

The Temple and the Two Prophetic Witnesses (Revelation 11:1-14)

The interludes in Revelation provide insight into future events that are interwoven into the three series of sequential judgments—the Seal Judgments, the Trumpet Judgments, and the Bowl Judgments. Revelation 10 introduced one of these interludes which involved a mighty angel, a little scroll, and an exhortation for John to continue his prophetic task. Revelation 11:1-14 continues this interlude by describing the future temple in Jerusalem and two prophetic witnesses who will stand up for God in the face of the most severe spiritual resistance ever to plague this planet. Although these verses refer to future events, they challenge Christians today to be vigilant, diligent, and resilient in their faith.

Be amazed—in spite of pagan Gentile dominance Temple worship will be restored (11:1-2).

One of the most amazing political developments in modern history was the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. For centuries the Jews maintained no national identity, but the revival of a Jewish nation set the stage for future events as described in the Bible. The future holds yet another amazing event, the building of a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It's hard to imagine, given current political realities, how this will take place. But Revelation 11:1-2 clearly portrays the existence of a temple in Jerusalem in the future even in the midst of resistance on the part of the nations of the world. Christians should never cease to be amazed at what God can do.

John received a measuring reed and was instructed to measure the Temple, the altar, and the worshipers (11:1).

At this point in John's vision he was given a measuring reed, a lightweight stalk of a plant used in ancient times for taking measurements. A voice, presumably the voice of the one who gave John the measuring reed, addressed him. Many ancient manuscripts include the phrase "and the angel stood," making the mighty angel of chapter 10 the speaker. John was instructed to measure the temple of God along with its altar and the ones worshiping in the temple.

The prophet Ezekiel, in a vision, had observed the measurement of a future temple and its surroundings (Ezekiel 40-48). The prophet Zechariah also saw in a vision a man who was appointed to measure the city of Jerusalem in order to prepare for its reestablishment after Israel's exile (Zechariah 2:1-2). Significantly, Zechariah's ministry included exhorting Israel's leaders to rebuild the temple in his day (Zechariah 4:8-10). The act of measuring implies ownership and preparation.

John was instructed to measure the temple of God, indicating that the future temple will belong to God. John's act of measuring might even imply preparation for rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Since there is no temple in Jerusalem today and since there will be one in the future, that rebuilding could conceivably take place during the first half of the seven-year Tribulation period. The temple will belong to God, but midway through that Tribulation period it will be desecrated (2 Thessalonians 2:4). So, many of the events in Revelation 11:1-14 may best be set in the period prior to that desecration. John was also to measure the altar, here most likely the altar of sacrifice. In addition he was to measure, or count, the worshipers. At that

stage in the Tribulation period there will be Jews who worship the true God within the context of a rebuilt temple. However, when that future temple is desecrated the Jews will be forced to flee (Matthew 24:15-20).

John was further instructed not to measure the outer court of the Temple because it was given to the Gentiles who would trample the holy city for forty-two months (11:2).

The temple in the first century included the main edifice, a courtyard for the Jews, and an outer courtyard for Gentiles. The future temple will have this same basic layout. John was instructed to measure the temple edifice and the surrounding area for the Jewish worshipers. However, he was told not to measure the outer courtyard. This courtyard was given over to the Gentiles who will trample the holy city, Jerusalem, for forty-two months. Jesus warned about this same situation, stating that the Gentiles would trample the city until their time reached its fulfillment (Luke 21:24). This period of forty-two months may refer to the second half of the Tribulation period, also called the Great Tribulation. The temple will be considered relatively sacred during the first half of the Tribulation, but when the temple is desecrated midway through that period the Gentile nations will trample the city of Jerusalem until their time is fulfilled at the return of Jesus Christ. In spite of pagan Gentile dominance in that day, there will be a temple and there will be worshipers who honor the true and living God.

**Be courageous—in spite of harsh opposition
two prophetic witnesses will stand up for God (11:3-6).**

At this point in the interlude John learns about two prophetic witnesses who will display great power and stand up for God in the face of severe persecution.

God will send two special witnesses to carry out a prophetic ministry for 1260 days (11:3-4).

Speaking on behalf of God, the angel then told John that God would give His two witnesses to the world scene. These two witnesses will prophesy, that is, speak with the authority of God for 1260 days. This timeframe equals the forty-two months of verse 2 (one month consisting of 30 days), although the different way of expressing this duration may hint at the difference between the first and second halves of the Tribulation Period. The two prophetic witnesses will wear sackcloth, symbolizing the dire nature of their ministry.

The identity of these two witnesses is given only as “the two olive trees” and “the two lamp stands” that stand in the presence of the Lord of the earth. Clearly these references point back to Zechariah 4:2-14. In that passage there is a single seven-pronged lamp stand along with two olive trees. The lamp stand refers to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit as Zechariah 4:6 declares: “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord.” The two lamp stands in Revelation 11:4, therefore, stand for the power of the Holy Spirit that will be at work through these two prophetic witnesses. Zechariah 4:14 describes the two olive trees as two specially anointed servants of God, anticipating the role of the two prophetic witnesses in Revelation 11:3-4. Any further identification of these two witnesses is mere speculation. Some consider the two witnesses to be Enoch and Elijah due to the fact that neither of these two men died physically. Others consider the two witnesses to be Moses and Elijah due to the similarities

in their miraculous powers. However, it seems best to view the two witnesses as two distinct individuals who will display divine power in much the same way as did Moses, Elijah, and other prophets. God will appoint two anointed, prophetic witnesses to speak out in His name for 1260 days.

The timing of their ministry is a subject of debate. The 1260 days may refer to the second half of the seven-year Tribulation Period since that's the time in which Jerusalem will be trodden by the nations. However, the influence of these two witnesses may contribute to the salvation of the 144,000 sealed Jews (Revelation 7:4) and of the vast multitude (Revelation 7:9), which seems to take place in the first half of the Tribulation Period. The nature of the plagues these two witnesses call down on the earth also parallels some of the judgments that take place during the first half of the Tribulation. Furthermore, to place the death of these two witnesses immediately before the second coming of Jesus Christ seems abrupt. For these reasons the scales tip slightly in favor of viewing the ministry of the two prophetic witnesses as taking place in the first half of the Tribulation Period.

These two prophetic witnesses will possess miraculous power to protect themselves and to inflict judgment on the earth (11:5-6).

Because the two prophetic witnesses will be the targets of deep seated animosity on the part of the unbelieving world their lives will be constantly at risk. People will attempt to hurt or even kill them. But "fire" will proceed "out of their mouths" and devour their enemies. In fact, those who wish to harm these prophetic witnesses deserve to die in this way! According to 2 Kings 1:9-12, Elijah called fire down from heaven to destroy his enemies. These two prophetic witnesses, by their spoken word ("comes from their mouths"), will have the same power to protect themselves and their message.

In addition to their power to protect themselves these two prophetic witnesses will have the power to bring harm on the earth. They will have the authority "to shut heaven" so that it will not rain during the period of their ministry. Interestingly, Elijah called for a drought that also lasted three and a half years (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1; James 5:17). These two witnesses will also have the authority to turn the fresh water supplies into blood and to strike the earth with all kinds of plagues as often as they choose. These abilities are reminiscent of Moses' miraculous power (Exodus 7:17-21; 9:13-14). Some of these works parallel the earlier Seal and Trumpet Judgments and may involve a combined instrumentation (compare Revelation 6:5-6; 8:8-11). These two prophetic witnesses will display great courage in the face of severe opposition.

**Be hopeful—in spite of the obvious work
of God evil will seemingly be victorious (11:7-10).**

Although the two prophetic witnesses will be protected by God throughout their ministry, the time will come when their ministry will be finished and their lives will be taken. In that apparent moment of victory on the part of evil, God will still be in control and worthy of His people's trust and hope.

When the work of the two prophetic witnesses is finished the beast from the Abyss will oppose and kill them (11:7).

The two prophetic witnesses will “finish their witness” at an appointed time in God’s plan. At that point “the beast coming up from the Abyss” will engage them in battle, gain the victory over them, and kill them. The word “beast” best describes the evil, deadly nature of this individual. The fact that the beast comes from the Abyss indicates that this individual is demonic in nature. More specifically, this may be a reference to Satan himself. Later, two other beasts—one coming out of the sea (Revelation 13:1) and one coming out of the land (Revelation 13:11)—will accompany Satan in an unholy trinity of resistance to God and His people. Therefore, it makes sense to distinguish the beast coming out of the Abyss from the other two beasts.

The corpses of the two prophetic witnesses will lie exposed in Jerusalem for all to see for three and a half days (11:8-9).

After the beast from the Abyss kills the two prophetic witnesses their dead bodies will be left unburied as a way to further denigrate these two men and their mission. This will take place in the city of Jerusalem. John describes Jerusalem figuratively as Sodom, an ancient center of immorality, and Egypt, a center of idolatry and oppression in ancient times. It was also the city where the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, making its identity as Jerusalem certain. While the bodies of the two witnesses lie exposed in the streets of Jerusalem, individuals from every “people, tribe, language, and nation” will view their corpses. Jerusalem will be inhabited by people from all around the world, so it’s reasonable to expect that those who view the bodies will represent the global community. The people of Jerusalem will refuse to bury the bodies of the two witnesses. This condition will last for three and a half days, at which point God will intervene.

People will rejoice and celebrate over the death of the two prophetic witnesses (11:10).

Those living on earth in that day will take great delight in the deaths of the two prophetic witnesses. It will seem to all that evil has triumphed over good. The people will rejoice and celebrate, even sending gifts to one another. After all, in their minds these two witnesses had “tormented” them—calling down fire and plagues and speaking out against wickedness. Sometimes even today it seems as though evil triumphs over righteousness, but any such setback is temporary at best. God is still in control. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, is Lord.

Be confident—in spite of seeming victory over the two prophetic witnesses God’s resurrection power will prevail (11:11-14).

God will display His resurrection power by raising the two prophetic witnesses from the dead in the sight of all. Righteousness will triumph over evil.

After three and a half days God will restore the two prophetic witnesses to life, causing great fear among those who see it happen (11:11).

After the three and a half days in which the corpses of the two prophetic witnesses will lie exposed on the streets of Jerusalem “the breath of life from God” will enter them and they will stand to their feet resurrected. God is a God of resurrection power, and that power will be evident in the raising of the two witnesses. This resurrection power will prove that evil never did actually triumph and will cause great fear to fall on those who look on.

A voice will invite the two prophetic witnesses to come up to heaven and they will ascend in a cloud while their enemies look on (11:12).

Having been raised to life again, the two prophetic witnesses will hear a voice inviting them to heaven, saying, “Come up here!” (compare Revelation 4:1). Immediately these two prophetic witnesses will be taken up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watch what’s taking place.

A great earthquake will destroy a tenth of the city, killing seven thousand people, and terrifying the survivors (11:13).

At the moment that the two witnesses are taken up to heaven an earthquake will strike the city of Jerusalem. One-tenth of the city will be destroyed. Seven thousand people will die. The survivors will become terrified and will give “glory” to the God of heaven. However, this response will likely be less than heartfelt. It’s likely that in giving glory to God the survivors are merely acknowledging God’s hand in these events and are not truly penitent.

The account of the sequence of the Trumpet Judgments would now resume (11:14).

The last three Trumpet Judgments were designated as “woes” because of their horror (Revelation 8:13). John had described the first two of these woes (Revelation 9). Having presented the interlude involving the mighty angel and the two prophetic witnesses, John now returned to the sequence of judgments. It was time for the final Trumpet Judgment, the final woe to fall on the earth. It was “coming soon,” with no more delay. The account of the two prophetic witnesses, however, proved again that the Lamb is Lord. It reminds us that Christians today need to be vigilant, diligent, and resilient in their faith.