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Sermon Notes

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The Two Witnesses

Revelation 11:1-14

Church history is filled with fascinating and courageous people who have boldly witnessed, even to very hostile crowds.

Stephen, the first martyr, boldly preached the gospel to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and paid for it with his life.

The Apostle Paul boldly witnessed to a very hostile crowd in Jerusalem, people who had just tried to beat him to death. Later in his life, he boldly proclaimed the whole gospel to the Roman Emperor Nero while he was on trial for his life.

Boniface, a missionary to barbarian German tribes, once chopped down a sacred oak tree and stood on the stump to preach the gospel to those stunned people.

Raymond Lull, the first missionary to the Muslims, went to Tunisia in 1315, during the time of the Crusades, and instead of trying to conquer the Muslims there preached the gospel to them... and did so for many years until they finally stoned him to death.

John Wycliffe sent out dozens of preachers called the Lollards; he sent them out two by two in medieval England to preach the gospel in the face of the medieval Roman Catholic false doctrines. He was educated, bold, powerful and feared by the Catholic authorities.

Jan Huss preached in Bohemia, modern-day Czech Republic – the exact same doctrines that Martin Luther would preach a century later, and he was burned at the stake for doing it

The underground church in eastern Europe and China boldly faced Communist government officials and preached the truth, often at the cost of their lives

TRULY history is filled with bold, clear, powerful proclaimers of the word of God

But this morning, we are going to come to the two boldest, most powerful, and most unusual witnesses to Christ that the world will ever have seen

This morning, we are going to meet the mysterious TWO WITNESSES of Revelation 11

These fourteen verses are so steeped in symbolism and woven with powerful images that connect with much of the history of Israel that many conservative commentators take a purely symbolic approach to interpreting them... they are merely spiritual SYMBOLS of the calling of all Christians to stand before the powerful kings of the earth and witness to Christ even when persecuted and put to death:

Matthew 24:9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."

Though I see all this symbolism, and through I will embrace it even more fully in this sermon and try to draw out the symbolic language John uses, yet I do not think this precludes a literal fulfillment at the end of the age

I. God's Messengers Throughout Redemptive History

A. The Focus Here: Two Messengers who Speak the Words of God

1. Fundamental to our faith: God's Word Mediated by Human Messengers

Romans 10:13-15 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

2. God has entrusted his words to human messengers throughout redemptive history

3. Key to our salvation: accepting God's words through flawed human messengers

1 Thessalonians 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

B. What is a Prophet?

1. A prophet is literally one who speaks God's word directly to the people... able to say "Thus says the Lord"
2. The office of prophet originated at Mt. Sinai, when the people BEGGED that God no longer speak directly to them, but that Moses would listen to God and speak in his place
3. After Moses' death, the Lord raised up a series of prophets to speak God's words to both Israel and the Gentile nations...

Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Daniel... these godly men spoke God's word in their own generations

C. BUT... Israel Consistently Refused to Listen

1. Stephen charged Israel with this crime:

Acts 7:51-52 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?"

2. Clear evidence in the pages of the Old Testament, the history of Israel
3. 2 Kings: summary of Israel's history right before the exile under the Assyrians... the extinction of the northern kingdom

2 Kings 17:13-15 The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees... ¹⁴ But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless.

- D. These Two Witnesses Are the Final Prophetic Warning Given by God to Israel and to the World

II. The Temple Measured: God's Meticulous Control

Revelation 11:1-2 I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. ² 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.

A. John Involved in the Action

1. Often in the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John is drawn into the action
2. For example:

- a. In Revelation 4:1, John is commanded to come up to heaven through an open doorway
 - b. In Revelation 5:4-5, John weeps and weeps because there was no one found who could take the scroll and open the seals... and one of the elders tells him not to weep, and points out the Lion/Lamb
 - c. And in Revelation 10:8-10, John is told to go take the scroll from the angel and eat it; and when he does so, it was sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach
3. Here, John is drawn into the heavenly scene and is given work to do
4. The task: MEASUREMENT and COUNTING!
- a. He is given a REED to measure with... the Greek word “kalamus” is a reed-like plant which was hollow and lightweight, and could grow as long as ten feet
 - b. In the vision of Ezekiel, in chapters 40-48, the mysterious, idealized prophetic temple in that vision is measured off most meticulously by an angel with a measuring stick... the walls, the courtyards, the land surrounding the visionary temple, the river of life flowing from the temple which gets deeper and deeper as if flows further and further... all of these things are carefully measured
 - c. The idea of measuring and counting shows God’s meticulous and mathematical nature, but it goes deeper than that

B. The Focus: The “Temple of God”

- 1. Remember: In John’s day, the earthly Jewish temple had been destroyed by the Romans... in the year A.D. 70
- 2. John is writing maybe twenty to thirty years later
- 3. The nature of this temple is a big point of division for commentators
 - a. Those who hold to a literal view of every detail of this chapter say this is the temple built by the Jews under the reign of Antichrist... what some call the “Tribulation Temple”
 - b. This “Tribulation Temple” is built during the last seven years of human history, and there the Jews will renew the animal sacrificial system
 - c. That is the hardest part for many to accept, for we know that, when Jesus died the animal sacrificial system was instantly OBSOLETE forever

Hebrews 10:4 it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Hebrews 9:26 now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

- d. The temple here in Revelation 11 is called “the temple of God”
- e. Why God would want his name attached with a physical temple like this is hard to say... so those who take a spiritual view of this vision in Revelation 11 say this must be the HEAVENLY sanctuary, the true one in heaven... the one the original tabernacle and then Solomon’s Temple was built to copy, as a TYPE or SHADOW of the real one

Hebrews 8:5 They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."

- f. Furthermore, throughout the Book of Revelation, the “Temple” is always seen to be HEAVENLY

Revelation 11:19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

- g. But if this is the heavenly temple, how can the Gentiles trample its outer courts for 42 months??

C. The Measuring = God’s Knowledge and Protection

- 1. God is a God of details... the measurement = God’s limiting power
- 2. Unlike Ezekiel’s vision, no numbers ever come back from John’s measurement
- 3. But the measuring of the Temple of God and the counting of its members represents God’s intimate knowledge of the elect, and his ability to protect them... God LIMITS the power of all things in his universe

Job 38:8-11 "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, ¹⁰ when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, ¹¹ when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?"

- 4. The command NOT TO MEASURE the Court of the Gentiles refers to a distinction between the safe zone and the war zone
- 5. It is said that the Court of the Gentiles has been given over to them to be trampled for 42 months

6. This refers to the worst part of the reign of Antichrist

D. My Interpretation

1. Revelation 11 has two parts... the measurement of the temple and the work of the Two Witnesses in Jerusalem
2. Though many take a figurative approach only, I think we need to see a literal fulfillment in our future

Obviously the central theme of the flow of Redemptive History is the spread of the gospel by witnesses who are persecuted in every generation; but there are so many details in this chapter that I cannot simply spiritualize it and say it refers only to the suffering of the church on earth as it seeks to witness to Christ

How could it be said that fire comes out of our mouths to devour any that oppose us? For the most part if any fire devours anyone, it's faithful witnesses like Jan Hus who was burned at the stake; so also William Tyndale

How could it be that the church has the power to shut up the sky for 3 ½ years like Elijah? What does that symbolize? How can it be that the church is killed and lies dead in the streets of Jerusalem for 3 ½ days while the whole world gloats and gives each other gifts?

There are so many details here that force me to think this is a literal prophecy of something that will come in the future.

Furthermore, for me a key text on the end of the world and the career of the Antichrist is this:

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

The Antichrist is a specific world ruler that we will meet in Revelation 13...

He is the one who will specifically overthrow the two witnesses, as we will see

I believe at the end of the world, this powerful ruler will rise up and according to Daniel will make a covenant with the Jews for the rebuilding of the temple and the establishment of the animal sacrificial system... this is in NO WAY PLEASING TO GOD, but it is what the unbelieving Jewish nation wants

This rebuilt temple, called by some the “Tribulation Temple” is the place where Antichrist will do his most blasphemous act... “setting himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God”

The TRUE TEMPLE is in heaven, where Christ went to present his own blood

So, the first two verses of Revelation 11 speak of a divided temple... a safe refuge up in heaven where God protects his true worshipers; and a “Court of the Gentiles” down on earth, literally in Jerusalem, which God gives over to the Gentiles (under the Antichrist) to trample down... Daniel 7 refers to a beast-like empire which the Antichrist will rule

it culminates in the second coming of Christ... in which Jesus will destroy the Antichrist by the breath of his mouth:

2 Thessalonians 2:8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

III. The Two Messengers: God’s Powerful Warning

A. Their Mission

Revelation 11:3 And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.

1. Sent to prophecy by Almighty God

- a. To prophesy = to speak forth; to speak the words of God
- b. God was sending them to the reeling planet earth... it seems exactly at this point in the seven trumpets...
- c. The inhabitants of the earth have undergone amazing judgments from God
 - i) Six of the seven trumpets of judgment have been sounded
 - ii) 1st trumpet: Hail and fire mixed with blood burning up 1/3rd of the earth and the trees and all the green grass
 - iii) 2nd trumpet: a huge blazing mountain fell into the sea, turning a 1/3rd of the sea into blood, killing 1/3rd of all living creatures in the sea and destroying 1/3rd of all the ships
 - iv) 3rd trumpet: the blazing star named Wormwood falling on the fresh water, poisoning 1/3rd of the water supply of the planet

- v) 4th trumpet: the sun, moon, and stars darkened to 1/3rd of their usual brightness
 - vi) 5th trumpet: demons pour forth from the Abyss and torment individuals with sores for five months
 - vii) 6th trumpet: a demonic army sweeps across the earth and kills 1/3rd of the earth's population
- d. ABSOLUTELY STAGGERING, these cumulative sufferings
- e. BUT without the prophetic word INTERPRETING these judgments, people will not understand their spiritual significance... these are happening BECAUSE of the idolatry and wickedness of the human race
- f. The task of these two prophets is grave indeed! Their job is to convict the world of guilt and sin in light of these specific and extreme happenings
- g. You can see what a hostile reception they're going to receive... no one wants to hear this message... that's why they are empowered to protect themselves from the inevitable attacks; that's why everyone in the world celebrates when the Beast from the Abyss kills them
2. They are sent out as a pair
- a. Patterned after Jesus' sending out his disciples two by two
 - b. Also reminiscent of the general pattern in the Bible that every matter must be established by the testimony of at least two witnesses
 - c. Also they will be able to encourage each other and have fellowship together for the very challenging and hated mission they will be doing for 3 ½ years
3. God EMPOWERS them for this

Revelation 11:3 And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses

- a. The power of a prophet is in his WORDS

Jeremiah 23:29 "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

b. These prophets will have a very powerful presence and bold stance... strong personalities, undaunted courage, to stand before all that rage and hostility unafraid

c. Like God said to Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 15:20-21 I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the LORD. ²¹ "I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel."

d. But God also gives them supernatural power to do miracles, as we shall see

B. Their Location

1. These two witnesses will be ministering in the city of Jerusalem

2. That is made clear by these words:

Revelation 11:8 Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.

3. The city of Jerusalem is not seen to be a godly place, but actually a place of wickedness and rebellion, being likened to Sodom and Egypt

4. The clarity of the statement, "Where also their Lord was crucified" is a powerful detail that helps us realize we are not dealing with symbolism here

5. This also lends credence to the fact that the Antichrist will set up his seat of power there, so that he can usurp God's place in the temple that he will permit the Jews to build there

C. Their Duration

1. God specifically measures out the days they will prophesy: 1260 days

2. This is also forty-two months and 3 ½ years

3. This is a well-known extent of time

a. Elijah shut up the sky in Israel for three and a half years... there was neither dew nor rain for that length of time

b. Daniel 12:7: The angel tells Daniel that the length of time it will take for these things to be fulfilled (focusing on the Antichrist and his relationship with the nation of Israel) "it will be for a TIME, TIMES, and HALF A TIME" = 3 ½ years

- c. The woman in Revelation 12 flees into the desert to be cared for for 1260 days
- d. Revelation 11:2: The Gentiles trample on the holy city for 42 months
- 4. Since this number is so consistent and is seen in so many places in connection with the Antichrist and Israel and the End of the World, it is hard not to take this literally...
- 5. It also happens to be half of the number seven... so some scholars link it to the seventieth week of Daniel
- 6. They say this is the final seven years of human history... the Antichrist comes, makes a covenant with Israel to rebuild the temple and allow them to resume their animal sacrifices; but in the middle of that seven year period, he breaks the covenant by abolishing daily sacrifices and setting up the Abomination of Desolation causing people to worship HIM as God in the temple:

D. Their Clothing... and Demeanor

Revelation 11:3 clothed in sackcloth.

- 1. Sackcloth was a sign of mourning, often and especially for sin... a sense of the seriousness of sin and of grieving over the sin on behalf of the nation
 - a. Elijah wore it continually as he prophesied to the people
 - b. Isaiah wore sackcloth while he prophesied
 - c. It was a sign of turning from the softer and better things in life, to show grief and sorrow
- 2. The whole reason these prophets were there, prophesying to the earth, was because of the sin of the human race
- 3. So their demeanor was surely somber, powerful, convicting, serious

“Hear this, all you inhabitants of the earth! Almighty God, the creator of the universe and of the earth and everything in it is grievously enraged at you for your sins. That is why these dreadful plagues have come upon the earth! You have suffered and are suffering from them still... sores, and darkness, and bitter water, and misery. These sins are the just punishment of a holy God on a people who deserve to be swept from the earth. Repent! Turn to God! It may be that he will forgive you and wash away all your sins! Trust in Christ, the Savior of the World! His blood alone atones for sin! Turn to Christ! Trust in Christ!”

E. Their Prophetic Heritage

Revelation 11:4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

1. This is a direct reference to the Book of Zechariah, a vision that that prophet had

Zechariah 4:1-6 Then the angel who talked with me returned and wakened me, as a man is wakened from his sleep. ² He asked me, "What do you see?" I answered, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. ³ Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left." ⁴ I asked the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" ⁵ He answered, "Do you not know what these are?" "No, my lord," I replied. ⁶ So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.

2. The lampstands refer to the light of the knowledge of the Lord; the oil refers to the Spirit
3. The central message is that the prophetic word goes forth as a light, but only by the power of the Spirit does anything happen of eternal consequence...
4. So by the power of the Spirit these two witnesses stand as a light before the Lord of all the earth
5. The Antichrist that will be in power at that time is impotent before the Spirit of God... he will be the most powerful man in history, but he is nothing compared to the Spirit

F. Their Identity

1. The text says nothing about who these two witnesses are, so it's probably best to leave it at that ultimately... we don't know who they will be
2. Some scholars seek to identify them as Moses and Elijah
3. This is because of the similarity between their actions and the works of Moses and Elijah
4. As we will see in a moment, they have power to do amazing miracles... and the miracles seem to line up with what Moses did to bring judgments on Egypt and what Elijah did to bring judgments to Israel
5. Also, Moses and Elijah were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration
6. Many have noted that Moses represents the Law, and Elijah the Prophets

G. Their Power

1. The astonishing power of these two witnesses is that of specific judgments brought on unbelievers

Revelation 11:5-6 If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶ 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.

2. This is not how witnesses of Christ have carried themselves since the time of Christ
3. Remember what James and John (called the “Sons of Thunder”) wanted to do to a Samaritan village that refused to allow Jesus to come... they wanted to call down fire on them... but Jesus rebuked James and John!
4. Of course, the fire that consumes their enemies reminds us of two sets of soldiers sent by evil King Ahaziah

2 Kings 1:9-10 Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, "Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'" ¹⁰ Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.

This happened TWICE!! Terrifying!

5. So also these two witnesses have the power to burn up with fire anyone who tries to lay hands on them or harm them
6. They have the supernatural protection of the Lord
7. And like Elijah, they had the power to shut up the sky so it wouldn't rain; given that the third trumpet already turned a third of the fresh water bitter—Wormwood—this will be a severe plague
8. And the plagues they strike the earth with are a direct warning from God that the time is short and judgment is soon to fall on them... they definitely remind us of the ten plagues with which Moses struck Egypt in the days before the Exodus
9. These powers will strike fear in the hearts of their enemies, and it will identify them as speaking a supernatural message that MUST be heeded... but all it will do is provoke hatred in the hearts of many
10. HOWEVER: we should not imagine that these two witnesses will be without converts

11. It is quite possible that God will use their ministry to begin to convert the majority of the Jewish nation at that time

Romans 11:26-27 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

H. Their Death

Revelation 11:7 Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them.

1. The "Beast that comes up from the Abyss" = the Antichrist; a human being who will rule over the world
2. We will meet him in Revelation 13... but John already knows about him by the time he writes this chapter
3. In Revelation 13, the Beast comes up out of the sea; but here he is identified with "the Abyss"... the prison of the demons which were unleashed in Revelation 9
4. Thus John is saying this man is dominated by Satan and his demonic power
5. He is MIGHTY in power and God allows him to conquer the two witnesses... to overpower them and attack them and kill them

Daniel 7:21 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them

Daniel 7:25 The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.

6. BUT he is only permitted to do this "when they have finished their testimony"

I. Their Dishonor

Revelation 11:8-10 Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰ The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

1. This wicked world is so filled with hatred toward God's word and God's people that they cannot conceal their delight at the deaths of these witnesses

2. They refuse them burial for 3½ days... allowing their bodies to decompose in full view of all the world... which it seems is watching by the modern technologies we know so well

J. Their Resurrection

Revelation 11:11-12 *But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck 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, while their enemies looked on.*

K. Their Impact

Revelation 11:13 *At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.*

What is coming next:

Revelation 11:14 *The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.*

This is the seventh trumpet will sound... we'll discuss it next week!

IV. Applications

A. Come to Christ!

1. The central issue here is HEEDING THE WORD OF GOD when you still have a chance to do it
2. The two witnesses are sent to proclaim God's gospel to a hostile world
3. They have power to harm and even to kill those who oppose them
4. The present messengers of the gospel are simply called on to use words to WARN people to flee to Christ while there's time

B. See the Meticulous Protection of the People of God

1. God is able to measure out the limitations of Satan's power and that of the Antichrist in the end of the world
2. So also he controls Satan's ability to attack us and harm us now

2 Peter 2:9 *the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.*

1 Corinthians 10:13 God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

C. Witness!

1. Right now, it is the era before the end... but it is coming soon
2. Like the Two Witnesses, we are called on to testify to Christ while we have time