 ½ years (or 42 months) of the (literal) 7-year tribulation period. Thus the "outer court" refers to Gentiles who will persecute the remnant during a literal 42-month period. The two witnesses are either Elijah and Moses themselves or individuals who are characterized in their persons and ministries by the elements and activities of those two figures as recorded in the OT narratives. Their witness will span the 3 ½ year period, after which they will be martyred by the Beast, only to be resurrected 3 ½ days later.

I have tremendous respect for the many who believe that is what John is describing, but I humbly disagree. I believe that all of 11:1-13 describes *symbolically the mission and fate of the Church during the entire present inter-advent age, culminating in the final period of opposition and persecution by the Beast*. On this view, the temple or sanctuary, together with the altar and the worshipers, are a reference to the church as God's people. All throughout the NT, *the temple of God is, first, the person of Jesus Christ in whom God dwelt and manifested his presence, and then, second, Christ's body, the Church of Jesus Christ*. We, the church, are the only temple in which God will ever again dwell. Among the many texts that indicate this (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Peter 2:5), I'll mention only one, Ephesians 2:19-22.

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the

cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22).

But is it plausible, you ask, to believe that the *temple*, the *altar*, the *worshippers*, the *outer court*, and the *holy city*, here in 11:1-2, all refer figuratively or symbolically to the church, i.e., the believing community of God's people now on earth? Yes! Let us remember that in Revelation 3:12 the church, the believing community of God's people now on earth, are promised that they will be "*a pillar in the temple*" of God. They will have written on them the name of God and "*the name of the city*" of God, "*the New Jerusalem*"!

The measuring of the temple has nothing to do with ascertaining its size or width or height. To "measure" speaks of *spiritual preservation from God's wrath*, but not from physical persecution and martyrdom. Thus this "measuring" is equivalent to the "sealing" of chapter seven and the "worshippers" in 11:1 are the same as the "144,000" in 7:4 (see 2 Sam. 8:2b; Isa. 28:16-17; Jer. 31:38-40; Ezek. 40:1-6; 42:20; Zech. 1:16; for OT examples of "measuring" as "protection").

The point of the imagery is to remind us that we, the people of God, are sustained and protected and kept secure in our faith while we suffer greatly at the hands of the Beast. To be "measured" means to be known and loved and preserved secure by God against all opposition.

So what does it mean that the inner sanctuary is protected but the outer court is trampled or persecuted? Some say that the inner sanctuary is the true church of Jesus Christ while the outside "court" refers to only nominal, but not true believers in Jesus. One is protected by God and the other is not. That's entirely possible, but I'm inclined to think that this is John's way of describing the church's experience viewed from two different perspectives. The church is spiritually protected from God's wrath (the inner sanctuary) but is physically oppressed by pagan forces (outer court). According to this view "the holy city" must be yet another symbolic designation of the church. In Revelation "city" (*polis*) is used four times of the future heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2,10; 22:19). This is similar to what we read in Hebrews 11:10; 12:22; and 13:14. The people of God on earth are members and representatives of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 4:26).

42 Months, 1,260 Days, 3½ Years, a time, times, and half a time (vv. 2-3)

What is the meaning of 42 months and 1260 days and 3½ years? Are these references to some chronologically precise period of time that you might mark on a calendar, or are they a symbolic reference to any period of time, regardless of duration, in which certain characteristic features and events are prominent? Once again, dispensationalists who take Revelation in a strictly futuristic sense argue that this is a reference to 3½ years of the so-called 7-year Great Tribulation that is yet to come.

I would contend, instead, that *the period 42 months = 1260 days = 3½ years = time, times, half a time, is a reference to the whole of this present church era, spanning from the exaltation and ascension of Christ to his second advent/coming, during which time the beast oppresses and persecutes the people of God.* In other words, the question before us is this: is the period 42 months = 1260 days = 3½ years = time, times, half a time *chronological* (hence, literal) or *theological* (hence, symbolic)? Does it refer to a *quantity* of time or to the *quality* of a period of time? I believe it is the latter.

The first thing we observe is that the expression in Daniel 7:25 is not in terms of years, days, months, weeks or any such chronological measure. Rather, we read of a "*time, times, and half a time,*" by which we may take Daniel to mean $1 + 2 + \frac{1}{2} = 3\frac{1}{2}$. But 3½ what? In Revelation there are several texts in which a similar if not identical designation is found:

- Rev. 11:2 = 42 months = the period during which the nations will trample the holy city.
- Rev. 11:3 = 1260 days (or 42 months of 30 days each) = the period during which the two witnesses will prophesy.
- Rev. 12:6 = 1260 days = the period during which the "woman" is nourished by God in the wilderness.
- Rev. 12:14 = a time, times, and half a time = the period during which the "woman" is nourished in the wilderness.
- Rev. 13:5 = 42 months = the period during which the beast acts with authority and blasphemous.

One's understanding of these time references will depend on how one interprets the events prophesied to occur within each respective period. Suffice it to say that in my view these designations (42 months = 1260 days = time, times, and half a time = 3½ years) **all refer to the entire present age intervening between the two comings of Christ**. In other words, they are but literary variations for the same period. It is **the period of persecution and tyranny, during which the people of God are oppressed and martyred**. I do not believe that either Daniel or John intended us to take these references as chronologically precise periods that may be specified on a calendar.

In the OT book of Daniel the number 3½ is described as “a time, times, and half a time.” But that isn't what we expect, is it? We expect there to be a “time”, after which comes two “times”, after which comes “four times.” But instead of the expression *four times*, we read merely of a *half time*. The point is that the “beast” will hold sway for a time. His tyranny will increase in strength and intensity. This is represented by the word *times*. “We should then expect that the intensity of his rule will double, but instead of that we are told merely that it will be for a *half time*, thus signifying that his power is cut off, just when it seemed to be increasing towards its fullness.” (E. J. Young, *The Messianic Prophecies of Daniel*, 52-53).

There is evidence both in the OT and outside it that the number 3½ gradually became **a stereotypical or stock designation in apocalyptic literature for a period of persecution and distress**, regardless of its chronological duration. As for references to this time frame in biblical literature, note the 3½ years of drought during the ministry of Elijah and the rule of Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 17-18; Luke 4:25; James 5:17. It was also approximately 3½ years that Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted the Jewish people by defiling the temple.

The reference to 42 months is possibly taken from the 42 years of Israel's wilderness wandering (the initial 2 years followed by the 40 God inflicted upon her). Or it may allude to the 42 stations or encampments of Israel while in the wilderness (Num. 33:5ff.). Others suggest that 3½ signifies a broken 7, and thus becomes a symbol for the interruption of the Divine order by the malice of Satan and evil men, a period of unrest and trouble.

In the light of this, I believe that the period is simply an expression for **the time of tyranny** until the end comes, the period of eschatological crisis, **the age of persecution** and pilgrimage for the people of God however long it may be. “The figure [thus] becomes a symbol like the red cross or the swastika, a shorthand way of indicating the period during which the ‘nations,’ the unbelievers, seem to dominate the world, but the ‘people,’ God's people, maintain their witness in it” (Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 106).

Therefore, John is *not* attempting to tell us *how long* the Beast will hold sway, as if by 3½, 42, 1260, etc., he is specifying a period that is chronologically precise. **It is not the length but the kind of time that is meant**. In other words, 3½ and 42 and 1260 are **not a description of the chronological quantity of the period but rather of its spiritual and theological quality**.

Who are the Two Witnesses (vv. 3-4)

Once again, probably contrary to what you've been taught before, I do not believe the two witnesses are real or historical individuals, but rather **symbolize the entire Church of Jesus Christ in its missionary and prophetic role** during the present age and particularly at the close of history.

I count as many as nine possibilities for who might have served as models for the “two witnesses”, but for the sake of time I'll only mention three. (1) There is first of all, **Enoch and Elijah**. This view is based on the belief that Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:10-11) were the only two OT figures who did not experience physical death. Thus, theologically speaking, they would be the most likely candidates to return to earth and to complete the ministries which their heavenly translations cut short.

(2) Another view is that they represent **Joshua and Zerubbabel**. Since Rev. 11:3ff. is clearly patterned after Zechariah 4:1-14 where these two figures are mentioned, they are seen as likely candidates.

(3) The most popular and likely view is that they are patterned after **Moses and Elijah**. It was Elijah who called down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:38) to consume his enemies (2 Kings 1:10-14; cf. Luke 9:54). In Rev. 11, however, the imagery is changed and the fire proceeds from the mouths of the witnesses. Elijah also prevented rain from falling for 3½ years (1 Kings 17:1). Moses was responsible for turning water into blood (Exod. 7:14-24)

and for striking the Egyptians with “every sort of plague” (1 Sam. 4:8). And the two appeared together with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:3). However, this does *not* mean that the two witnesses literally *are* Moses and Elijah.

First of all, the powers of each of these two OT figures are attributed to both of the two witnesses, not divided between them (11:5-6). Look at all the references to “them” and “they” and “their.” In other words, they are, as Beale notes, “identical prophetic twins” (575).

Second, and even more important, is the fact that they are called “two olive trees and two lampstands” (11:4). The reference to “two olive trees” most likely points to the fact that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Zech. 4:2-6). Olive oil was often associated with anointing, and anointing is associated with the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

“Lampstand” in Revelation is used as a symbol for the church. We saw in Revelation 2-3 that the seven lampstands are representative of the whole church, since seven is the number of completeness. Jesus himself said in Revelation 1:19 that “the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Therefore, the two lampstands stand for the church exercising its role as witness to the gospel and Jesus Christ. But why two and not seven? Don’t forget that all through Scripture it was required that evidence be accepted only on the testimony of *two witnesses* (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15; cf. Matt. 18:16; John 5:31; 8:17; 15:26-27; Acts 5:32; 2 Cor. 13:1; Heb. 10:28; 1 Tim. 5:19). When Jesus sent his followers “into every town and place” he did so “two by two” (Luke 10:1). The “two witnesses” then are not a mere part of the church, but *the whole church insofar as it fulfills its role as faithful prophetic witness* in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that according to vv. 9-13 “the entire world of unbelievers will see the defeat and resurrection of the witnesses. This means that the witnesses are visible throughout the earth,” which makes sense if they are symbolic of the entire global church of God (Beale, 574). Hal Lindsey had a quick answer for this: he appealed to the availability of worldwide television to make this possible. I suppose today Lindsey would also appeal to the internet!

So, simply put, you are the two witnesses! All Christians collectively as they bear witness to the gospel and the Lordship of Jesus are represented by the two witnesses of Revelation 11.

The Ministry of the Two Witnesses (vv. 3-6)

The “harm” mentioned in v. 5, from which they are protected, is a result of the church having been “measured” back in v. 1. Christians who comprise the Church will undoubtedly suffer bodily harm and economic oppression and political harassment and spiritual persecution, but *nothing can threaten our eternal relationship with God. They may kill the body, but they cannot destroy the soul.* Notwithstanding the worst imaginable efforts of the Beast, the church will fulfill its mission of bearing witness to Jesus.

That “fire” should proceed “out of their mouths” points again to the symbolic nature of both the witnesses and the ministry they are described as fulfilling. In Rev. 1:16; 19:15,21, Jesus is portrayed as judging his enemies by means of a “sharp sword proceeding from his mouth” (cf. 2:16). This is clearly a metaphor of the effect and fruit of his spoken word, whether it be of judgment or blessing. We read of this same imagery in Jeremiah 5:14, “Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts: ‘Because you have spoken this word, behold I am making my words in your mouth a fire and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.’”

But precisely what is meant, practically speaking, by the imagery of the church, through her prophetic ministry, stopping the rain, turning water into blood, and smiting the earth with plagues? The “power to shut the sky” so that “no rain may fall” was the hallmark of Elijah’s ministry. But in James 5:16-17, James mentions this facet of Elijah’s ministry and tells us that our prayers can be just as powerful and effective as those of Elijah. I suggest, then, that this “power” to halt the rain is simply a reference to the impact of the prayers of God’s people in this age.

Or it could be that God will, in response to the preaching, praying (cf. James 5:16-17), and prophesying of the church, pour out his judgments on an unbelieving world. We read in v. 10 that the two witnesses are described as having “tormented” the earth-dwellers. Is the torment a reference to the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments? Is the church and its ministry one of the means by which these judgments are poured out? On this see especially Revelation 8:3-5.

The reference to water being turned into blood and plagues striking the earth evokes the memory of what Moses did in securing the liberation of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Perhaps the declaration in v. 6 that the church has this power means that we have “the necessary power to liberate people from bondage, to enable people to experience the new exodus” from sin through Jesus Christ (Hamilton, 239).

This, then, is what the church is to *do* in this present age. But what should we *expect*? For this we turn to vv. 7-10.

Persecution and Oppression (vv. 7-10)

The opening words of v. 7 indicate that John is now describing what will occur at the end of history. Clearly, the “measuring” of v. 1 has succeeded in preserving the church and its prophetic witness intact until all has been accomplished.

The “beast” is mentioned here for the first time in Revelation, although it appears that John expected his readers to know of whom/what he spoke. Note two things. First, the beast does not now, at the end of history, for the first time rise up out of the bottomless pit. The phrase, “the beast that rises from the bottomless pit” describes what is characteristic of the beast, most likely throughout the course of the church’s witness during the inter-advent age. The beast has been actively engaged in persecuting God’s people for the last 2,000 years and will continue to do so up until the end of the age when Christ will destroy him at his second coming. This is the first indication that the beast is far more than the end-of-the-age Antichrist. But for this we will have to wait until we come to Revelation 13.

The description in v. 8 is not intended to suggest that the entire church is destroyed. However, as Wilcock explains, “Scripture does seem to envisage a time . . . when at the very end of history an unexampled onslaught will be mounted against the church, and she will to all appearances ‘go under’” (106). It will appear that the public and official witness of the church has been smothered. The previous influence of the church will have diminished and be treated with indignity and open contempt (which is surely the point of their bodies being left unburied; on the latter see 1 Sam. 17:44,46; 2 Kings 9:10; Ps. 79:1-5; Isa. 14:19-20; Jer. 8:1-2; 9:22; 16:4-6; 22:19).

Is the “great city” in v. 8 literal Jerusalem? Many think so. But this could only be the case if the two witnesses are, in fact, two literal individuals, contrary to what I argued above. In every instance in Revelation where the words “great city” are used they refer to *Babylon the Great* (Rome?), not Jerusalem (see 16:19; 17:18; 18:10,16,18,19,21; and possibly 14:8). *The “great city” is, then, the ungodly world as a whole where earth-dwellers live.*

This “great city” is “symbolically” or more accurately “spiritually” (*pneumatikos*) called “Sodom and Egypt” [cf. Joel 3:19] (v. 8). Thus the ungodly world is likened not simply to Babylon but to other embodiments and corporate expressions of wickedness in the ancient world. The word “symbolically” indicates “that the city is not to be understood in a literal, earthly manner, but figuratively through spiritual eyes . . . The city is ungodly and is not to be located in any one geographical area but is any ungodly spiritual realm on earth” (Beale, 592). Or as Richard Phillips says, these cities “represent not a place in the world but the world itself in its sensual harlotry, violent persecution, and idol-worshipping false religion as it militantly opposes the gospel” (324).

The concluding phrase of v. 8, “where their Lord was crucified,” has led some to insist that literal Jerusalem is meant. But I think John is saying that Jesus was crucified in, throughout, and by the ungodly of the entire earth. In other words, the world-city is spiritually like Jerusalem in having turned its back on Jesus, accounting for his crucifixion and its continuing hostility to him and those who bear witness to his life, death, and resurrection.

The apparent demise of the church will captivate the attention of the unbelieving world, but only for a brief season. The “3½ days” of their shame is to be contrasted with their “3½ years” of invincible witness (the former to be taken as no more literal than the latter). The point is simply that the “victory” of the beast and his/its followers “is brief and insignificant in comparison to the victorious testimony of the witnesses” (Beale, 595). Their refusal to place the bodies “in a tomb” is again a powerful symbolic heightening of the indignity and contempt to which the unbelieving world subjects the church.

The happiness and merriment of the earth-dwellers in v. 10 is due to their belief that the message of the church, which brought them so much discomfort and emotional anguish, has been silenced. Perhaps their joy is due to their belief that the ultimate judgment which the church proclaimed will now never come to pass. Simply put, vv. 7-10 are

designed to portray symbolically the global scope of all the persecution and eventual martyrdom of Christians throughout the present church age in which it appears that God's people are destroyed and evil has triumphed over truth and righteousness. But appearances can be deceiving!

Resurrection or Vindication? (vv. 11-12)

This portrayal of "resurrection" is an echo of Ezekiel 37:5 and 10, where we read of God's restoration of Israel out of the Babylonian exile. The nation in exile is described as corpses of which only dry bones remain:

"Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. . . . So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceeding great army' (Ezek. 37:5,10).

Some believe that the "resurrection" in Revelation 11:11 is literal and refers to the bodily resurrection of the dead in Christ which occurs at the time of the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17), the latter being the focus of 11:12. Others contend that this scene is simply a symbolic portrayal of vindication. Perhaps both ideas are in view.

Is the "great fear" that "fell upon" (v. 11) the unbelievers who saw them a saving fear, descriptive of their repentance and salvation (as, for example, in Rev. 14:7; 15:4; 19:5)? Or is it merely the reversal of their joy and merriment (v. 10) as they suddenly realize that they must face the wrath of the God whom the witnesses proclaimed (for "fear" of this sort see 18:10,15; Ps. 105:38; Exod. 15:16; Jonah 1:10,16)? It's hard to say.

Events of the Last Day (v. 13)

Four things are said in v. 13 that occurred at "that hour", i.e., at the time undoubtedly of Christ's return when God's people are vindicated and resurrected.

(1) First, **"there was a great earthquake."** Similar terminology occurs in 6:12 (the sixth seal) and 16:18 (seventh bowl) where the last judgment is beginning to unfold. Is it a literal earthquake or a symbolic portrayal of the fall of earthly kingdoms as Christ brings his judgment to bear upon them? I don't know.

(2) Second, **"a tenth of the city fell."**

(3) Third, **"seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake."** If the two witnesses are linked to the ministry of Elijah, the 7,000 who die may be the just equivalent of the 7,000 faithful who "did not bow the knee to Baal" (cf. Rom. 11:4).

But these are odd numbers. If this is a global judgment at the time of Christ's return, why does **only** one-tenth of the world city fall and why are **only** seven thousand people killed? Ah, be patient, the answer is coming!

(4) Finally, **"the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."** The question once again is whether this "terror" or "fear" and the subsequent "glorifying" of God describes an expression of saving repentance and faith in the God of heaven. I believe it does! Almost identical terminology occurs in Rev. 14:7 ("fear God and give him glory") and Rev. 15:4 ("Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?"). Both of these texts have in view *saving* fear and acknowledgement of God.

We should also take note of Rev. 16:9 where the unrepentant are described in these terms: "they did not repent and give him glory," the point being that "to give God glory" **is** to repent. In fact, in Revelation "to give God glory" always refers positively to a saving response on the part of people (see 4:9; 14:7; 16:9; 19:7).

Global Revival?!

There is yet one more thing we must note, and I owe these observations to Richard Bauckham. He believes, and I am inclined to agree with him, that the numbers "**1/10**" and "**7,000**" indicate that the conversion portrayed here is of **the vast majority** of the lost, not a paltry few. That is to say, **there is in the events of Revelation 11:11-13 an indication of a great, vast final global harvest or revival of souls!**

In the OT God's judgment typically falls on the vast majority of people and only a tiny remnant is saved or delivered. That remnant is often described as only 1/10th (Amos 5:3; cf. Isa. 6:13, where in its present context the tenth part is the righteous remnant). The figure of seven thousand alludes more specifically to Elijah's prophetic commission to bring about the judgment of all except the seven thousand faithful Israelites who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:14-18; cf. Rom. 11:2-5).

In other words, John here in v. 13 reverses the arithmetic! ***It is typically a small number whom God saves and a large percentage that God judges. But here in Revelation 11:13 it is a small percentage that God judges and a vastly larger percentage that God saves!*** So, if only a tenth of the city falls under judgment, nine-tenths of the city fears God and gives him glory. If only 7,000 are killed in the judgment of the earthquake and the rest fear God and give him glory, it would seem as if John is describing a vast global harvest of souls coming into the kingdom at the end of the age.

Conclusion

When we were in Kansas City two young ladies from Canada came to visit our church. I was engaged in conversation with them and asked why they had come so far to the south. They responded: "We came to prophesy because we are the two witnesses of Revelation 11!"

Needless to say, virtually everyone standing with us had to muffle their laughter. I, on the other hand, said: "Well, of course you are! And so are all of us! And so are all of God's people, the church, through this present age in which we live." They were not comforted by that answer, and returned to Canada.

You, Christian brother or sister, we, Bridgeway Church, are the two witnesses. And what is it that we should ***expect***: persecution. And what is it that we should ***do***: prophesy! And in the end we will be vindicated. In the end we will live!