



Catalog No. 1517

Revelation 11:1-14

17th message

Bernard Bell

August 1st, 2004

FAITHFUL WITNESS

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

For many of us there are certain pieces of news which had such an impact on us that we can remember exactly where we were when we received them, even after the passage of many decades. For me, one of those moments occurred in January 1978, when I was 17 and had just finished high school in England. I was living in Edinburgh with my parents who just a month previously had returned from the mission field in Thailand for a year's furlough. One evening I was sitting in the living room with my parents. The phone rang in the hallway and my father went to answer it, closing the door behind him. He returned ashen-faced to report the news. A group of missionaries from the rural hospital where my parents were based in Thailand had gone on a picnic. A horrific road accident on the way home left twelve of them dead: seven adults and five children. These were my parents' close colleagues and friends. They had been with them just a month before. These were people who had dedicated their lives to serving the Lord, who had sacrificed much to serve him overseas. Why did the Lord allow their lives to be snuffed out so suddenly? Surely God would want to be building up his community of witnesses in that land rather than decimating it. We sang, "Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill he treasures up his bright design and works his sovereign will."¹ What sort of "bright design" was this? Why? Why? Why? There are many things that God does that seem to run counter to all common sense. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps 116:15), but it's hard to see how that can be so when the Lord seems to cut down the saints in the prime of life. The Christian life can indeed be bitter-sweet.

Last week we saw that John was given an open scroll, the same scroll which the Lamb had opened. He was told to eat the scroll and proclaim its contents, which concerned the fulfillment of the mystery of God, the good news of salvation which he formerly announced to the prophets. But John was warned that the scroll would be bitter-sweet, and he found it to be so. Chapter 11 now shows why it is bitter-sweet. The passage divides into two unequal parts: instructions to John to measure the temple (11:1-2), and a narrative concerning two witnesses (11:3-13).

A. Measuring the Temple (11:1-2)

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. 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." (11:1-2 NIV)

John is given a measuring rod and instructed to play the role of a surveyor, imagery that occurs twice in the Old Testament. In exile in Babylon after the destruction of the temple, Ezekiel was given a vision of an angel measuring the temple (Ezek 40-42), an indication that God would restore his presence among his people. That same imagery of restoration is used at the end of Revelation, where John sees an angel use a golden measuring rod to measure the New Jeru-

salem. Sixty years after Ezekiel's vision, after some of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem but while the city was still in ruins, Zechariah was given a vision of an angel measuring the city for the purpose of protection, for building new walls. John's measurements here in chapter 11 serve this purpose of protection. He is to measure the temple, the altar and the worshipers who are gathered there; they are under protection. He is not to measure the outer court; it will not be protected.

What is this temple? Preterist interpreters (those who say most of Revelation has already been fulfilled) say it is the Second Temple, the temple from Jesus' day which was destroyed in AD 70; this implies the book was written prior to that year, during the reign of Nero. Futurists (those who say most of the book will be fulfilled in the future) say it is a Third Temple yet to be built in Jerusalem. Others, myself included, say it doesn't refer to a physical building at all. Every other reference to the temple in Revelation clearly refers to a heavenly entity. Caird comments, "in a book in which all things are expressed in symbols, the very last things the temple and the holy city could mean would be the physical temple and the earthly Jerusalem."² But if this is the heavenly temple, why is only the temple protected while the courtyard is left unprotected? Several different suggestions have been offered by those who accept the imagery as symbolic, but to me, only one proposal makes sense of the whole book. The temple and its altar and the worshipers refer to God's people as a heavenly entity; the courtyard refers to God's people as an earthly entity. The Church is betwixt heaven and earth. As a heavenly entity the Church is protected; as an earthly entity it is not. The message given here in the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets is the same as that given in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals (Rev 7): the saints are sealed in heaven but must nevertheless go through tribulation on earth.

The outer court, the holy city, the church as a visible, earthly entity will be trampled on. It is God who allows this; his is the unseen hand behind that impersonal passive, "it has been given." It is unfortunate that the NIV identifies the trampers as "the Gentiles." This is not a conflict between Jew and Gentile; it's a conflict between God's people and his enemies. In the other 22 uses of this noun in the book, the NIV correctly identifies it as "the nations." We saw last week that the nations are hostile to God, but also that it is from the nations that the Lamb redeems a people for God.

The church will be trampled on by God's enemies for 42 months. Forty-two is the answer; the challenge is to find the question. This is one of a set of three numbers which John uses in the next three chapters: 3½, 42 months, and 1260 days, all referring to the same period of time. Last week we saw that Daniel was told that the time of the end would be marked by a period identified as "a time, times and half a time" (Dan 12:7, cf 7:25). John tells us that during this time, the outer court will be trampled (11:2), the witnesses will prophesy (11:3), the witnesses will lie slain by the world (11:9), the woman will

be preserved in the wilderness (12:6), and the beast will have authority to war against the saints (13:5). This is the current experience of the church. The 42 months is the entire period from Pentecost until the end of the age, what elsewhere is called the last days. The church is betwixt two worlds: it is a heavenly entity but it is present on earth. As a heavenly entity it is protected, but in its earthly presence it lies open to attack. This is the clear teaching of Revelation.

B. The Two Witnesses (11:3-13)

1. The mission of the witnesses

“And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. (11:3-6)

The Lord informs John that throughout this period when the church lies open to attack, he will empower two witnesses to prophesy for 1260 days. We’re not told their message, but their garb of sackcloth identifies it as a warning of judgment with an implicit call to repentance.

Verses 4-6 describe these two witnesses using numerous images from the Old Testament. There are two witnesses because valid testimony requires two witnesses (Deut 19:15). They are portrayed as two olive trees and two lampstands, imagery drawn from Zechariah 4, where Zechariah was shown a seven-wicked lampstand flanked by two olive trees. In Zechariah’s vision the two olive trees were Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel, the governor. The context of Zechariah’s vision is instructive. He received his vision in 520 BC, eighteen years after Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem. The city and the temple lay in ruins, the people were few and had little power. They had no king; Zerubbabel, though of Davidic descent, was only the governor of Judea, a minor outpost in the vast Persian Empire. Satan rightly accused Joshua the high priest of being defiled (Zech 3). What hope was there for God’s people? The Lord showed Zechariah that the light had not gone out on earth. He had raised up two witnesses. It didn’t matter that they didn’t have might or power; that’s not how recovery would come. “Who despises the day of small things?” he asked (Zech 4:10). It’s in this context that we find the famous verse, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech 4:6).

The two witnesses are presented also in the guise of Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament. It was Elijah who shut up the heavens so it would not rain, and Moses who turned the waters into blood and struck Egypt with every kind of plague. Moses brought God’s prophetic word against Pharaoh who held God’s people in captivity. Elijah confronted Ahab and the prophets of Baal with their idolatry.

These two witnesses represent the Church, commissioned to bear witness to God and to Jesus. In Revelation, to prophesy and to bear witness are the same thing. Repeatedly we are told that the witness concerns “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The word of God is Jesus himself. The testimony of Jesus is either the truth about who he is or the revelation which he entrusts to his servants, i.e. the revelation of what must happen. The Church is commis-

sioned to bear faithful witness. In the context of the late first century this meant insisting that it is Jesus not Caesar who is Lord, that the throne at the center of the universe lies in heaven not in Rome, that it is God and the Lamb not Caesar who are worthy of worship. Bearing this faithful witness is a costly mission.

2. The fate of the witnesses

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. (11:7-10)

The two symbolic witnesses have operated under God’s protection throughout the symbolic 1260 days of their testimony, but then God removes that protection, allowing the beast to overwhelm them. This is our first sight of the beast; we’ll have to wait until chapter 13 to learn more about him. He comes from the Abyss, the antithesis of heaven, the home of Satan the destroyer and of his destructive forces. Three key verbs describe the beast’s assault on the witnesses: he wages war, he conquers, and he kills. In chapter 13 the beast will be shown to have tyrannical power; he is *T. rex*, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the tyrant king. The witnesses have no power to withstand him; they are overcome by his overwhelming power. But though the residents of the Abyss look fearsome, Revelation regularly reminds us that they are ultimately under the sovereignty of God. They can do nothing outside of God’s will.

The two witnesses are insulted and shamed by the refusal of burial, one of the deepest insults in the Ancient Near East. Instead their bodies lie in the open for all to see and gloat over. This is the ancient equivalent of the bodies of American soldiers being hung on a bridge in Baghdad or dragged behind a jeep in Mogadishu. The city where this abuse occurs is identified in four different ways. It is the “great city,” which elsewhere in Revelation always refers to Babylon. But Babylon in turn is a metaphor for the world city, the city of “the inhabitants of the world,” the home of those living their lives in autonomy from God. The city is also Sodom and Egypt. Sodom is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of utter depravity. Egypt is the empire which held God’s people captive, ruled by a tyrant who refused to let them go. Finally, the city is the place where their Lord was crucified, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the city where God’s prophets were killed. Jesus understood this as he set his face toward the city, and said, “I must keep going...for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you” (Luke 13:33-34). Jerusalem had rejected God’s word and his prophets. Finally it rejected his last and greatest prophet, Jesus. Jerusalem had become indistinguishable from the rest of the world, from Sodom, Egypt, Babylon. It had become the great city, the antithesis of the holy city. It was because the old Jerusalem was corrupted that there was a need for a New Jerusalem.

Two familiar terms describe the residents of the world city: “men from every people, tribe, language and tongue” and “the inhabitants of the earth.” With God’s troublesome prophets out of the way, they rejoice and exchange gifts. No longer need their consciences be tormented by the warnings of judgment and call to repentance.

3. The vindication of the witnesses

But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. (11:11-12)

The abuse of the prophets by a rejoicing world lasts for 3½ days, after which they are raised to life by God. John has taken the three days that Jesus lay in the tomb and expanded it into the apocalyptic period of 3½ marking the last days. God vindicates his faithful witnesses in full view of the world. The world’s response is terror, perhaps better translated as “fear” or “awe,” which can have positive and negative connotations. The world is astonished at the vindication of the witnesses. In their world, these weak people had lost, they had been conquered. Now it is evident that they have won, that they have emerged the conquerors. This has dreadful implications for their own world.

At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. (11:13)

The mighty earthquake which occurred at the very hour of the witnesses’ resurrection and ascension both attests to their vindication and heralds the end of the age. This is the eschatological earthquake foretold by the prophets, the earthquake which shook Jerusalem at the very moment of Jesus’ death (Matt 27:51-53), one of the events marking the coming of the Lord in judgment and salvation. The first six trumpets showed that God’s judgment is fearsome indeed, but God’s ultimate purpose is salvation not judgment, a restored cosmos not a destroyed one. His judgments are therefore tempered with grace. This is shown in the effects of the earthquake. In the Old Testament, the remnant who had not bowed the knee to Baal in the days of Elijah numbered only 7,000 (1 Kgs 19:18), and the remnant of Israel whom God would preserve through his judgment upon his own people would be only one-tenth (Amos 5:3). But here it is the opposite. In his grace, God preserves nine-tenths and all but 7,000. This large remnant was “terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.” What does this response signify? Elsewhere in Revelation, to fear God is a positive response, especially in conjunction with giving him glory (11:18; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5). Conversely, to refuse to glorify God is the same as refusing to repent (16:9). The response of fear and giving glory can only mean that the remnant genuinely repents.

Remember that at the end of the terrible judgments unleashed by the first six trumpets, the rest did not repent (9:20-21). Because the judgments were only partial (a third) not total, they served as warnings with an implicit call to repentance. But those opposed to God refused to heed his warnings. Nevertheless, the Lord is a “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). He is not content for the nations to die in their rebellion. His desire is a full heaven not a full hell. If the nations do not repent when God sends warnings of judgment, how will he bring them to repentance? He does so through the witness of his saints. They have no power, they are despised, they are rejected by a hostile world which rejoices in their death, but they are vindicated by God. Surely “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.”

The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon. (11:14)

Only now, with the nations converted through the prophetic testimony, death and vindicating resurrection of God’s faithful witnesses is the sixth trumpet complete. Now we are ready for the seventh trumpet, which proclaims the transfer of all sovereignty to God and to his Christ, the unveiling of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We’ll look at that next week.

C. Not by might nor by power...

This chapter calls the Church to a life of prophetic witness. Such witness will be costly, for it will be rejected by the world, which will kill the witnesses and rejoice in doing so. The Church is not alone; she follows in the footsteps of the Lamb. He was killed for his faithful witness, but God raised him from the dead and took him to heaven. The saints are to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, in life, in death, in resurrection, and in ascension to glory.

Remember that this is a pastoral letter, addressed to seven churches. For those churches suffering for their faithful witness, it is a call to endure. For those churches which have abandoned their faithful witness in order to avoid suffering, it is a call to repent. In Pergamum, Jesus’ “faithful witness” Antipas has already been killed (2:13). In Smyrna and Philadelphia the saints are suffering opposition and death is imminent. But death is not the end; if it were then the early Church was but a bunch of losers.

Around AD 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer from North Africa and an adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the Church, “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”³ From this last statement was developed the famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In just a century and in the face of violent persecution the Church had grown to fill every corner of the Empire. The early church had no strength of its own but it prevailed over mighty Rome, for it is “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

When Western missionaries withdrew from China following the Communist takeover in 1949, the Chinese Church numbered a half-million or so. The missionaries feared for the survival of the native church, all the more so as reports filtered out about the horrors of government persecution and the Cultural Revolution.

By 1958 the government had closed all visible churches. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, told foreign visitors, “Christianity in China has been confined to the history section of the museum. It is dead and buried.” In the 1970s a visiting Christian delegation reported, “There is not a single Christian left in China.”⁴

Did the church die out in China? Quite the reverse. It seems that the church in China has grown a hundred-fold and now numbers 50 million. Now the Chinese church is sending out missionaries into Central Asia along the Silk Road. The Chinese church had no strength of its own but it prevailed over the Cultural Revolution, for it is “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

As a pastoral letter, Revelation comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. To suffering churches it is a message of comfort, a call to endure. But to churches that are compromised and comfortable it is a call to repent. I see two great warnings for the American church, one for the evangelical church and one for the liberal church.

For the evangelical church, the warning is that it is “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.” The early church grew not because it had any power, but because it bore faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, even unto death. The church grew so rapidly that in less than 300 years it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. But this status was a mixed blessing, for the church now had power. I fear that the evangelical church too often relies upon power and might, upon programs and techniques, upon building “a lean, mean kingdom machine” as it markets its religious goods and services.

For the liberal church, the warning is that the paradigm for the church’s life and mission is the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for his faithful witness. “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). The message of the cross is offensive to the world; sadly it is offensive also to the liberal wing of the church. Richard Niebuhr described the message of liberal Protestantism this way: “A God without wrath brought me without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without the cross.”⁵ There’s no gospel in that! Liberal Protestantism is enamored with the so-called “missing gospels” such as The Gospel of Thomas. Sir Leigh Teabing in *The DaVinci Code*, tells Sophie that these hidden gospels are very different from the four canonical gospels.⁶ They are indeed different but not for the reason which Teabing gives. Thomas is a collection of purported sayings of Jesus, the wise teacher, but there is no mention of the cross. That’s why it’s attractive to modern scholars. The four canonical gospels are very different. Each builds up to a lengthy passion narrative describing the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is presented as God’s faithful prophet sent to his people to warn of judgment, call to repentance, and offer salvation. He was killed for his faithful witness, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead and raising him to glory. And then he used that very death of Jesus to bring salvation to the rebellious world that caused that death. That’s the gospel!

Death is not the end. I shared this quote with you two weeks ago, and it generated considerable comment, so I’ll share it again. Commenting on the trumpets, G. B. Caird writes, “The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat.”⁷ The General Director of OMF sent a telegram to the grieving missionaries in Thailand, “Don’t allow questions you can’t understand to detract you from the glorious certainties you already know.” There are many things about God’s ways which we cannot comprehend, for he “moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.” If we attempt to understand the world from the position of human power and wisdom we will fail to comprehend God’s purposes: “Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his works in vain. God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain” (Cowper). The cross proclaims that “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Cor 1:25). “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom 11:33). Thanks be to him!

We come now to the Lord’s table. By eating the bread and drinking the cup we express the centrality of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The bread is a symbol; it has no power of its own, but that which it represents has great power. It represents the body of Jesus, broken by a hostile world, but through which God brings healing to that same world. The cup likewise is a symbol; it has no power of its own, but that which it represents has great power. It represents the blood of Jesus, shed by a rebellious world, but which God uses to bring forgiveness of sins to that same world.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

1. William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (1774).
2. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 131.
3. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.
4. Xu Yongze, “Preface.” Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man* (London: Monarch Books, 2002), 7.
5. Quoted in Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162.
6. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 234.
7. Caird, *Revelation*, 113.

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