

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part twelve

Sunday, January 14th, 2018 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2022

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE MEASURING OF THE TEMPLE AND THE TWO WITNESSES

Revelation 11:1-19 - "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." [4] These 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. [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. [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. [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." [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."

We need to go back a bit in our study to pick up the flow of what John has been seeing in his visions. We've been lining up and comparing the central New Testament passages dealing with, what John describes as, the **"days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel"** (10:7). In these passages we've been examining the key events leading up to the sounding of the seventh trumpet and the end of the age.

Remember, each of the series of sevens leads up to, and includes, the Second Coming and the end of this age. The three sevens (seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls) **pile up** on top of each other. The seventh seal **contains** the seven trumpets. The seventh trumpet **contains** the seven bowls. The wrath of God is quickly and dramatically poured out right at the very end of the Tribulation. The church is either removed or spared right at that final end-time moment, right at the coming of the Lord in flaming power and might.

We finished studying the sounding of the sixth trumpet in Revelation chapter nine. In spite of the fiery trial of these terrible events, that chapter closed with a description of the **stubborn hard-hearted response of the enemies of God: Revelation 9:20-21** - "The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, [21] nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts."

These words give the clearest answer to those who say, "Pastor Don, if people aren't raptured before the Tribulation, if everyone will be here to **see** the coming of the end of the age, then everyone will have a chance to repent at the last minute. Everyone will just live like the Devil until they see the end coming, and then will turn to God.

My response to that is **nothing would make God happier than to have everyone turn to Him and be saved through Jesus Christ**. Unlike many of us in the church, God doesn't **begudge** salvation to even the most wicked people on earth - even at the last minute. I don't know why that thought is so upsetting to Christians.

But the important point here is this: **John sees that this won't happen.** We're given this powerful description of the **blinding, binding effects of sin cherished over time.** Only fools think they can give sin up at will. Only fools think they can continue in sin for as long as they wish and then swing over to the Lord's side later on. That's not how it works. It never will. If you aren't willing to turn seriously and repentantly to God right now, you will **never** turn to Him later on.

Now, after the sixth trumpet there is a comma. There is a break in the **revelation** - not in the **action** - of the sounding of the trumpets. This shouldn't surprise us because we found the same thing happening between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. Chapter seven records two visions John sees **between** the sixth and seventh seals.

Now, in Revelation chapters 10 and 11, John describes visions that are like a **picture-in-picture** of the visions he has been seeing of the sounding of the seven trumpets. First, in chapter 10 he saw the huge, strong angel coming down out of heaven with a little book. The angel commands John to eat the book. The book was first sweet in John's mouth, then bitter in his stomach.

There is a wonderful sweet flavor to the gospel of grace and promise in Jesus Christ. And, regardless of the trials of life, we **do** all win in the end. But, before that end comes there will be **trial and suffering.** Many will be martyred for their faith. Chapter ten ends with John being encouraged and braced to be faithful to his prophetic calling. He has much tough news yet to deliver:

Revelation 10:10-11 - "And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. [11] And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Now we come to chapter eleven. This is admittedly the most difficult and challenging passage in the entire book of Revelation. That's why, while you may have **read** books about it, you have probably only rarely, if ever **heard** a sermon or teaching on this passage during the regular Sunday ministry in most worship services. Opinions and interpretations are numerous and varied, even among very committed and dedicated followers of Jesus Christ. So it's a passage to approach with great humility.

The content of this eleventh chapter centers around two visions - though I think they are really only one in theme and nature: First, there is the **measuring of the temple of God (11:1-2).** And second, there is the **ministry of the two witnesses (3-14).**

1) **THE MEASURING OF THE TEMPLE OF GOD**

Revelation 11:1-2 - "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."

Without getting too complicated, let me just say there are **four traditional interpretations** of this passages of Scripture:

- a) **The historical interpretation** - This interpretation suggests that the passage deals primarily with the **past** rather than the **future.** John was illustrating God's judgement with an incident that took place long before he received his vision.

When John writes this book of Revelation there was no temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the temple had been leveled to the ground some decades earlier. But John was looking **back** rather than **forward,** to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, as predicted by Jesus and the Old Testament prophets.

The problem of this interpretation is that many of the prophesied details never came true. Certainly the temple was destroyed. But the inner sanctuary - the holy place - was never protected and preserved. The whole thing was trampled by the Gentiles.

- b) **The dispensational interpretation** - This interpretation (which until very recently has certainly been the most popular among evangelicals) teaches that this passage will find a **literal** fulfillment yet in the future. The temple will actually be **rebuilt** according to the measurements of Ezekiel and other prophets once again on Mount Zion. This will lead to a struggle between the Jews (who will once again be offering Jewish worship in the temple - sacrifices and all) and the antichrist. The church, of course will already be raptured and in heaven.

As you probably have guessed, I don't hold to that view. **First,** because I see no mention of secret rapture of the

church (which this dispensational view absolutely requires) anywhere in the Scriptures. And **second**, because a literal, rebuilt temple, at least according to the specs of Ezekiel, would never fit on Mount Zion. The temple would be bigger than Mount Zion itself. So whatever the Old Testament prophets were predicting, it simply can't be a literal temple the size of the measurements of Ezekiel and Zechariah.

- c) **The allegorical interpretation** - This view says there is nothing about Israel in Revelation eleven at all. When John sees the temple and the people of God, he is seeing the church, the true Israel, the true descendants of Abraham. There is no special future work of God with the Jewish people in the plan of God. The church has replaced Israel.

The problem I would have with this view is it is hard to make fit with other key passages in the New Testament. I **do** agree that the church is the true spiritual Israel. I **do** agree that we are the people of God, as defined by the New Testament. And I strongly **do disagree** with the dispensational interpretation of Bible prophecy that sees Jewish people coming to God through their Old Testament sacrificial system back in the temple after the church is raptured.

But having said all that, it seems that there **is** at least **some** place still in the future plans of God for a great work among the Jewish people. They will only be saved **through repentance and turning to Jesus Christ, the Messiah**. But they seem to have a special time of spiritual awakening ahead of them:

Matthew 23:37-39 - "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! [38] See, your house is left to you desolate. [39] For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

Luke 21:24 - "They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

So I don't think you can interpret Revelation chapter eleven in a way that leaves Israel totally out of the picture.

- d) **The end-time incorporation of many Jewish people into the church of Jesus Christ** - This view sees a coming end-time spiritual work in the hearts of many Jewish people. They will realize and repent of their rejection of Jesus Christ and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, be **"grafted into"** the church, the true people of God (**Romans 11**).

Romans 11:22-25 - "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. [23] And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. [24] For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. [25] Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

I think the vision of the measuring of the temple best lines up with the fourth interpretation. When you look carefully, the measuring isn't so much a measuring to **determine size**, but a way of **separating two groups - one for protection, and one for judgement**. That's why John is told to measure only the **inner court**. The inner court is to be treated separately from **both** the outer court and the holy city (that is Jerusalem itself): **Revelation 11:2** - "...**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.**"

Now forget just for a minute all of the other details (the forty-two months, etc.). I believe what we're seeing in this difficult passage is something parallel to what we've seen earlier in John's visions. I believe we're seeing both a **division** and a **protection**, much like the one we saw in the **numbering and sealing of the people of God (144,000) in Revelation chapter seven**.

And just like in chapter seven, everything is stated in very **Jewish terminology** to show that God is going to bring many of the Jews into the church of Jesus Christ. There will be a faithful remnant among the Jewish people. That's why the **inner court** (where the holy place was kept and maintained) will be **measured off and protected** while the outer courts and the city itself will **come under judgment**.

The inner court - the **holy place** - is a picture of those who truly love and serve the Lord - those who recognize, repent, and turn to Jesus Christ, the one who alone can open the scroll of this world's redemptive history. These Jews seem to grasp what the temple and the sacrifices all **pointed** to. They will come to see the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament sacrificial system in Jesus Christ. These are the ones measured off and protected from God's wrath, as opposed to those who are merely of **Jewish decent**.

So the emphasis of John's vision isn't the **distinction between** Israel and the church, but the **inclusion of** the repentant Israel within the church of Jesus Christ in a great end-time Jewish revival. Jews will come to Jesus:

Zechariah 12:10 - "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."

What a wonderful prophecy! Many Jews will look at the pierced, crucified Son of God and see something they wouldn't see before. They will mourn over their sin and rejection. And they will be brought into the Church, the spiritual Israel, the New Testament people of God. That, to my mind, is what the measuring and dividing of the temple is all about.

2) THE MINISTRY OF THE TWO WITNESSES

Revelation 11:3-12 - "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." [4] These 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. [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. [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."

Forgetting just for a minute their identity, notice how tightly these witnesses are tied to the proceeding two verses about the calling out of a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in verses one and two. John just blurts out their ministry without any pause or introduction at all. In other words, these witnesses **fit into the plan of this Jewish remnant coming to Jesus in the last days**.

Also, notice that these are **Christian** witnesses. They bear a distinctly **New Testament** Christ centered description. They aren't coming with some different end-time message. John is specifically told that these witnesses give up their lives and die **"where their Lord was crucified"** (11:8). This, to me makes it very unlikely that these two witnesses are **Elijah** and **Moses**, as Tim Lohay describes in his series of novels.

So just who are these witnesses? That may be the toughest textual question in the entire New Testament. Ideas abound. Let me give you what is just my **opinion**. I don't think these witnesses are meant to be seen as two, and **only** two actual people. I say that because of the symbolic nature of their description following immediately in **verse 4**: "These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth."

So here's what we can start with. These people are olive trees, and they're also lampstands. This pictorial language comes from a prophetic vision of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah:

Zechariah 4:1-3 - "And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. [2] And he said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. [3] And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left."

Then look further along in the same chapter in Zechariah:

Zechariah 4:11-14 - "Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" [12] And a second time I answered and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out?" [13] He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." [14] Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

The two anointed ones are identified as *Zerubbabel*, the king, and *Joshua*, the high priest. Now, stay with me just a bit longer. Remember, this is a *vision* John sees. It's a fluid picture with very little detailed information given. But just stop and look at it. It's not like a news story with words and description and logic all placed in sequence, where one idea is perfectly explained after another. That's not what a vision is. But look at the ingredients of the picture John sees:

First, there are these witnesses. A King and a high priest. This imagery comes right from the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures. Then they are described as golden lampstands. Then as olive trees. Here's what I think: I think we have a very cryptic picture of the church rather than just two individuals. Look at how the church has been repeatedly described in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 1:5-6 - "...and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood [6] and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Revelation 5:9-10 - "And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, [10] and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

So John's two witnesses are a *king* and a *priest*. And all through Revelation the redeemed are described as a collection of *kings* and *priests* to our God. In other words, there are *two* witnesses in John's picture, not because there will only be two *individuals* but because the witnesses will fulfill two *roles* or *offices*.

Just as the 144,000 sealed people of God in Revelation chapter 7 doesn't just mean literally 144,000 people, but is a picture of *perfection* and *completion*, in the same way the two witnesses don't describe (at least in *my* opinion) just *two literal witnesses*, but are a picture of the *role of the church cast in the light of Zechariah's Old Testament prophecy*.

Consider one more important detail: Notice the connection between John's vision of these witnesses as lampstands (and also the work of the Holy Spirit in the church as olive oil to *burn* in those lamps) and the descriptions we've already seen of the witness of the church earlier in this book:

Revelation 1:19-20 - "Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. [20] As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

To my mind, all of these factors make the idea that the witnesses are the church at least a very *possible* interpretation. Remember, it's a mistake to read Revelation the way you read Romans. Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Horses fly and sting like scorpions. Lambs have seven horns and seven eyes. Altars are seen floating high in the sky.

Now, certainly all of these visions are just as true and just as inspired as any other book of the Bible. But, if you take God's Word seriously at all, you can't *interpret* these visions the same way you interpret the book of James. If you do, you'll destroy the message of the Holy Spirit to the church.

3) **POWER AND SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF THE END-TIMES CHURCH**

Revelation 11:5-10 - "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. [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."

Very briefly, we have pictured here a vivid contrast of seasons in these end-time witnesses. First the church enjoys great power and outward success. Verses 5 and 6 picture the church as being virtually unstoppable. She ministers in the power of Moses and Elijah. But *only* until her divinely appointed role of witness is finished. In other words, in her end-time role as witness to Jesus Christ, she must be ready both for the *best* of times and the *worst* of times:

Revelation 11:7-10 - "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."

Admittedly, we have a hard time knowing what to even *do* with words like this. They are just so incredibly far removed from our present capacity to relate to. But John's first readers were in a very different situation.

Just twenty years before John penned the words we're studying tonight, the city of Rome (or at least a great deal of it) was destroyed by fire. By that time, Christians had become a very large, visible minority in Rome. Nero publicly blamed the Christians for Rome's demise.

Now listen to what happened. Christians were dragged from their homes at night. Nero held large gatherings all over the city denouncing Christianity and proclaiming the greatness of the Roman Empire. Those celebrations were illuminated by the bodies of Christians, fastened to large stakes and covered with animal fat. Then they were set aflame to provide light for the partying Romans.

Now read **verse 10** again - **"...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."**

Now can you see why the gigantic angel, upon recommissioning John's prophetic role, told him his message would be both sweet (the great power of the church) and also, later on, very bitter (the suffering and persecution)?

4) **THE RESURRECTION AND THE END OF THE AGE**

Revelation 11:11-19 - "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.[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." [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."

I take the resurrection pictured in the two witnesses to be the resurrection of the dead in Christ. The three and a half days, like the forty-two months, or the twelve hundred and sixty days, isn't a literal time span, but merely a way of showing that the death these martyred Christians suffered wasn't the end of the story. Their resurrection was to be triumphant and soon in coming.

"But I thought you said the resurrection of the dead in Christ took place at the same time as the Second Coming of Jesus

and the end of the age!" I **do** believe that. And, very significantly, that's exactly the string of events John sees linked together in this very involved vision:

Revelation 11:15-18 - "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."

So the true believers (both Gentiles and, as highlighted in this vision, Jewish converts to Christ) will be marked out separately from the rest of the world. All people **must** be saved through Christ if they are going to be saved at all. **Notice how even the city of Jerusalem (except for those included as the True Israel in 11:1) is called "Sodom" and "Egypt" in verse 8.**

As we've already studied, the true church will experience both might and greatness, and then, as time draws to a close, persecution and suffering. But that will all be brought to a close when the wrath of God is poured out on the unbelievers. Faithful saints will be raised and raptured. God will usher in His Kingdom!