

Sermon 37: Revelation 11:3: The Two Witnesses

OUTLINE

The church as the witnesses

Weeping witnesses

INTRODUCTION

Think of all the ways in which the church is represented in the book of Revelation. We move from the traditional 'servants' 1:1, to more symbolic designations such as 'kingdom' and 'priests' 1:5, to the more crazy 7 lampstands 1:20. The church is called on to be conquerors in the 7 letters, they are symbolised as the martyrs under the altar 6:9; the 144 000 sealed of the people of Israel 7:1-8; and a festal throng of all nations waving palm branches in heaven 7:9. They are called saints 8:4, pictured as the woman with 12 stars for a crown, as well as the rest of her offspring ch.12. They are the armies of heaven 19:14; the souls of the beheaded who experience the first resurrection and reign with Christ; those whose names are written in the lamb's book of life, the New Jerusalem and the Bride of Christ. This prepares us for the further way in which the Church is symbolised in Revelation 11 as the temple of God, the holy city and the two witnesses. These symbols help us to know ourselves and our mission as the church.

How do you see the church in the world? Do you see the church as given to rule and so seek to place a pope over kings? Do you see the church as a victorious army that should be conquering nations and establishing a worldwide theocracy? Do you see the church as a life boat that must not get involved in the world's affairs at all and its job is to try and save as many people as possible before the rapture? In a world full of persecution and idolatry God reminds the church of her purpose by casting her in the role of the 2 witnesses. We will be spending some time looking at them but today we want to recognise that these witnesses are the church and they are weeping witnesses.

The church as the witnesses

'But how can you say that the 2 witnesses are the church?' let us answer this question before we continue. Some have suggested that this chapter was fulfilled in the first century and the 2 witnesses represent Peter and Paul, or the 2 High priests who were slain during the Jewish war in 68 A.D. Others see these 2 as a future literal Moses and Elijah. Given the symbolic nature of the book of Revelation we cannot agree with these views.

We can agree that the witnesses are Elijah like and Moses like because they are described as shutting the sky and turning water to blood v6. But this should not automatically lead us to infer that this is literally Moses and Elijah. You will remember that in Luke 1:17 John the Baptist was said to have come in the 'spirit of Elijah,' and Mal. 4:5 anticipating Christ's coming speaks of Elijah coming. However, we see that John the Baptist was not literally Elijah, there is less ground in Revelation 11 to think so.

Here are some reasons why the church should be identified with the 2 witnesses. Firstly, the church is identified as both witnesses Acts 1:8 and prophetic. Quoting Joel 2:28-32 Peter on the Day of Pentecost sees the outpouring of the Spirit indicating that the church are all prophets, just as we are also priests and royalty, Acts 2:17-21. The connection between the testimony and witness of the church and prophecy is made in Rev. 19:10, 'Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' We must not think too narrowly of prophecy in this picture in Rev. 11 as being foretelling, but rather a Spirit anointed message of Christ and the final judgement approaching, and so the message of repentance looms large.

Secondly, the 2 witnesses are also called the two lampstands in 11:4. In the book of Revelation God has used lampstands to represent the church.

Thirdly, we see in verse 7 that the beast will wage war against them and overcome them. This is borrowed from Dan. 7:21 which does not speak of the beast waging war against 2 witnesses but all the saints.

Fourthly, we must avoid the anachronism of assuming that the reason the whole world rejoices over the death of the witnesses is because of T.V. Instead we could think of the world wide church of God as the explanation.

Fifthly, the holy city, which we understand to be the New Jerusalem, in this instance the Church militant as an ambassadorial outpost, is trampled underfoot for 3 ½ years. This time is very significant as it is the parallel time that the woman is protected in the wilderness and same time that the beast wages war upon the saints. And we see that this is also the time given for the two witnesses to prophesy. These parallel symbols of the church 1 woman, and 2 witnesses, as well as the fact that the Danielic reference to the time is always against the saints, confirms our view.

Incidentally the reference to 3 ½ years is symbolic. This number which first appeared in Daniel and was fulfilled by the 3 ½ year war of Antiochus Epiphanes 168-165 B.C. Like many things in the OT that supply symbols for the book of Revelation it is borrowed for its symbolic reference. The symbolic value of this time when another beast attacked the saints is obvious as the church has to face greater and more widespread foes. We understand the time to indicate a limited period not a literal period. Some have thought that it could also echo Christ's 3 ½ years ministry of suffering and the church following in the sufferings of Christ.

Sixthly, in the book of Revelation witnessing and testifying are done by the church.

Seventhly, both the prophetic powers normally attributed to Elijah and Moses, which leads to the conclusion that it must literally be them, are not exclusive to one or the other but both exercise both. This closes the door on thinking that this must be Moses and Elijah.

Eighthly, the fact that there are 2 echoes Christ sending out His disciples in twos Lk. 10:1-24. But the number 2 is also the most appropriate number for legal witnesses. The OT practice was to substantiate the truth by at least 2 witnesses Num. 35:30. The message of bitter judgement that is coming and the guilt of mankind proclaimed by the witnesses are attested by 2.

The church is identified as a witness. Why has God left his Church on Earth? Here we are excluded, different, persecuted, suffering, dying, dropping in numbers, why has God left us here? We know that our sins have been paid for by Christ, so this can't be a type of purgatory to cleanse us. The primary reason we are here is found in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." We have been left on this Earth in order to be witnesses. We are not here having an extended holiday, we are not here to build an Earthly empire, we are here to be witnesses.

A witness is someone who speaks about something they know or have experienced. In court an eye witness has seen the events of a crime and has first-hand information relevant to the case. In Christianity, the apostles were the first eye witnesses, but the witness does not end with them for we have all, if we are born again, experienced the truth of God's saving act in Christ. We can testify to the fact of a new life, but more than just subjective truth we testify to the truth written in God's word, repeating the original eye witness accounts. The first challenges that come to us from our identity as witnesses are these. Have we experienced the truth of Christ's saving work. There is no use in being a witness if there is no experience of the truth. Someone who has never had their sins forgiven can never bear witness to the forgiveness in Christ. To the reality of His resurrection life, or the peace that He gives. This re-education about what a Christian is forces us to define the Church not as those who are part of a club and frequent a certain building, but rather of people who have encountered the truth of the Historical Christ and experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and testify to it. The second challenge relates to our message, have we changed the eye witness accounts or are we being faithful to them. There are some Christians who are embarrassed to speak of miracles, resurrection, Christ's teachings on hell and judgement, and they are no longer being faithful to the original message preached by the first witnesses. To be a witness in the Biblical tradition demands that we not change the message that the apostles preached. And from Revelation we learn that we must be faithful in the face of adversity, even unto death.

This reminder of what the Church exists for is most important in our day, for many in the last one hundred years have turned the Church into a do-gooders society, a mere charity organization. A place to send children that they might receive morality, and become 'good' people. No doubt the Church should be active in helping society, improving morality and guiding children, but this is done through preaching the gospel. Our primary goal is to preach the gospel. The Church is not a wing of the Government that exists to sooth the populace of a country. We are the prophets of our nations, like John the Baptist we are to call people to follow the Messiah, and to repent for there is a day when Jesus will return.

We serve no ones agenda but God's, and are failing in our task if we are no longer being a witness to what has been done in Jesus Christ.

Weeping witnesses

We see in 11:3 that they are granted authority which reminds us of the Great Commission when Christ in His authority sent out His witnesses. We see that they prophesy which we have already seen in the book of Revelation is connected to testifying about Christ 19:10. We see that this is for the duration of 1260 days, this is a symbolic reference to the time of the church's persecution which will endure until Christ returns for her. But we also see that the witnesses are dressed in sackcloth.

I find this description of the church which has authority to preach, which will suffer at the hands of its enemies, yet will weep for its enemies at the same time very striking. Sackcloth is found 42 times in the OT, 27 of those times are linked to mourning and 13 additional ones link the mourning with repentance. I was just reading this week about Westboro Baptist Church, yes the antigay, anti-everything 'church', I don't actually want to call them a Church at all. They protest outside of churches that meet on Sundays because they are not out evangelising, it sounds like they are zealous for evangelism, but they are not weeping witnesses. They carry signs saying 'your pastors are whores.' In another post one witness tells of some evangelists from Westboro who go into a starbucks and begin to start following some pedestrians screaming at them to repent. One woman turned around and said, 'I would rather go to hell than be with you.' These angry, loveless, harassing evangelists are not the weeping witnesses of chapter 11. You wear sackcloth when you pray as a way of humbling yourself before the Lord when asking for mercy, Dan. 9:3, 'Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.'

The famous Christian martyr Bonhoeffer said these words, 'Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them they will not despise us and persecute us, They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us, so long as we pray for them. For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. Every insult they utter only serves to bind us more closely to God and them. Their persecution of us only serves to bring them nearer to reconciliation with God and to further the triumphs of love. It is only when we see the anger and wrath of God hanging like grim realities over the head's of ones enemies that one can know something of what it means to love them and forgive them.' Abraham prayed for Sodom, Jeremiah and Ezekiel prayed for idolatrous Jerusalem, and the 2 witnesses who tell the world of certain judgement and call them to repentance are all the while praying and weeping in sackcloth for those who persecute them. This is how we are to see ourselves in the world.