

8. The witness to the Gospel on earth

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, on page 1034 of Revelation 11, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we look at this together.

God our Father, how we praise you. You have given to us your word. Sometimes it speaks to us in a way whose clarity cannot be mistaken. Other times it speaks to us in picture and in symbol, as it does in the passage we'll consider.

We pray that your gracious Holy Spirit will take that written word and use my spoken words to lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

So, Revelation chapter 11, the witness to the gospel on earth. C.S. Lewis was once asked, how did the idea of writing the Narnia stories come into your mind, particularly the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe?

And he said this, it all began with a picture. A picture of a fawn carrying parcels and an umbrella through a snowy landscape.

[1 : 2 6] It all began with a picture. Then he goes on to say, suddenly Aslan came bounding into the story, and he drew the whole story together, as indeed he drew all the other six Narnia stories together.

It struck me that you could hardly say better than that about the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is a book of pictures.

Pictures which make little sense unless Aslan, the Lion of Judah, the root and the offspring of David, comes bounding into the story and draws the story together.

This whole series, which began some time ago, I've given the overall title of Christ, the first word and the last word. So let's look at this chapter, this part of the first and last word, and see what we can make of it.

Now it is clearly the counterpart of chapter 10. In chapter 10, this mighty angel, whom I suggested was Gabriel, bringing the announcement of salvation to the whole world, comes down with a little scroll, and tells John he is to eat that scroll, and he is to prophesy, chapter 10, verse 11, about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.

[2 : 4 8] That scroll is going to be very, very bitter, because the contents are very bitter and rather nasty reality. It's a powerful pictorial description of the savage persecution of the church.

Just as the last chapter, chapter 10, was the sure protection of the church, here we have the savage persecution of the church. In many ways, it is a pictorial representation of what the Lord Jesus Christ says in the Gospel of John, chapter 16, verse 33.

In the world, he says, you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world. So you see how the Bible works. We've got that unambiguous statement in the Gospel of John.

You will have trouble, but I have overcome the world. But the Bible doesn't just appeal to our minds. The Bible appeals to our imaginations, our emotions.

And therefore, in powerful pictorial language and symbol, we have here a picture of that reality, the trouble in the world, but the fact that Christ has overcome it.

[4 : 02] Now, there's a question, there's a number of questions this chapter raises. Not exactly straightforward. I said to you last week, we were getting into the roller coaster part of Revelation. I mean, there are many commentators who say, this is the most difficult chapter in Revelation.

But I've yet to meet a commentary on Revelation that doesn't say that about every other chapter in Revelation. So that's not especially helpful. The point is, some people want to project this into the far future.

The rapture of the church has happened. God's people have been taken to heaven, secretly. So-called rapture. And when they're in heaven, there are seven years unfold of great tribulation, which is identified with the 70th week in Daniel's prophecy.

Don't worry, this bit's going to be brief. And during that period, these two witnesses arise, and they literally speak in the great city.

They are literally killed, and their bodies raised to heaven. Now, I've given reasons earlier on for rejecting that particular view. So let me tell you what my own view of this chapter is.

[5 : 16] My view of this chapter is, this is the witnessing church throughout its history. Parallel to chapters 2 and 3. Remember chapters 2 and 3, the letters to the seven churches.

Those churches in a kind of semicircle around western Turkey, Asia Minor, as it was called then, for which the apostle had particular responsibility.

But also the church throughout the world, throughout time and space. So that's what I'm going to take this, through the witnessing church throughout its history, and between the comings of Christ.

Now I'm going to look at the chapter in three movements, if you like. First of all, in verses 1 to 6, we have the enduring witness of the church.

That's what these verses are about. The enduring witness of the church. Now the apostle John has been called into the vision, if you like, himself.

[6 : 14] He's no longer simply describing the scene, he's participating in it. And I want to suggest that John, the apostle, John the writer of this letter, in some ways symbolizes the whole church.

He speaks for them here. And he is told to measure the temple of God. This is taken from Ezekiel's vision in chapter 42 and 43, where Ezekiel speaks of the rebuilt temple.

Now what does this mean then? Is John literally, at some point, or is someone at some point in the future, literally measuring a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem?

And I don't, as I've said, I don't accept that view. So first of all, what we have here in these verses, verses 1 to 6, is the powerful protection of the church.

As the church carries out its enduring witness, it is protected. The temple is not here, I suggest, a literal building. I was right in suggesting that John is given this vision in the late years of the end of the first century, round about the 90s.

[7 : 30] The temple in Jerusalem had gone in AD 70, destroyed by the Romans. No, this is the temple of God, the people of God, indwelt by the Spirit.

That's what the New Testament means when it talks about the temple. Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians, you are the temple of God. And this, I suggest that this corresponds to the sealing in chapter 7.

In chapter 7, the servants of God are sealed. Here they are, as it were, surrounded by powerful protection. Now, this does not mean immunity to physical danger, clearly.

We know that many in the church were suffering martyrdom. We know that from chapters 2 and 3. What it does mean is protection against spiritual danger. There is awful spiritual danger.

And when we come to chapters 12 and 13, we'll see just how dreadful that danger is, the devil and his henchmen. What it means is that the church of God will be protected against these assaults.

[8 : 39] Satan will not be able to destroy them. Satan will not be able to destroy their faith. Now, there's this curious bit as well.

Do not measure the court outside the temple. Once again, there are different ways of interpreting this. This could mean, and some commentators argue, this is the nominal church.

As I say, not the real people of God, but the hangers-on. Those who are, as it were, on the fringes. The nominal church, which has compromised with the world, as you get in chapters 2, in chapter 2 in particular.

Or it could be, and I suspect this is what it does mean, it could be a way of saying that all the devilish attacks on the church only reach the outer fringes.

Remember what Paul says in Colossians, your lives are hid with Christ in God. They can't be harmed. Eternal life will never be taken away from you.

[9 : 43] You'll never be hurt by the second death. It's the eternal security of the believer, once again. So we have the powerful protection of the church during this period of 42 months.

Now what on earth is all this about? Now we're going to understand that. We've got to go back to the book of Daniel. In that the book of Daniel speaks about the period of the exile.

But it also prophesies of a period in the second century, when the Syrian king Antiochus, Antiochus Epiphanes, is going to take over Jerusalem and try to turn it into a godless city.

He offered pig's flesh on the altar of burnt offering. He set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies. This is what Daniel calls the abomination which makes desolate.

And that 42-month period before Antiochus was expelled by the great Judas Maccabeus, this period in apocalyptic writing, I believe, symbolizes the whole period between the comings of Christ, sometimes three and a half years, sometimes 42 months, sometimes slightly shorter, slightly longer like the 1260 days.

[10 : 57] The period during which the church on earth is subject to the attacks of the devil and the attacks of the devil's emissaries, but nevertheless protected.

What Hebrews calls the last days. We are in the last days. But the last days began when Christ came to earth and they will finish when he returns from heaven.

So what we're talking about here is, I say, the powerful protection of the church. And the other thing in this section about the enduring witness of the church is the effective witness of the church.

And let's get to the two witnesses now. The two witnesses here, they are very clearly modeled on Moses and Elijah. Fire pours from their mouth, consumes their foes.

Remember Elijah, the fire coming down from heaven and then again in the less well-known story in Two Kings, one where fire falls from heaven and consumes the armies coming to capture Elijah.

[12 : 02] The plagues of Egypt and so on. The river Nile turning into blood. Moses and Elijah, the great Old Testament figures, whom Luke or Malachi says, will come again on the last days.

Not so much literally, because after all, we are told who Elijah is to come again. In other words, John the Baptist. And Moses, of course, points to Jesus Christ himself.

And they both appear on the mountain of transfiguration, speaking with Jesus about his suffering. Then also, the olive trees and the two lampstands, that comes from the prophecy of Zechariah, chapter 4.

The olive trees which symbolize the king of Israel and the lampstands symbolizing the priests. Now you see what John is doing. He's doing what he so often does throughout this book.

He's ransacking the Old Testament for pictures. Just as we began. It all began with a picture. We have these powerful pictures of the witness of the church throughout the ages.

[13 : 11] And of course, the Old Testament church as well. And in the Zechariah passage, there's the well-known phrase, not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

What is it that activates the two witnesses? What is it that causes the church not to be destroyed? It is the power of the Spirit himself.

Now, Elijah and Moses were given supernatural powers, powers over the elements, powers over the earth. But this is symbolic, surely, of for the whole church, of the power of the Spirit, the Spirit-filled witness of the church.

So, we begin then in verses 1 to 6 with the enduring witness of the church. It will continue throughout these 42 months, throughout the last days.

But then we come in verses 7 to 10 to the apparent eclipse of the witness of the church. How are we going to reconcile the enduring witness with the apparent eclipse?

[14 : 22] Verse 7. When they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit, will make war on them and conquer them and kill them.

Obviously, the enduring and effective witness attracts the special rage of the devil and his henchmen. In chapter 13, we're going to see how the devil summons two beasts, one from the sea and one from the land.

This is talking particularly about the devil's attacks on the witness of the church. I think we've got to remember this. It's not, we mustn't, you know, we mustn't exaggerate our own importance.

It's not after all us that the devil is concerned with. The devil hates Christ, wishes to destroy him, wishes to destroy his kingdom. But because we are associated with Christ, then we are, of course, going to attract the rage of the devil.

Now, what does this mean, then, they were killed, their dead bodies lay there? Does this mean, as some argue, that at the end of the last days, the professing church will die out as a visible body?

[15 : 41] Now, many respected commentators say that's what these verses mean, that the devil's work will apparently succeed. I don't myself accept that view because it's hard to reconcile, for example, with Romans 11, the great turning to the Lord at the end of the age, particularly among the Jewish people, which ushers in the fullness of the Gentiles.

But we can understand why people feel that. And, of course, this has happened and does happen in various countries, in various communities. There are places, China, other sorts of places, where the visible church was suppressed.

Not, of course, the invisible church, not, of course, the people of God behind the scenes, but the church as a visible witness, Christ. Now, since we are, obviously, not only dealing here with the last days, but we are moving, as the book moves on, towards the end of the last days, I often feel it's possible the early chapters of Acts give us a clue.

Perhaps the end and the beginning of the church age will correspond to each other. Remember, in the early chapters of Acts, which really took us through some months ago, there are two things marking the growth of the church.

One is the growth, the growth of the word, the growth of the church, tremendous spread of the gospel. The other thing is terrific persecution of all kinds. And surely, it is true that when these things come together so often, that we have often the apparent eclipse of the church's witness.

[17 : 23] After all, if you're writing a biography of Paul the Apostle, it was hardly a success story, rejected by his own people and eventually put to death by the Romans, rather like the Lord himself.

It doesn't sound a success story. And yet, I call it the apparent eclipse because the spirit is there, the word of God still grows.

So, I don't think this is saying the professing church as a body will die out. I think what it is saying is that in given times, given places, this will happen. And even at the best times, we look out on the world scene and think, well, the church really isn't making much of the Great Commission, if you like.

Second question is, what is the Great City? The dead bodies will lie in the street of the Great City, symbolically called Sodom and Egypt, where the Lord was crucified.

Some people argue it's Jerusalem, of course, taking the phrase where the Lord was crucified. For the same reasons as rejecting the idea of the literal temple, remember, Jerusalem had been trodden underfoot by the Romans some 20 years before.

[18 : 36] I think this is the city of the world, sometimes called Babylon, sometimes called here Egypt and Sodom. What John elsewhere calls the world, remember in his letters, do not love the world, all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and so on, is not of the Father, but of the world.

Sodom, standing for the corruption and moral evil of the world, and Egypt for the oppressive power of the world. Both of these things, hating the witness of the gospel, which, of course, is why they rejoice.

Verse 10, all who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because the two prophets have been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. The prophets did not have what in the jargon nowadays is called people skills.

The prophets are very much in your face. This is the word of God, and you better listen to it. Now, naturally enough, that kind of message is not a particularly congenial message to people.

And so it is, when any time when the message appears to go underground, there is rejoicing. But, this is not the end.

[19 : 57] It's the apparent end. So, that's the second thing, then, the apparent eclipse of the church's witness. We have the enduring witness of the church.

Secondly, we have the apparent eclipse of the church's witness. And then, thirdly, in verses 11 to 19, we have the endless triumph of the church's witness, the endless vindication of the church's witness.

Verse 11, And after three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them. They stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.

You can see why some people want to project this into the future and make it, you know, like Tim LaHaye in Left Behind, and so on. This makes good, this makes good novelistic stuff, makes good television, and so on.

But, this is saying what an earlier chapter has said, that they will not be hurt by the second death.

[20 : 59] All the devil can do is destroy the body. The devil cannot destroy the soul. The devil cannot separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I think symbolically, as well, it could refer to these great movements of the Spirit that happen every so often in church history, when in the deadness of nominalism and in the dullness of conventional religion, the Spirit blows his breath into the church, and the church comes to life.

These wonderful occasions, time of Wesley, Whitfield, and others, when the dying church came to life, and the gospel spread once again throughout the world.

And that hour there was a great earthquake and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people, verse 13, were killed in the earthquake. The rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Now, all through the book, John has been emphasizing that salvation is not just the salvation of individuals. It's the whole recreation of the universe.

[22 : 08] This imagery is taken from the Old Testament prophets as they prophesy the coming of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord introduced by earthquakes and so on. The day of the Lord with a whole cosmic recreation.

I think that's what it's referring to here. So, what are we talking about here? I think we're talking about two things. First of all, we are talking about the triumph of the king.

And this is why I took the reading with the seventh trumpet along with this passage. The seventh trumpet, verse 15, the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

Now, in the first part of this chapter, we have been in the kingdom of this world, haven't we? The great city called Sodom and Egypt. That place of anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-Christian activity.

But now, the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. This illustrates another thing we have in Revelation. There's constant anticipations of the ending.

[23 : 16] When we come towards the end of Revelation, chapters 19 and following, when we actually come to the end of all things, the great white throne, the judgment of the nations, and the final separation of good and evil, the final destruction of the devil, we'll see how it's been anticipated throughout the book.

Another illustration I've used of Revelation, it's like walking around a great art gallery, looking at pictures, perhaps pictures on the same theme, which repeat, but don't quite repeat it.

Or to use an analogy from a totally different field altogether, like different shots of the winning goal, which is easier to see after your team have won than after they've lost.

But this is what the book of Revelation is like, continually anticipating, continually looking forward. And in chapters 4 and 5, we have this picture of the throne of God towering above the kingdoms of this world.

John received this vision on the Lord's Day, which I said was a phrase that was deliberately double-edged. On the one hand, it is the day of resurrection.

[24 : 26] Christians started calling Sunday the Lord's Day, around about the time John is writing this book. But at the same time, what is the Lord's Day about? The Lord's Day is about the fact the Lord Jesus Christ has triumphed.

He's won. The resurrection points us to that. That's the first thing, the triumph of the king. But the second thing, the faithfulness of the king.

This is particularly the last verse. Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. Now, the ark of the covenant was the place where God met with his people.

The literal ark of the covenant, long gone, undoubtedly destroyed from Nebuchadnezzar's armies, destroyed, the city burned, the temple took it off to Babylon.

Despite what Steven Spielberg may say, there is no hocus-pocus ark of the covenant somewhere in South America, which does all kinds of marvelous things. Why is that?

[25 : 23] Because the ark of the covenant became flesh. Jesus Christ is the true ark of the covenant. The word became flesh, and we saw his glory.

And the ark of the covenant is about the faithfulness of God. The covenant faithfulness of God. That's why these kind of books you sometimes get out, you know, questions we'd like the answer to, where is the ark of the covenant now?

Well, we know the answer to where the ark of the covenant is now. Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. Christ in heaven, the ark of the covenant, guarantees the presence of his people there.

To put it another way, we have a great high priest who has gone into heaven, Jesus, the Son of God. And the flashes of lightnings, rumblings, thunder, earthquake, and hail, who is about to judge the world?

He sang a moment or two ago, Christ at God's right hand exalted, you will judge the world you made. Then in chapters 12 to 13, which we'll look at later, the whole thing moves up a gear, and we are shown the high command of good and evil.

[26 : 39] The witnessing church on earth, the enduring witness of that church, the apparent eclipse of that witness, but the endless triumph of that witness. You see, we need to see the whole picture.

It's not enough to see the fawn carrying the umbrella and the parcels through the snowy forest. Aslan must bound into the story and pull it all together. And this is exactly what the book of Revelation is saying.

The lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered. The future belongs to him. Take heart. Keep on going. Finish the race.

Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, how we praise you for this great book of Revelation, for the triumph of the Lamb in the midst of his apparent defeat and the utter indifference of so many, particularly in our own culture, towards him.

May these great truths give us strength to keep on going, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

[27 : 52] Lord, get fine. For the organizers and the defense of the kingdom, our Macht and the possibility of our faith.