

A THIRD WOE COMES

Revelation 11

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Revelation 11:1-19 (NIV)

“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. 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. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.’

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 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. 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. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half 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 will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. 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. 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. 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. The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon. The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’ And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and 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.’ 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.”

I. I titled this message today “The Third Woe Comes,” and the reference to the third woe derives from the fact that we’re in a sequence of what is called judgments.

They begin in chapter 8. The first four trumpets are sounded and four judgments break out against the realm of nature. But before the fifth trumpet is sounded an eagle flying in mid-heaven cries out “Woe! Woe! Woe! to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!” (Revelation 8:13). The woes that begin to break out—the fifth woe, the demonic invasion of mankind, the sixth woe, the two-hundred-million man army, and the third and final woe, which is the seventh trumpet, is the kingdom of this earth becoming the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ—should tell you that the woes are not directed toward believers for it is not a woe to a believer to acknowledge the fact that the kingdom of this earth

has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. The woes are pronounced upon an unbelieving world.

The people of God, what is their role in this time of trouble when the trumpets are sounding?

That has been the purpose of this interlude in chapters 10 and 11. Chapter 10 has tried to address the question of how long is the time before the third woe is revealed and the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. Chapter 11 is addressing the theme of what is the role and responsibility of God's people in this time of trouble.

Revelation 11 is possibly the most difficult chapter to interpret in the whole of Scripture.

Probably the multitude of interpretations regarding what the significance of Revelation 11 is, is equally proportioned to the number of persons who read the chapter. If you're looking for some clue to the end time and have a particular theory that you'd like to fit into this chapter you can conceivably take a text or a few words and make a good theory out of it. In looking at this chapter I've felt a responsibility to share with you three major views that are possible or at least are widely proclaimed among persons who believe in Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, His resurrection, His atoning death and His coming again. Evangelical persons happened to be somewhat divided with what Revelation 11 may be saying to us.

II. The president of Dallas Theological Seminary in his commentary on Revelation espouses the viewpoint toward Revelation 11 that says that you must read it with as literal interpretation as possible.

He takes the position of Revelation 11 that it is representing a pretribulation rapture position and what is being described after the church is caught up is the fate of the Jewish believers and the Jewish people in Jerusalem at the end of the age. So his view of Revelation 11 is something like this. The temple referred to that's measured is the rebuilt Jewish temple that is on Mount Zion. In

this moment of time it is not rebuilt. When John wrote Revelation there was no temple, because it had been destroyed years before by the Romans. What this Scripture is doing is setting forth a prophetic viewpoint that we may look forward to the rebuilding of the temple on Mount Zion. The mosque there now is of course going to have to be obliterated in order for a Jewish Temple to emerge. There's a little bit of spiritualization he does to the text even though he has a literal point of view because it would seem somewhat unlikely that the Antichrist would physically take over the outer court and leave the inner court standing intact for true worshippers. It may possibly mean that the messianic Jews will be kept spiritually safe in this time and those that are outside the realm of the covenant are kept unsafe. The 42 months are literally the last three and a half years of the tribulation. Forty-two months or 1,260 days is a three and a half-year period of time and it equates with the reference in Daniel 7 to the final years that the covenant of Israel has been broken. The two witnesses that prophesy at the end are end time prophets in the character of Moses and Elijah. There are many people who believe that these are actually Moses and Elijah. Others say it's Enoch and Elijah. The reference to calling down fire from heaven makes us think back to Elijah and turning water into blood and calling forth the plagues makes us think of Moses. But it may be possible according to this point of view that these two witnesses are end time prophets simply in the character of Moses and Elijah rather than being literally Moses and Elijah themselves. This would square with how Jesus interpreted the role of John the Baptist. When the prophet Malachi closed the Old Testament he said before the day of the Lord comes the prophet Elijah will come and Jesus said of John the Baptist, this was Elijah if you can receive it. In other words, John the Baptist was an Elijah-like person.

Two prophets come on the scene who have the ability to be immune to any kind of attack for a three-and-a-half-year period of time. Finally at the end of the tribulation they are killed by the

Antichrist in the literal city of Jerusalem, which is called Sodom and Egypt. Sodom allegorically is representative of inhospitality to the people of God. And Egypt is the place where the people of God are kept in slavery. This would be Jerusalem. And their dead bodies lie unburied for three and a half days. The grossest kind of insult in Near Eastern terms is to leave a body unburied in the open in the street for three and a half days.

The fact that they will be seen by the whole world is something that could not have been fulfilled in the time John was writing. In the modern age of communications the view would emerge that the world will literally see this.

The two witnesses, after three and a half days of lying dead, in the street are resurrected by God, and taken into heaven while Jerusalem suffers an earthquake, experiences seven thousand literal fatalities and the remaining Jews recognize God's power although they do not repent. They simply recognize God's power. The seventh trumpet then sounds, signaling the beginning of the reign of God, and the millennial age has started. Then the temple of God in heaven is opened. It is seen as a deliberate contrast to His temple on earth. Throughout Revelation, God never descends from His temple in heaven. The temple above is secure, but on earth it has been the symbol of attack and warfare. This is the view shared by many in the body of Christ today.

III. Another view is one that might be called a modified literal view of Revelation, which states the view that the church is going to be taken up after the Tribulation—the posttribulation position.

This point of view says that not everything can be taken literally. Some of it is meant by the writer to be taken symbolically. Therefore what the purpose of Revelation 11 is, is to answer the question that Paul raises in Romans 11: When is Israel going to be grafted back in and made part of the people of God? When is this going to occur and how is this going to occur? Revelation 11

answers the question raised in Romans 11. The temple is not so much a literal building. It is the redeemed remnant of Israel who are gathered. The outer court and the city, which is trampled down by the Gentiles, represents nonbelievers who will be trampled by the enemy. The 42 months may be literal but they also maybe symbolic representing the period of satanic power concentrated in the hands of the Antichrist who arises from the abyss just like the demonic plague in Revelation 8. Three and a half years is a time, which by the way is taken historically from the ravaging of the Jewish temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian who took the temple, a three-and-a half-year period of time when the Syrian desecrated the temple by offering pigs on the altar and bringing brothels into the inner courts of the temple precincts. This three-and-a-half-year period of time then was picked up in Jewish literature and by the apostles and by early Christians to be representative of the concentrated force of evil that will occur at the end of the age. Three and a half is one half of seven. Seven is complete. Three and a half therefore represents a broken time, a broken period, a violent period, a crushing moment. Some would say this three and a half years represents a symbol of the brokenness of the time, the incompleteness of Satan's power. It's concentrated but it can never run its full course. Or it's literally a forty-two-month period as well. According to this point of view the two witnesses represent either the witness of the Church to Israel or they represent two end time prophets who were sent to bring about the conversion of Israel. We know from the text in verse 8 that these are Christian prophets because the phrase was used "Where their Lord was crucified," linking these prophets with the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. Following the death of the witnesses and the resurrecting in Jerusalem the rest of Israel becomes saved. When they give glory to God this doesn't mean necessarily that they become saved but the term represents they were saved. It's the final

gathering of Israel. They now embrace Jesus as the Messiah before the Lord's second return to the earth.

When the witnesses are raised from the dead and the Jews who have not believed prior to this time have believed then the old covenant people and the new covenant people have been gathered together triumphantly in the kingdom of God. The Lord returns from heaven and the kingdom of this world is the kingdom of our God and God's temple in heaven is open. The kingdom of this world is a striking phrase used of this moment of time. Verse 15 does not say "kingdoms"—plural—of this world, but simply the "kingdom" of this world, representing the truth of Scripture that God views all the succeeding monarchs and governments under one administration, the administration of the evil one. In every age in every people throughout every era of time there's only been one kingdom. It's the kingdom of this world as compared to the kingdom of God that is coming.

God's temple in heaven is open. Signifying that now we walk with God simply in the Spirit. We do not see God. We do not see His temple. We do not see into His heaven except through Scripture. Our walk with God now is through the Spirit but then it will be visual and then we can feel and touch and taste. This chapter tells us of the conversion of Israel.

This may be one area where we have to wait and see what happens. I was talking with a Bible study about the fact that, if you had had any group of biblical people who knew the Old Testament before Jesus was born in Bethlehem sit down and talk about how the Messiah is going to come and how was He going to manifest himself, you would have that group of people disagreeing on the precise chronology that was going to happen. They couldn't fit it all together. They needed the event in order to be able to understand how the prophecies lined up. Sometimes

I think the coming of the Lord is like that. We're going to need the event. Then we'll say that's how it was meant!

Another point of view is a spiritualized or a symbolic view of Revelation 11 and a post tribulation viewpoint as well. A person who takes the literal view says if you take anything other than the literal view then you're not being true to Scripture—the symbolic or the spiritualized view is explaining Scripture away. This is not necessarily the case. For example, in Matthew 5, when Jesus said, "If your eye offends you pluck it out; if your hand offends you cut it off," if you interpret Him literally at that point, you're going to have a great many deformed people walking around. Jesus did not mean it to be interpreted literally at that point. He was speaking in a figure of speech we call hyperbole—an overstatement or an exaggerated statement. He meant it to be spiritualized or allegorized at that particular moment rather than literalized. It may very well be, as we look at Revelation 11, that these statements are being given to the Early Church to acquaint it with the spiritual struggle that the people of God are always facing. So he interprets it in this fashion.

The temple, which is described in Revelation 11, is the people of God. The prophet is told to rise and to measure the temple of God, meaning the people of God. These are God's own. They are going to be preserved spiritually. The outer court and the holy city represent their physical existence that God in a time of trouble has guaranteed that He will preserve them inwardly, but He has not accorded to His church, His people, a guarantee of their physical preservation or their ability to be exempt from martyrdom. The church, on the one hand, is protected spiritually but it's unprotected from physical persecution.

The two witnesses, rather than representing two specific individuals, are symbolic of the two-fold witness of the church. John in Revelation 11 is basing the two witnesses on a portion of Old

Testament Scriptures found in Zechariah 4. Here the prophet is shown a lampstand and two olive trees that are by the lampstand. The olive tree has a pipe going in the lampstand and the imagery is such that the two olive trees are providing the oil which makes the burning of the lampstand possible. The two olive trees in this case are pictured as Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua. The statement to Zechariah is “not by might not by power but by My Spirit says the LORD.” What John is doing as he’s inspired by the Holy Spirit is take an Old Testament passage which talks about the coming of the Spirit of God and says the olive tree is a ministry of the Spirit as it sustains the twofold witness of the church—a royal witness of the fact that Jesus is coming as king and a priestly witness which says He is coming and He has already interceded as a priest for all of us.

This kingly priestly witness of the church is sustained. The church as it witnesses has nothing lacking of Moses and Elijah’s power. The idea of fire coming from a prophet’s mouth is not meant as a fire-breathing prophet like a fire-breathing dragon. Rather, it is a spiritual term much like Jeremiah 5:14 who calls the word of God fire in His mouth. It is the preaching of the Word which is devastating upon the opponents of those who witness for the Lord.

The church is preserved until such time as His testimony is ended. Individuals may be persecuted and their bodies may lie dead but the church as an entity, as a being as a people of God, is kept preserved until the church’s ministry has been fulfilled. When its ministry has been fulfilled, its physical protection is lifted. And with the lifting of its physical protection the Antichrist makes war on the church. The war against the church is successful and the Antichrist reigns supreme. The great city in which the body of the dead church lies, the literalists would have us say it would be Jerusalem but the seven times in Revelation where the words “the great city” is used always refers to Babylon or Rome. What’s being talked of here is simply the city of man in

contrast to the city of God. Jesus was as much crucified in LA or Rome as He was in Jerusalem. It is the city of man where the church lies dead in the street. The defeat of the church by Antichrist brings joy to the world, a perverse Purim breaks out. We know from Esther 9:19 and 22 when the Jews had been delivered from the hanging of Haman there was a day of gladness and feasting, a day they sent choice portions to one another and gifts to the poor. The people of God celebrated because they had been delivered. Now the tables are reversed and the enemies of God celebrate in perverse Purim or a perverse Christmas, exchanging gifts because the Antichrist has won. Jesus has said the disciples will weep and lament but the world will rejoice. This is that moment.

But then the triumph of the church becomes openly visible to the whole world. For the Lord takes them up in a cloud unto himself. The world too late realizes the truth of God and they are compelled by overriding terror to recognize the true Lord is Christ and not Antichrist. The new age comes. Angels give thanks and God is seen as faithful to His covenant.

All of the brothers who hold these points of view love the Lord with all their heart. They're all born again people and they all have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. In regard to the future they look at the same passage of Scripture and at three distinct points of view. Surely there must be a point of view which can be non-disagreed upon. A point of view that's practical and devotional, that moves the future into the now. This seems to me what Revelation is always trying to do with the people of God. John is writing to first-century believers, and he's not just simply relating to them some kind of idea of here's what's going to happen in the future, but it doesn't relate to you now. But he's in effect saying in light of the fact that this is going to happen here is how you should apply it to your life right now what is going on.

IV. It seems to me that we are instructed and deeply fed in our devotional lives by understanding some implications of this passage which cannot be disagreed upon.

The implications are maybe perhaps illustrated by the idea of the following: Given the future that is coming what we're meant to do with the text of Revelation is like a piece of tracing paper. Lay it over that and kind of draw a sketch so we can have right now what is being spoken to us by the Spirit. What the Spirit is saying now is that those who are kept safe in its temple then (whether it's a literal temple or a spiritual temple is beside the point), those who are kept safe in His temple then are also kept safe in His temple now. What does it mean to be in the temple of God right now? If you think of the temple, there are two high points in the temple. The altar of sacrifice, which was in the court of the priests, and the Holy of Holies. Inside the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, in which were contained in a golden block, the law of Moses and, overhead, a mercy seat with cherubim whose wings were bent toward one another. The high priest annually would offer an offering at the altar for the sin of the people and carry the blood into the Holy of Holies and apply it to the wings of the cherubim that God might look at that blood as a symbol of mercy and might forgive His people who have violated His law. The blood became for them a sacrifice for sin which God accepted and provided freedom. The events of the temple were really structured around the offering and once a year going into the Holy of Holies to apply blood to the mercy seat indicating God's people were forgiven because a sacrifice had been accepted.

What it means to be the temple of God now is that we have come to the altar of the Cross where the sinless sacrifice has given himself for us. But God through Christ Jesus has lifted our sin by being the perfect sacrifice and as Hebrews said with His own blood He atones for us. He went into the Holy of Holies that cannot be seen by the naked eye and presented His blood as an

atonement once and for all for us. We've understood that we are in the temple of God because of Christ's offering. Then we see that we are kept by the Spirit of God. That while death can ravage our bodies and accidents can happen and defects can occur in life when we are in the temple of God worshipping in view of the sacrifice that Christ has made for us, we are safe, preserved, now and in the age to come.

These are they who have eternal life whose names are written in the Book of Life. I don't have to wait until the end time to worry about whether I'm in that temple or not. If I am in Christ, now, I am kept preserved.

I think also there's this aspect of application that is telling us that he who testifies until he's finished is the testimony of the two witnesses, must testify until he is finished now. The witness of the two witnesses, whether they be literal people or simply symbolic representatives of the church, whatever view you take you recognize from the text of Revelation that they witness until their work is finished. It is only when their work is finished that the Antichrist can exercise his power against them. There is the sense that John is writing there are those who because of the hardness of being a Christian have been tempted to walk away from the Cross and to walk out of the temple and to not complete their testimony which may have eventuated in martyrdom. John is simply saying of this experience, if the two witnesses can continue their testimony until they have suffered the ultimate indignity of martyrdom following their Lord then how much more ought we also to finish our testimony and not give in and not walk away.

Paul struggles with the fact that there are people whom he knows that have walked away from Christ. One who joined him in giving greetings to the Colossian church, a few years later as Paul writes 2 Timothy says "Demas has forsaken me having loved this present world." Paul says in Philippians 3:18-19 "Many of who I have told you often and now tell you even with tears live as

enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their God is their belly and their glory in their shame with their mind set on earthly things.” Here are persons who, within the temple worshipping if you will, who walked away and did not complete their testimony, who follow their own interests and desires.

I think the greatest sorrow I experience as a pastor is realizing that over the course of years as one observes the inflow and the outflow of the congregation that there are people who fall away, people who fall away not only from the church but people who fall away from the Lord, people who do not complete their testimony. I struggle a great deal with this because in a certain sense it represents failure of myself as pastor. I bear it personally. It represents at times also failure of the church.

But I think there is also a point where a person must take responsibility for their own falling away and not simply claim, “If the pastor had just come by my house quicker or if a member of the church had demonstrated more concern sooner it wouldn’t have happened to me. I wouldn’t have fallen away.” You cannot make a corpse stand up.

It is easy to blame spiritual decline on someone else, on a pastor or a church. Where there is blame that is rightfully placed, it ought to be borne and repented of and confessed. But there is a certain sense in which when you choose to fall away and not complete your testimony you yourself are going to have to answer to God about that. And give testimony to God as to why your mission that God gave you to do was not completed.

So this admonition of the Scripture gets hold of us. He who lives now should also finish his testimony and complete it. That is the spirit of a person who has determined to finish their testimony even if it involved the outpouring of their blood.

I think there is a third theme going through this chapter and all of Revelation. It is the theme of he who welcomes the kingdom of God then has already welcomed to it now. There is no welcoming of the kingdom of God if the Lord comes and I am unprepared. It is not a hope. It is a real woe. A judgment pronounced. For there is a day that comes that is too late. If I am to welcome the kingdom of God when it comes and I recognize that it is coming, I recognize that a hundred years from now the kingdom of God for me will have long come. The kingdom of God is coming. If I am to welcome it then, I must welcome it now. The Lord has already chosen to rule in the lives of those who welcome Him.

Somehow the coming kingdom can be compared to how we conduct elections in the United States. Every four years in November the country holds an election to determine who the president will be. On that day the president is elected. But while he is elected he does not take office until January 20th. There is a three-month period of time almost in which the new president is simply known as the president-elect. Everyone knows he is going to be president. During that time he is selecting the members of his administration, interviewing those who are going to hold high office. But he has not yet been formally inaugurated. But we know he is the president.

When Christ died and when He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven His election was guaranteed. He is the new ruler of the earth. His government is an everlasting government. There has been a period of time in the mercy of God between that moment of His election and that moment of His coronation or inauguration.

The kingdom is certainly coming. We who know who has been elected king have chosen to join His administration now. So with the angels who praise Him before the throne of God they can record how His prophets and saints great and small rejoice in Him who has destroyed the

destroyers of the earth. We who walk in the Spirit realize there is a temple not made with hands in the heavens, will live to see that moment when the temple of God is opened for us and the mysteries of God which we have functioned with and believed in through faith are made evident and real—touchable and speakable and seeable. The kingdom is coming. Have you welcomed the king already? That’s what this chapter is saying to us.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we give You thanks for Jesus. We praise You today that we are a part of Your people, that through Your own blood given on the sacrifice of the altar of the cross we have been redeemed. You have called us who were no people, Your people. And You have loved us with an everlasting love. You see us through Your blood, not through the law. We welcome You and we praise You. We know that You will keep those whose heart is stayed on You. There are temptations each of us have experienced this week. There are moments when we have felt that we have been tempted out of our capacity. Perhaps we have even failed. So we stay within the temple not because of the people who are there. We stay within that temple because we know that’s where the forgiveness of sin is. That’s where the blood has been shed. That’s where we may have been at one with God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. Whether we have succeeded or failed we know that whenever we come to You, there is help and forgiveness and protection and a place of refuge in Your habitation. It is possible there may those here whose interests in remaining in the temple has cooled or perhaps have never set foot within the precincts of the spiritual realm where Your blood was shed. We recall the great truth of Your power demonstrated in the coming age and we would want to now put ourselves in right relationship with You. We know that outside the blood of Jesus Christ there is no forgiveness of sin. Stop those today who are straying or who have never come to You. Speak so powerfully into

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their heart by the Spirit that they would find their place of refuge in Your cross that no one would leave here today outside Your temple, outside Your care, outside of welcoming You. May we see ourselves as pilgrims in the temple, rejoicing for what You've done, welcoming You with open arms and open hearts. Praise Your name. Thank You for the truth of Your word which always speaks to us and gives us courage and hope through Christ our Lord. Amen.