

Revelation 11:1-19

We are now coming to a chapter that is one of the most difficult to understand in the book of Revelation. The funny thing is that when I looked at various commentaries.....with vastly different viewpoints; the authors would tend to use words like “clearly” when describing their respective position. “Clearly.....this is what John has in mind when he discusses the temple imagery and the two witnesses.” In other words, they are saying it is obvious to everyone!

Whenever I use the word “clearly” I state what I believe to be obvious. Clearly Machele is my wife. Clearly Korban is my son. Clearly my favorite burger is Jack-in-the-Box’s, sourdough Jack.....without the bacon and tomato. Anyone who knows me would say these things are obvious. But as I scoured many different interpretations I did not see their viewpoints as clearly as they assumed. Instead there was confusion and raised eyebrows on my part. Anyhow, today we are going to talk about some different viewpoints in chapter 11 and I promise not to use the word “clearly.” Nothing is clear in Revelation when it comes to symbolism unless John specifically tells us what the symbols mean! Most everything else is symbolic speculation. It is okay to speculate—the important thing is make sure you are humbled enough to admit that though you have studied your conclusions at length, you cannot clearly guarantee your interpretation is the right one.

Then 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, 2 but 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. 3 And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”

We do not have to wait very long for the first interpretive difficulty to come and rear its theological head. Instantly in these two verses arise the Temple Controversy.

Before we get to that let’s address some things first. John is told to measure the temple and those who worship there—but not to measure the outer courts. The measuring symbolism is used in the OT for displaying ownership or protection. For example, if someone buys my house and they want to measure something so they can make an upgrade; I will have no problem with this because they own the home. They are seeking to change something to their house. Now if someone has not purchased my house and they start measuring something so they can add an addition—then I will tell them to leave my house. You can’t measure my house because you don’t own it! Get out of here!

It appears to me that God is symbolically making a distinction between those that are sealed and belong to Him and those who belong to the world. One set appears to be believers—the others do not. So what does God do to those nations who trample the outer courts? He appears to show concern by sending them two incredible witnesses. Not surprisingly, many of those folks who trampled the outer courts don’t like people witnessing to them about Jesus. More on that in a bit. First we have to discuss this temple imagery.

The question is whether we should take this temple literally or symbolically? In other words, will there be a future temple built? Here are some views.

Please refer to the handout, *Temple or No Temple* so you can track with me (The last page of these notes)

Now there are good arguments for both positions. You’ll have to make up your mind as to what you feel is the best option. One thing is clear. Clearly one has to speculate. Okay, now back to these two witnesses!

4 These (That is, the two witnesses) are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 5 And 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. 6 They 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.

So the question of the hour is who are these two witnesses? Not surprisingly scholars have differed. It is worth mentioning that the “two witness” is traced to the Old Testament in the book of Zachariah. There, the two witnesses are identified as

Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the High Priest, whom represent the kingship and priesthood respectively. In that context their job is to rebuild the temple and sacrificial system which had been destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. Every controversial section one reads in Revelation is filled with references to the Old Testament.

What we know about these two witnesses is that they prophesy for a period of forty-two months, which equates to three and a half years, or 1260 days—which appears to be a reference found in Daniel to the last three and a half years of human history, which is known as the great tribulation (Daniel 9:27).

There have been several explanations pertaining to their identity.

1. They represent Israel and the church (Note the reference to the Olive trees and the candlesticks)
2. They represent the church as a whole. Here, the Olive Trees represent the Holy Spirit illuminating the lamp stands
3. They represent Enoch and Elijah, the only two mortals in human history that never died according to the Bible.
4. They represent Moses and Elijah based on the judgment imagery of the witnesses shutting up the sky from rain (Elijah) and turning the water into blood and sending every kind of plague (Moses).

We are not told the answer so again we must speculate as to their identity. It seems to me the best guess revolves around them either being Moses and Elijah, or two witnesses that represent their ministry. The power they have been given to prevent rain and send plagues would be understood by the first century reader as these two individuals.

Secondly, it is worth mentioning that when Jesus took Peter, James, and John to what we call the Mount of Transfiguration, the two witnesses the disciples see are none other than Moses and Elijah. In the context God the Father validates the ministry of Jesus as someone who He is well pleased with. It is as if the Father said, though Moses (the Law) and Elijah (great prophet) represent the Law and the Prophets, Jesus is the One who is of greater importance. Recall, the disciples wanted to build three tabernacles—but in the end Jesus was the only one left standing.

Here, in our passage, Moses and Elijah once again seem to be validating the message of Jesus. Recall, the church was being persecuted by the Jews and there are references in chapters two and three where Jesus mentions that there is a distinction between those who claim to be Jews (ethnic Jews) and those who are real Jews (Jews for Jesus) [Revelation 2:9, 3:9]. What I am trying to convey is that both these groups would identify themselves with Moses and Elijah—but the fact that they are witnessing for the defense of the gospel means that they side with Jesus and the church. As you can imagine, this would not sit well with ethnic Jews, who are most likely the culprits of those who try to harm the witnesses (Revelation 11:5). But it would be an encouragement to those who were Christians being persecuted because it would indicate Moses and Elijah are on their team. Let's continue.

7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. 9 For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10 and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

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The beast is not a TV show starring Patrick Swayze—instead it is a reference to what is commonly understood to be the antichrist, which is either a personage or personification of someone who represents Satan. In the text, the beast wages war against these witnesses and defeats them. The reference to the great city and the symbolism used to describe Sodom and Egypt seem to fit well with the imagery mentioned earlier pertaining to those who represent the outer courts. You can imagine that these two witnesses would have been a burden to those who trampled the city for forty-two months. The seemingly great defeat of these two would cause great rejoicing and gloating, which seems to be the point of not burying them. But God gets the last laugh!

11 But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. 13 And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

Imagine how encouraging this next section would have been to the first century church that had witnessed many people being killed for Christ. It would indicate once again, God is on their team and their witness for Jesus wasn't in vain. The great reality in the Christian faith is the certainty of the resurrection. It does not matter what happens to the Christian in this life. The important issue is what happens after our earthly life.

So these witnesses are validated by the Father for their witness and granted access to heaven. To heighten this awesome event, there is an earthquake which does great damage—which leads to God's ENEMIES giving glory to God. This whole experience was able to change the hearts of those who were spared by this great earthquake.

Again, there is an opportunity for repentance. God does not send calamity because he wants to destroy everyone—He does it so that people can come to Jesus. He sent the witnesses to the enemies of God for the purpose of providing yet another opportunity for them to repent and come to Jesus. Unfortunately for some people to come to Christ there needs to be something earth shaking.

I have a good friend who is the director of Cornerstone School of the Bible. His dad refused to accept Jesus and though family and friends tried...it appeared he would go to his grave not knowing Jesus. But then something tragic happened. He was on his tractor—which is known as a hay chopper—and a branch knocked him off and he fell to the ground and was ran over by the blades. He lost both his legs. As he lay on the ground he had a vision of Jesus and was radically transformed into a Jesus Freak. Triumph at the sight of tragedy. The reality is that many will not come to Jesus unless something tragic like a hay chopper, the resurrection of the dead, or a great earthquake awake them from their rebellious state.

John is writing this book to forewarn us so that we will not have to suffer the hay chopper! Let's read on.

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." 16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

The seventh trumpet is the one we all want to hear because it means the God's kingdom has retaken control of the ship! Jesus will reign forever and there will be great rejoicing and worship in heaven. Notice verse 18 mentions that once the dead were judged the saints were rewarded—the servants of God—the saints—the prophets—and those that fear God, both small and great. There is no distinction or showing of favoritism for God's people. Those that persevere, despite whatever circumstances, will rejoice together as One Body. What an encouragement to those first century readers who suffered tremendous persecution. What an encouragement to us! What an encouragement to those who will call on the name of Jesus. There will be ample opportunity to rejoice like we never have before.

19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

There have been great endeavors to locate the Ark of the Covenant. But perhaps it has been purposely hidden from all of humanity so that one day while we are gathered in front of the throne we will all see it together in heaven. What better surprise could there be than having the ark, which symbolizes God is with us—be revealed to us when we are finally and literally with God Himself at His home. The reference to the flashes of lightening, rumblings and peals of thunder, heavy hail and an earthquake not only convey the awesomeness of God—but perhaps even a celebration of the reality we are safely home in his presence.

Temple or no Temple

I. Some believe in a LITERAL third future temple!

a. Some Christian (Notably Dispensationalists)

1. See the abomination of desolation (Daniel, Matthew and 2nd Thessalonians) as necessitating a new temple
2. Believe since the church has been raptured—the Great Tribulation is Jewish in nature (Sacrifices)
3. See Ezekiel 39 and onward talking about the construction of the millennial temple, which they see as a memorial

b. Orthodox Jews

1. Majority of Orthodox believe a temple is prophesied about during the Messianic age (Daniel 9:27)
2. There are organizations who are coordinating building the temple objects, organizing the worship,
3. New Scholarship has concluded the Temple Mount is located where the Byzantine East gate is now which may allow for rebuilding since this changes the location of the destroyed temple.

c. Obstacles to rebuilding

1. The Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque are Islamic religious holy Sites
2. Believe it or not, no one is sure of the exact size of the cubit: There is a need for Divine prophetic guidance
3. Many Orthodox Jews believe the rebuilding will take place in the Messianic age—not now!

II. Others see the temple imagery as symbolic!

a. Jesus never mentioned the rebuilding of the Temple

1. Olivet Discourse mentioned its destruction in 70 AD (Mark 13:2 cf. Matt 24:2; Luke 21:6)
2. The destruction was the initiation of the end times according to him.
3. Christ's description is sequential: Temple destruction, persecution, wars, famines, earthquakes, 2nd coming)

b. There is no need for temple sacrifices:

1. What would be there purpose? The sacrifices were for contamination and reality of sin
2. Temple sacrifices foreshadowed Christ and had to be repeated because they were imperfect.
3. Christ is the last sacrifice. Hebrews 10:1-4, 11-14, 18
4. The veil has been torn; there is no need for the services of priests. We have access to God because of the sufficient sacrifice of Christ: (Matthew 27:50-51; Hebrews 10:19-21)

c. The Jewish expectation of the rebuilding during the Messianic age has already happened with Christ.

1. The prophesy of Daniel mentions Jesus will come and be pierced during the temple era (ie. Herod's temple)
2. The Jews rejected Christ as Messiah so they are waiting for someone else

d. Finally, Paul refers to the Christian as God's temple:

1. Where the Spirit Dwells (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27 cf. 1st Corinthians 3:16, 6:19-20; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5).)
2. Our bodies are not our own; they were purchased by Christ