

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #15: “Two Witnesses from Heaven” (Rev. 11:1-19)

Have you ever noticed that what you see on the surface doesn't always match what is happening in the heart? Joe Wagner shared an example in the *Reader's Digest*.

He wrote, “I was attending a junior stock show when a grand champion lamb, owned by a little girl, was being auctioned. When the bids reached \$5 per pound, the little girl, standing beside her lamb in the arena, began to cry. At \$10 a pound, tears began streaming down her face and she clasped her arms tightly around the lamb's neck. The higher the bids rose, the harder she cried. Finally, a local businessman bought the lamb for more than \$1,000, but announced that he was donating it back to the little girl. The crowd applauded and cheered. Months later, I was judging some statewide essays, when I came across one from a little girl who told about the time her grand champion lamb had been auctioned. ‘The prices got so high during the bidding,’ she wrote, ‘that I started to cry from happiness.’ She added, ‘The man, who bought the lamb for so much more than I ever dreamed I would get, then returned the lamb to me. And when we got home, Daddy barbecued the lamb—and it was really delicious!’”

What motives lie hidden in the hearts of men and women, boys and girls? Only the Lord knows for sure. In fact, quite often what we project on the outside is very different from what is going on in our hearts. That's why the Lord sets up various opportunities for our motives to be tested and revealed. For example, historically He has placed mankind in a variety of settings—the innocence of a garden, the beautiful pre-flood world of Noah, the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, now the Age of Grace, and one day the glory of His Kingdom. But in each case, what do our reactions prove? That our problems are not the result of our environment, but the wickedness of our hearts.

That, in a sense, is the lesson of this study. In Revelation 11, God sends two preachers with supernatural powers to proclaim the truth of Christ. But after 3 ½ years of putting up with their preaching, they are killed by the Antichrist, revealing his true colors. He then proceeds to desecrate God's Temple for 3 ½ years, taking his seat in the Holy Place and claiming to be God. At that point, however, God can no longer put up with him. He sends Jesus back into the world to judge His enemies and reward His saints. Before that happens, however, several revelations are made about those who are facing condemnation. This study is intended to show that those who follow Antichrist are not innocent pawns ignorantly led astray by a charismatic leader. They are active participants in a great sin, willfully rejecting the truth of Christ for a lie. That's demonstrated by three events that are about to happen on earth. The first event is that—

GOD'S TEMPLE IS DESCECRATED

John describes what he was instructed to do in verse 1, “I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, ‘Go 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 (3 ½ years).’”

Verse 1 presents a problem for those of us who interpret the Bible literally. After all,

how can John measure a temple that hasn't existed for 1946 years and still doesn't exist today? In fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that "not one stone will be left upon another" and "Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," Titus the Roman general laid siege to Jerusalem, marched into the Holy City in 70 AD, and set the Temple on fire, which led the soldiers to pull it apart stone by stone to get at the gold that melted and seeped down into the cracks. This brought an immediate end to the Jewish religious system, because without the Temple, sacrifices could no longer be offered. That's why pious Jews stand weeping at the "Wailing Wall" today. It is the retaining wall and only part of the original structure that remains. So they sit or stand at the Western Wall, pleading for Messiah to return and restore the Temple and His Kingdom. But, as yet, no Temple has been built. For Messiah came and they rejected Him, and the Temple was destroyed as God's judgment on their sin.

So the question is: What Temple is John to measure? The only possible answer is a yet-to-be-built Temple that will be erected at the beginning of the Tribulation. That's the testimony of both Old and New Testament prophets. Daniel 9:27 says that Antichrist will sign a covenant of peace with Israel for a period of 7 years, allowing them to rebuild their Temple. However, at the midpoint of that period, he will break his treaty and desecrate the Temple. Jesus confirmed this warning of the abomination of desolation that will stand in the holy place. (Matt. 24:15)

So a future Temple will soon be erected in Jerusalem. Even now there are reports of Temple bonds being sold around the world with stones and Temple vessels being gathered for this huge project. But it's doubtful that Israel could launch such a project at this point. First, conservative Jews believe that only Messiah has the authority to rebuild the Temple. Second, the Mosque of Omar rests on the Temple Mount, one of Islam's holiest sites. They believe that Mohammed ascended to heaven from that spot. Consequently, any attempt to alter their holy site could trigger a full-scale war between Israel and their Arab neighbors.

How, then, will the Temple be rebuilt? The solution probably lies in their covenant with Antichrist, the false messiah. In return for certain concessions, Antichrist will become Israel's great protector, allowing them to rebuild their Temple and reinstitute the practice of animal sacrifices. How far away is this event? It may be sooner than we think. Right after the Six-Day War in which Israel regained control of Jerusalem, Israel Eldad, one of their famous historians, was interviewed by *Time* magazine. When asked about rebuilding the Temple, he said, "When the Jewish people took over Jerusalem the first time under King David, only one generation passed before they built the Temple, and so shall it be with us!" When asked about the problem of the Dome of the Rock, he replied with a wink, "Who knows, perhaps there will be an earthquake!" What Eldad said in jest may be about to happen—soon!

But the main point of verse 2 is the desecration of the Temple. John is told to measure the Temple, but leave out the outer court, "for it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months." This was predicted in Daniel 9:27 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. At the midpoint of the Tribulation, Antichrist, Israel's great protector, will suddenly become their fiercest persecutor. Indwelt by Satan himself, he will break his treaty, sit as God in their Temple, and lead the world in a Jewish bloodbath of unprecedented proportions.

Why is this emphasized at this point in the Revelation? Two reasons: First, to show the ripeness of the world for judgment. For instead of helping the Jews, the people of earth will

become Antichrist's partners in desecrating the holy city, revealing an attitude of contempt for God's holiness and hatred for His people. Second, to emphasize that Christ is their true Messiah and Protector. You see, only someone who owns a piece of property has the right to survey it. So, even though Antichrist appears to have the upper hand, John measures both the Temple, the altar, and the worshipers, symbolizing that they all belong to Jesus and are under His care. By the way, the same action is taken again in Revelation 21:15, where an angel measures the New Jerusalem. John says, "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

David Hocking explains it like this: "Measuring the Temple of God in the Tribulation means that God is going to protect a Jewish remnant. Though He is not going to protect the majority of the nation, God will protect the remnant."

Jesus promised the same thing. He said, "Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened . . . I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled." (Matt. 24:22, 34)

Notice also a second event. Not only God's Temple being desecrated, but also—

GOD'S PROPHETS ARE EXECUTED.

Who is your favorite super-hero? Superman? Batman? Iron Man? Christians answer differently. I thought of Moses, Samson, and Elijah. But alas, the days of the super-heroes are gone. Or are they? This chapter reveals that the greatest Bible heroes are yet to come! Once the Church is caught up in the Rapture, Christ sends two witnesses into the world with powers rivaling those of Moses and Elijah! Let's answer five questions about them.

A. Who are the Two Witnesses?

Verse 3 continues, "And I will give power to My two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." Verse 5 adds, "If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes out of 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."

Verse 3 literally reads in the Greek, "And I will give to *the* two witnesses of Mine." The construction suggests that they are men John is already familiar with. So who could they be? Many prophecy teachers say they are Moses and Elijah, returned from heaven to give the world one last chance to repent before the end. That may be true. After all, who did John see with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Moses and Elijah! (Matt. 17:1-3)

To support this position, three arguments are given. First, Malachi 4:5-6 says that Elijah will return before "the great and dreadful day of the Lord" to turn the hearts of his people back to God. But then, Jesus said that John the Baptist had fulfilled that prophecy, which means that "Elijah" may refer to the office of prophet rather than the individual Elijah the Tishbite. Second, the ministries of Moses and Elijah were never completed. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because of his sin of striking the rock (Deut. 34:4-5), and Elijah was later caught

up in a whirlwind to heaven (2 Kg. 2:11). So perhaps God will send the two of them to finish their ministries in Jerusalem during the Tribulation. Third, the ministries of these witnesses are similar to those of Moses and Elijah. One of Moses' miracles was turning water into blood, while Elijah caused the sky to withhold rain from falling on the ground for 3 ½ years.

One fact that argues against this identification is verse 4. They are called "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord." These terms were not used of Moses and Elijah, but of Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor who led the Jews in rebuilding the Temple following their exile in Babylon. The best we can do, then, is guess who these two men will be. No one can say for sure until they appear preaching in the streets of Jerusalem.

B. When will the ministry of the Two Witnesses take place?

Verse 3 is clear. "They will prophesy for 1,260 days." When will this period begin? Does it occur during the first half of the Tribulation when Antichrist is masquerading as the Savior of Israel? Or will it be during the last 3 ½ years, which Jesus called "the great tribulation?" The fact that verses 2 and 3 use different terms to describe two periods of 3 ½ years, suggest they are different periods of time. The 1,260 days in verse 3 is a time of preaching in Jerusalem which is immediately followed by the "forty-two months" of persecution in verse 2.

Three additional facts support this position. First, it's not until the midpoint of the Tribulation that Antichrist turns to attack Israel, his former friend (Dan. 9:27). So it's logical to assume that the first two targets of his persecution are God's prophets. Second, the powers demonstrated by these prophets make it impossible for anyone to desecrate the Temple, which means their ministry must end by the midpoint of the Tribulation. Third, in our earlier studies, we wondered how the 144,000 Jews will be converted to Christ. Here is the likely answer. It is through the preaching of these Two Witnesses during the first half of the Tribulation.

The clothing of the witnesses also provides a clue to their ministry. Verse 3 says they will be "clothed in sackcloth." This is a symbol of repentance. For example, when Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, the entire nation dressed in sackcloth to symbolize their repentance. That's also the meaning of the "olive trees" in verse 4. As I mentioned earlier, this was an Old Testament reference to Joshua and Zerubbabel. Haggai says that following the Babylonian exile, the people began to rebuild the Temple, but due to opposition they became discouraged and gave up. But God didn't leave Himself without a witness. He raised up a priest named Joshua, a governor named Zerubbabel, and two cheerleaders named Haggai and Zechariah to lead God's people in revival. And something similar will occur when these Two Witnesses appear. 144,000 Jews will be converted overnight! The difference is they won't call for the rebuilding of God's Temple; they will condemn it. "After all, how can you worship God, when you reject His Son?" In fact, they themselves stand in bitter contrast to the Temple Antichrist has helped to build, demonstrating that the real power of God lies *outside* not *inside* the Temple.

C. What will be the reaction to the ministry of the Two Witnesses?

Verse 7: "Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower them, and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was also crucified.

For 3 ½ 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 celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.”

The reaction to the Two Witnesses points to three spiritual facts: **1) *The true nature of the world ruler.*** No longer will he appear to be a man of peace. Now he is called “the beast.” In fact, the word “beast” will be used 36 times in the Revelation to describe his character. His first “beastly” act is the murder of God’s prophets. Indwelt by Lucifer himself, Antichrist will be filled with an unquenchable thirst for worship. So he makes war with the Two Witnesses and kills them. Then, with these two spiritual obstacles out of his way, he enters the Temple of God, takes his seat pretending to be God, and forces the entire world to worship him.

However, even here we are given a clear reminder of God’s sovereignty. For verse 7 says that none of this can happen until the Two Witnesses “have finished their testimony.” That is to say, only after God’s work is completed, is the devil permitted to have his way, and only then for a little while. It’s reminiscent of Jesus’ words, “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” (John 10:17-18) The devil may think he has the power of death, but not over God’s people. He and his thugs are permitted to do nothing without the consent of Christ.

2) *The true nature of Israel.* The spiritual condition of the Jews is seen in what they do about this great crime—nothing! In fact, they break the Law of Moses by refusing to give God’s prophets a decent burial. Instead, they let their bodies lie in the streets of Jerusalem for 3 ½ days, as a sign of their contempt for Christ. How do we know it’s Jerusalem John is describing? Because he says it’s the city “where also our Lord was crucified.” But no longer is it called the holy city. John called it “Sodom” and “Egypt.” “Sodom refers to its immorality. “Egypt” refers to its worldliness. But this spiritual condition will not last long. For the great miracle that’s about to occur in verse 13 will shock the remnant of Israel into true repentance and faith.

3) *The true nature of humanity.* The age-old debate continues: Is man basically good or bad? The world says that man is born good, but corrupted by society. Of course, the only flaw in that theory is that society is made up of people, and the reason people have a negative impact on us is because man’s heart is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” (Jer. 17:9) That is never portrayed more graphically than here. For how does the entire planet respond to the death of these two good men? Verse 10 says they throw a “Satanic Christmas party,” giving gifts to each other in celebration of their deaths. 100 years ago, those who read these verses wondered, “How could the entire world watch their bodies lying in the streets?” But with 24/7 news coverage from around the world, that is no longer a question.

D. How will the Two Witnesses be vindicated?

John describes two ways the Lord will vindicate His prophets. Each comes as a shock to Jerusalem and the world. ***First, there will be a miraculous resurrection and ascension of the Witnesses.*** That is how God vindicated His Son following His crucifixion. Psalms 16:10 promised that He would not suffer “His Holy One to see corruption,” but declared Him to be “the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.” (Rom. 1:4) That’s the same way God will vindicate His Two Witnesses. Verse 11 says while the world is making merry over their deaths,

God will breathe into them the breath of life, and they will stand on their feet, and “terror will strike those who saw them.” The world will think they’ve solved the nuisance of these prophets, only to be reminded that there is no final death for those who love Christ. Jesus said, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me shall live even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26) Then, finally, in a vivid re-enactment of the Rapture, verse 12 says that while all the world is watching, God will call out with a loud voice, ‘Come up here,’ and catch them up in a cloud to heaven.

Second, there will be a devastating earthquake. Verse 13 says “at that very hour there will be a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city will collapse,” and “seven thousand people will be killed.” But tragedy will soon turn to blessing. Verse 13 goes on, “The survivors will be terrified and give glory to the God of heaven.” Who are the survivors? The “remnant” of Jews who remain in Jerusalem. Up until now, they’ve put their faith in Antichrist. But upon seeing the resurrection and ascension of the Two Witnesses and the devastating earthquake that follows, the people of Israel will suddenly realize that what the Two Witnesses have said is true. “We’ve been deceived and following a false messiah!” And in a spirit of repentance, the remnant of the city turns in faith to Christ for forgiveness.

We’ve witnessed the desecration of God’s Temple and the rejection of God’s witnesses. Now let’s look at one more important event before we finish.

GOD’S SON IS LOVED AND HATED.

Chapter 11 has been a long paragraph describing the events following the blast of the sixth trumpet. Now it closes with the blowing of the seventh trumpet which, releases the final judgments of the Tribulation culminating in Christ’s return to the earth. But, again, as we study this final event, pay close attention to the reactions it receives. For it’s just one more evidence that the world is ready to be judged.

A. The Reaction of the Saints

The first thing we hear from heaven is the singing of the **Hallelujah Chorus**, which I consider the most inspiring piece of music on earth. But imagine when the voices of billions of saints and angels join together in perfect harmony to sing this song. There won’t be a dry eye in all of heaven! They declare, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever.” And in one sense, the book of Revelation could end here, because the Tribulation is now ending and the Kingdom of God is finally coming to earth. But, as we learned in our study of chapter 10, the book doesn’t end right away, for John was told to prophesy again about “many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.” (Rev. 10:11). So, once chapter 11 ends, John will go back and fill in the details by describing several key figures and events which were only introduced in the first eleven chapters.

The second thing we hear from heaven is found in verse 19. It continues, “Then God’s Temple in heaven was opened, and within His Temple was seen the ark of the covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hail storm.” In the Old Testament, the ark of the covenant symbolized God’s presence. As such, it

was an instrument of both judgment and mercy. On top of the ark was the mercy seat where the blood of the atonement was offered. But where there was no genuine faith, the ark was an instrument of wrath, releasing plagues on God's enemies. Hollywood tried to depict this in their *Indiana Jones* film several years ago, and did a miserable job of it, turning the ark into an object of superstition. But here the ark of heaven is revealed in all its glory, and the result is "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hail storm." These are the bowl judgments of the Tribulation, described in chapters 15 and 16, which are poured out on the world just as Christ is about to return to earth.

B. The Reaction of Sinners

How will the world at large react to Christ's return? Verse 18 says, "The nations were angry." This makes no good sense. God has been more than gracious towards them. Not only has He graciously provided all their needs and postponed their judgment, so they can repent. He also sent His Son to die in their place. What more could they want than that? The answer is: Power! Like angry, rebellious children, they want to cast off God's control and rule this planet for themselves. Revelation 19:19 says at the sight of Christ's return, the armies of earth will stop fighting each other and, in recognition of this greater "threat," will unite in one last-ditch effort to blow the Creator out of the sky. But they fail. Verse 18 says, "Your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding Your servants the prophets and Your saints and those who reverence Your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Isn't that ironic? Man has always wanted to rule this planet. But the more he asserts his own self-will, the closer he comes to destroying the very world he worships. Only the return of Christ can save this planet from total annihilation. But man still will not submit to Him!

C.S. Lewis once described the nature of fallen man in biting piece or satire called *The Great Divorce*. In it, he described a bus trip from Hell to Heaven. The damned were permitted to take a tour of Heaven and even stay if they liked. But alas, the Hellions aren't comfortable in Heaven! Nothing is to their liking! So, to the sorrow of their heavenly loved ones, each of them gets back on the bus, anxious to return to where he belongs.

In a similar fashion, this study demonstrates the sad, but perfect justice of God's final condemnation of the world. For unsaved humanity will never be happy in God's Kingdom, for they can never tolerate is Christ ruling over them. Revelation 11 gives sufficient proof of that. In verse 2, the Gentiles trample underfoot the Temple of God. In verse 9, they rejoice at the death of God's prophets. And in verse 18, they turn against Christ in open hatred and rebellion.

The truth is no one likes judgment, least of all the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why He gives the world chance after chance to repent. But judgment is coming, and when it does, it'll be well deserved. Our job, therefore, while time remains, is to warn our friends and loved ones of the danger, giving them one last chance to accept Christ's mercy and repent.