

“SPREADING THE FRAGRANCE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD”

I. Introduction

- A. Revelation 11 is a key chapter when it comes to the interpretive framework that is used to understand the book as a whole.
1. Futurists argue that the temple and city in verses 1 and 2 point to a literal temple that will be rebuilt in the literal Jerusalem at some time in the future.
 2. The problem with this position is that when Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple he said nothing about it ever being rebuilt.
 3. In fact, the rebuilding of the temple would only be a monument to the Jews' rejection of Christ as the true sacrifice for sins.
 4. It doesn't make any sense to see a rebuilt temple as playing a key role in the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption.
- B. Preterist interpreters contend that the temple in verse 1 is not a literal temple but is symbolic of the church, but then they say that the trampling of the holy city in verse 2 is referring to the literal destruction of Jerusalem and its temple at the hands of the Romans in AD 70.
1. One problem with this position is that it is inconsistent in its use of literal and symbolic interpretation.
 2. Why should the city be viewed as literal if the temple is symbolic?
 3. Another problem with the preterist approach is that it insists that Revelation was written before AD 70, even though the early church uniformly said that it was written in the mid-90s and even though the internal evidence in the book itself fits better with this later timeframe.

- C. The idealist approach to Revelation, which is the approach that I am taking in this sermon series, says that this vision, along with the rest of the visions in the book, needs to be interpreted symbolically.
1. This vision is not merely predicting something that will happen in the future.
 2. It is not merely describing something that has already happened in the past.
 3. This vision is descriptive of the church's experience in all ages.
 4. It is an elaboration of what John experienced when he ate the little scroll in the last paragraph of chapter 10 and found that it was sweet as honey in his mouth yet bitter in his stomach.
 5. Revelation 11 provides us with a picture of the bitter experience that the church has to endure as it preaches the sweet gospel message in the period between Christ's first and second comings.

II. The Measuring of God's Temple (1-2)

- A. The chapter begins with John telling us that, in his vision, he was given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple, the altar, and those who worship there.
1. The first thing to note about this is that John is relating things that he saw in a vision.
 2. He is not talking about something that took place in ordinary reality.
 3. That being the case, there is no need for this temple to be a literal temple.
 4. The vision is employing the image of a temple as a symbol.

5. And the meaning of this symbol is clear when we interpret it in light of its New Testament context.
 6. The fact that the New Testament frequently speaks of the church as God's temple tells us that the temple in this vision is a symbol for the people of God.
- B. The measuring of this visionary temple points back to a couple Old Testament passages: Ezekiel's vision of a symbolic end-times temple and Zechariah's vision of a man measuring the city of Jerusalem. (see Ezek. 40:5; 42:20; Zech. 2:1)
1. In both of those passages, the measuring is symbolic of the spiritual protection that God extends to his elect.
 2. This is the meaning of the measuring here in Revelation 11.
 3. It is conveying the same point that was signified back in chapter 7 when the servants of God were marked with a seal on their foreheads.
 4. As far as why John is told not to measure the outer court of this symbolic temple, there are two possible meanings.
 5. It could be that the temple, altar, and those who worship there are symbolic of the church in glory, or what is sometimes called the church triumphant, and the outer court is symbolic of the church in this world, or what is sometimes called the church militant.
 6. While that is possible, it seems more likely to me that the temple, altar, and those who worship there are symbolic of the true church of God, while the outer court is symbolic of those who are only outwardly associated with the church.
 7. This finds support in the fact that in the Jerusalem temple Gentiles who had not received the covenant sign of circumcision were not permitted to go beyond the outer court.

8. This symbolically communicated that communion with God is restricted to those whose hearts have been circumcised by the gracious working of God's Spirit.
- C. The meaning of the trampling of the holy city by the nations is also symbolic.
1. It means the church will be under assault from the world throughout this present age.
 2. While true believers are kept from spiritual harm in the face of these assaults, those who are Christians in name only are given over to the control of the world.
 3. This calls our attention to the vital importance of having a living faith in Jesus Christ.
 4. Those who are merely outwardly connected to the church, who attend worship services and participate in various church activities but do not personally trust in Christ for their salvation — such people are in reality a part of the world.
- D. John says that this trampling of the holy city will take place for forty-two months.
1. Notice that the same length of time is referred to in verse 3, except that there it is 1,260 days.
 2. Both of these periods of time are the equivalent of three and a half years.
 3. As with the other numbers in Revelation, these figures are not intended to be taken literally but symbolically.
 4. The meaning of the symbolism is made clear by looking at the Old Testament background in Daniel, where the church's suffering at the hands of the forces of evil at work in the world is said to take place for "a time, times, and half a time" (Dan. 7:25; 12:7), which

means three and a half years.

5. Three and a half is the number seven divided in half, and in Revelation the number seven is symbolic of fullness and completion.
6. The fact that the church's period of suffering is only half of seven means that it will be limited by God.
7. Though it will be intense, it will be less than a full measure.
8. In his mercy, God will cut it short.

III. The Two Witnesses (3-14)

- A. This brings us to the second part of the vision, which begins in verse 3.
 1. Here the focus is upon the two witnesses.
 2. The reason why there are two of them is because two is the number of witness in Scripture.
 3. Under the Mosaic law, two witnesses were required in order to establish a charge.
 4. This is why, when Jesus sent out the apostles, he sent them in pairs of two.
 5. These two witnesses point back to Revelation 2 and 3, where it said that of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which this book was written, only two of them received no word of rebuke.
 6. The two witnesses here in Revelation 11 are the faithful lampstands.
 7. Notice that they prophecy for the same period of time that the world will trample the church.

8. This presents us with a different perspective on the church's experience in this present age.
 9. Though we face opposition from the world, and though those who are only nominal Christians are given over to the world, the church will bear prophetic witness to God's truth.
 10. Notice also that the witnesses are described as wearing sackcloth.
 11. This is symbolic of mourning, reminding us that evangelism is not about promising health and wealth and worldly happiness, but about calling people to repent and believe in Jesus.
- B. In verse 4, the two witnesses are referred to as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands."
1. While the lampstand has been an image for the church throughout Revelation, this is the first reference in this book to the church as an olive tree.
 2. This is taken from the same Old Testament background as the lampstand image.
 3. In Zechariah 4, the light-bearing function of God's people is symbolized by the image of a lampstand that is fueled by two olive trees that stand alongside it.
 4. The meaning of this vision is explained to the prophet by these words: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."
 5. In other words, the olive trees that produce the oil that the lamp needs in order to give light represent the Holy Spirit.
 6. The church is empowered for its light-bearing mission by God's Spirit.

- C. In verses 5 and 6, the description of the church's prophetic witness is drawn from several Old Testament texts.
1. The statement in verse 5 about fire pouring out of their mouths alludes to Jeremiah 5:14, where the Lord says to the prophet Jeremiah, "I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them."
 2. The statement about the witnesses having power to shut the sky points back to the ministry of Elijah.
 3. And the statement about turning water to blood recalls one of the plagues brought about upon Egypt through Moses.
 4. The basic idea conveyed in all of this is that the proclamation of God's Word brings judgment on those who reject it.
- D. In verse 7, the focus shifts back to the severe opposition that the church faces from the world.
1. The beast that rises from the pit is a symbol of the demonically-controlled world powers that set themselves against God and his people.
 2. The beast is said to make war on the witnesses, to conquer them, and to kill them.
 3. This points back to Daniel 7:21, where the beast makes war on the saints and prevails over them until the arrival of the day of judgment.
 4. John says that the dead bodies of the witnesses are left in the streets of "the great city," and the people of the world rejoice over their downfall for a period of three and a half days.
- E. It is important to remember that all of this is intended to be understood symbolically, not literally.

1. The death of the two witnesses is not depicting the death of two literal individuals or of the entire church.
 2. Instead, this is telling us that throughout this age, as the church faces persecution and opposition, there are times when its witness-bearing power seems to be snuffed out.
 3. And at the very end of this age, this will take place on a worldwide scale.
 4. The church will seem so insignificant in the eyes of the world that people will conclude that it is essentially dead.
- F. The city that is referred to as “the great city” in verse 8 is not literal Jerusalem, even though it is also referred to as the city in which Jesus was crucified.
1. We are clued in to the symbolic identity of this city by the fact that it is said to be “symbolically called Sodom and Egypt.”
 2. Throughout Revelation, the phrase “great city” never refers to Jerusalem but to Babylon, which is itself symbolic of Rome, which is symbolic of the city of man that sets itself against God and his people.
 3. The fact that Jerusalem crucified the Lord means that, in spite of the fact that it was home to the temple, it showed itself to belong to the city of man.
- G. While the world rejoices when it sees the church being marginalized and its witness is apparently silenced, the Lord always preserves a remnant.
1. There are times when it appears that the church has been wiped out, but that is never truly the case.
 2. Recall what took place in the days of Elijah, when he thought that he was the only one left who was faithful to the Lord.

3. The Lord told him that he had kept seven thousand who had not bowed down to Baal.
 4. There is always a remnant, chosen and kept by grace.
- H. This part of our passage also brings to mind the apostle Paul's description of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4, where he writes, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor 4:8–11 ESV)
1. This is the general meaning of the death and resurrection of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.
 2. This is not limited to the literal, physical resurrection at the end of the age.
 3. Though it ultimately points to that, it also includes the many ways in which the Lord vindicates his church and preserves its witness throughout the present age.
- I. There are several other details to note about what John says about the two witnesses.
1. First, they lay slain for three and a half days.
 2. Notice how this stands in contrast to the much longer period during which they will give their prophetic witness.
 3. This tells us that the suffering that the church has to endure in this age is no comparison to its faithful labors in the cause of the gospel.
 4. Also note that when the witnesses are summoned up to heaven, which is symbolic of the church's vindication, their enemies watch them go.

5. This is clearly not the “secret rapture” taught by dispensationalists.
6. Lastly, the cataclysms that befall the city of man as this is taking place only affect one-tenth of the city.
7. This argues against the preterist position, which looks for the fulfillment of these visions in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
8. It was not merely one-tenth of Jerusalem that fell to the Romans, but the entire city.

IV. The Seventh Trumpet (15-19)

- A. Verse 14 clues us in to the fact that the interlude between trumpets six and seven has come to an end.
 1. Now is the time for the third woe, or the sounding of the seventh trumpet.
 2. When it is sounded, loud voices in heaven declare, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”
 3. We are familiar with those words because they have been immortalized in the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s Messiah.
 4. The important thing to note is that those words are only spoken once the seventh trumpet has sounded.
 5. The seventh trumpet is symbolic of the end, of the coming of the Lord in judgment.
 6. Only then, only at the return of Christ will all opposition to his reign be abolished.
 7. Though our postmillennialist brethren will argue otherwise, there is no golden age in this world prior to the coming of Christ.

8. Only at his return will the kingdom of the world become the kingdom of our Lord.
 9. Only then will the sons of God be revealed.
 10. Only then will the creation be set free from its bondage to decay.
- B. Another detail that stands out in this section is the way the twenty-four elders refer to the Lord in verse 17.
1. They call him the one “who is and who was.”
 2. Previously in Revelation, God has been identified as the one “who is and who was and who is to come.”
 3. The words “who is to come” are dropped here because this text is describing the final coming of the Lord.
 4. This is made clear in the remainder of the elders’ song, as they declare that it is the day for the dead to be judged and for God’s servants to be rewarded.
- C. The section then concludes with John telling us that the temple in heaven was opened, so that the ark of the covenant could be seen.
1. This is a climactic event, since all throughout the Old Testament the ark was kept from view behind the curtain in the holy of holies.
 2. The point being made is that God’s presence will no longer be veiled.
 3. In glory, his people will see him face to face.
 4. Yet the opening of the temple also shows something else.
 5. There are flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

6. This points to the fact that for the wicked, the unveiled presence of God means judgment.

V. Conclusion

- A. There is a connection between the imagery of judgment with which Revelation 11 ends and the prophetic task of the church that is such a key feature of the bulk of this chapter.
- B. While the message that we have been given to proclaim is the announcement of the only way of salvation, it is also the announcement of the certainty of judgment for those who refuse to embrace Christ as he is offered in the gospel.
- C. The apostle Paul made the same point when he described his apostolic ministry in 2 Corinthians 2, saying, “thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” (2 Cor 2:14–16 ESV)
- D. To those who are being saved, the gospel is the aroma of life.
- E. But to those who are perishing, it is the aroma of death.
- F. It is not for us to make the message appealing to people.
- G. Our task is to make the message known.
- H. May God help us to be faithful in doing so.