

The Invincible, Suffering, Victorious Church

Revelation 11

Intro: Sinclair Ferguson tells the story of a friend who found himself, unexpectedly, on center stage, at a significant point in history. His parents were invited guests at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 at Westminster Abbey. They had the great privilege of being eye-witnesses to this important event in Britain's history. And so, on the morning of June 2, this man gathered his parents and they made their way towards the city. Because they were invited guests, they had special passes to allow them to drive down closed roads near to the Abbey, but then, at a critical junction, he made a wrong turn. And suddenly he found himself, with his parents in the back seat like minor royalty, driving completely alone, down the mall in London, that great wide street often used for such special occasions. The crowds lined the street, and seeing this man, they began to cheer madly and wave their flags and there was great rejoicing! This man had simply to be a witness to history – and suddenly and unexpectedly, found himself a part of the great occasion.

We find this sort of thing happening in the book of Revelation. We expected to see the glory of Christ our King revealed to us in these pages. And that has been the case. But here in Revelation 11 we find that we are not merely eye-witnesses to the glory of Jesus, but we have been called into and made a part of the story. The vision of Revelation isn't only about Him, but about us. Jesus not only wants us to see Him, as He is – but He wants us to see ourselves, to see the church as He sees it. In Revelation 11 Jesus to see ourselves as He sees us – eternally secure, invincible in our mission, subject to scorn and suffering, ultimately victorious.

I. Eternally Secure

In verse 1-2, John is told to take a measuring rod and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship there. Remember, this is a vision. The measuring and the temple are all symbolic. The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD about 20 years ago. This temple is the new Jerusalem, the holy city of God. Notice, John is told to measure not only the temple and the altar, but the worshipers. In other words, this temple represents those who believe in and belong to Jesus Christ. They are the house of God; they have communion with God and belong to Him.

What is the significance of measuring the temple? Numbering, in Scripture, is often associated with ownership and care.

- God numbers the stars and calls them all by name. He owns them and knows them - and because of His great power, not one of them goes missing. (Isaiah 40:26)

- When you buy a piece of property it is carefully measured and recorded so that every inch of that property is known and identified, legally, as your very own possession.

The Living God wants us to know that He knows and claims every last soul that belongs to Him. He has built this holy temple called the church. He had put every stone in place. If you belong to the church of Christ, by living faith, it is not by accident or even by your own will. It is by sovereign purpose and power. He knows your name, He has claimed you for Himself and you can never be lost. You belong to God's eternal and heavenly temple.

I love how G,K Beale describes Christians: "They are members of the heavenly community living on earth."

That is essential to know – because the experience of the people of God, on earth, will challenge their sense of identity and security as children of heaven.

One of the great debates in this chapter is over the meaning of verse 2. John is told to refrain from measuring the outer court "for it is given over to the nations and they will trample the holy city for 42 months." In the Old Testament temple – there was an inner and outer court. The outer court was for women and God-fearing Gentiles. They were true worshipers and belonged to the covenant community – but there was a distinction made.

The command in verse 2 seems to teach two truths.

- There is no need to measure the "outer court" because the new, spiritual temple of God has no distinctions. "Here there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free." There is one, united, people of God.
- The only distinction in the church of Jesus Christ is an experiential distinction between those saints who are already in heaven and the saints here on earth. The church is One church – the saints in heaven and the saints on earth form one body, created by one baptism, united to one Lord. But the church on earth, "the outer court" will experience suffering, a "trampling" by the nations.

The church of Jesus Christ is an eternally secure church called to temporary suffering. John says that the "holy city" will be "trampled for 42 months". What does that mean? The number 42 is a figurative number that represents a period of suffering before rest.

- Some scholars believe that the time between Israel coming out of Egypt and entering Canaan was 42 years – 2 years to get to Sinai, and then 40 years of wandering.
- What we know for certain is that in Numbers 33 we have a list of all the places Israel camped during those years – 42 different camps.

- In the book of Daniel, he repeatedly prophesies a time of coming trial lasting for “3 ½ years”. Understanding that the Israelites counted a month as 30 days and a year as 360 days - 42 months = 3 ½ years. It’s the same number.
- In verse 3 we have the number 1,260 days. Guess what that adds up to? 42 months.

It’s all the same number. And in every instance, it stands for a period of trial before final victory and rest. Jesus wants us to see ourselves, like Israel of old, on a pilgrim journey to the Land of Promise – and we are almost there!

II. The Witnessing/Suffering/Victorious Church

A. Witnessing

In verse 3-6 we are told of two witnesses. They are granted authority and prophesy for 1,260 days. In other words, in these “last days”, the church has a specific calling in the world. We are here to testify to the truth of God and His gospel. The two witnesses are wearing sackcloth – signifying that their message is about the coming judgment and repentance. This was the message of the Apostles – “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

This message is accompanied with Holy Spirit power. That’s the point of the olive trees and the lampstands (vs 4). This is a reference to a vision in Zechariah 4. Lamps need oil in order to burn and give light. In Zechariah’s vision he sees an olive tree pouring its oil into a lamp. It is a picture of the Holy Spirit’s limitless power poured into the church – as the church shines like a lamp in this dark world. “Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.” This is why Jesus told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they had received the Spirit, power from on high. THEN they would be authorized and equipped to be witnesses.

Jesus wants us to understand our identity. His church is not man-made institution, one among many vying for influence in the market place of religious ideas. His church is authorized by Christ Himself. Empowered by His poured out Holy Spirit. Commissioned to speak His truth for the accomplishing of His purposes – to save and to judge.

There are **two** witnesses because Jewish law required two witnesses to in order to judge someone guilty of a crime. The church judges the world guilty of crimes against God. We stand ‘contra mundum’, against the world, against its principles and powers, calling the world to repentance and faith and everlasting life in Jesus Christ!

In verse 5 and 6, the witnessing ministry of the church is likened to the that of Moses and Elijah. Both men stood in opposition to the powers of darkness in their day and called down fire from heaven on the enemies of God. Their ministries were marked by heavenly power!

So why isn't that what we see in the church today? Why don't we see this devastating power in the ministry of Paul and Peter and John? John is imprisoned on the island of Patmos. Why doesn't he just call down fire in Caesar and walk away?

Well, remember, in the book of Revelation we are watching human history from the perspective of heaven. And we see, from the perspective of heaven, the devastating power of the New Testament church as it carries out its witness. The gates of hell are powerless against the onslaught of Christ and his church. No enemy can stand against the church – though many have tried. Chairman Mao, the Communist Chinese dictator promised to wipe the Chinese church from the face of the map. He is dead and buried and the Chinese church stands millions strong. The Devil's kingdom has suffered a devastating defeat.

Paul, Peter, James and John have wielded more power in the spiritual realms than all the rulers of the earth combined. Their Spirit-empowered witness to Christ has been a mighty weapon to destroy demonic strongholds and invincibly expanded the kingdom of God. And the same is true for us today. There is no power on earth that can stand against the Mighty Spirit of God working through the witnessing church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I recently heard the story of a time in WWII when two believers, an older and younger man, were walking through London and suddenly under attack from German bombers. The young man shrunk back in fear, but his older companion said, "Stay close to me. I am invincible until my work is done."

The very same for the church.

And then John sees what will take place when the work is through. In verses 7-10 we are told of a temporary, apparent, triumph of the Devil over the church.

⁷And 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, ⁸and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

B. Suffering

Several commentators make the point that the Devil's war against the church is a constant reality in these last days – and that is certainly true. But this seems to be pointing to a particular period at the end of time when the church's testimony has been finished. God's elect have been gathered in. And the church will follow the experience of her Lord. Jesus bore witness, was crucified and then raised and glorified.

In the closing days of this world, it seems that the church will face what seems to be overwhelming oppression from the world. And it will seem that the world has won.

John mentions Sodom – representing moral degradation, and Egypt – representing political opposition, and Jerusalem, “where the Lord was crucified” – representing religious opposition. These cities represent the principalities and powers of this dark, evil age in its rebellion against the Living God.

The citizens of the world will rejoice when the witnesses are killed.

- The bodies will be left in the streets. A sign of complete hatred and scorn.
- “Those who dwell on earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents” because the voice of the church has finally been silenced. The world will be convinced it has won! No more talk about a Holy God who will judge the world in His righteousness. No more talk about sin or repentance, or morality, or created norms or rules. We are free to do, live, love and believe as we chose. No God above the god of self. That sounds like gospel to those who dwell on earth. And they rejoice over the silencing of the church.

But their joy will be short-lived. The church will rise again.

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

C. Victorious

The enemies of Christ rejoiced and celebrated when He was in the tomb. But it was a short party. 3 days later He stood up on his feet and great fear fell on those who saw it. And so it will be for His church. We will rise. Not merely back to life – but into glory.

¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them.

There is coming a great day of vindication for the scorned and suffering bride of Christ. The enemies of the church will watch as the church is gathered up into heaven. This is no secret rapture – but a public vindication as Gods’ people are revealed to be who they always were – citizens of heaven, children of God, the bride of the King. And then will come the Day of Judgement.

“Then – the seventh angel blew his trumpet.”

III. The Seventh Trumpet

Once again, we have the song of the victorious church recorded for us.

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

Notice the slight variation. In an earlier song we heard the words, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come." Here the words, "is to come", are deleted. Why? Because He HAS come.

This is the song we will sing when Christ returns. And the theme of that song will be the great and absolute victory of our Lord Jesus over the nations of this world.

"The nations raged, but your wrath came and the time for the dead to be judged."

Destruction will be given to "the destroyers of earth". And rewards given to Christ's "servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both great and small."

What does Jesus want us to know here in Revelation 11?

1. We are eternally secure in Christ. Everyone who has confessed their sin and come to Jesus in sincere faith – trusting in His atoning work – is made a living stone in the temple of God and cannot be lost. You have been named and numbered.
2. He wants us to know that we are part of the great drama of His redemption in the world. We have a mission in this dark world – to testify, to witness to the reality of a Holy God, the reality of a coming day of judgement, and the glory of Jesus – the Savior of sinners and the Reigning King over this world. We carry out that mission with the authority of Christ and in the power of the Spirit of Christ. And we are invincible until that mission is accomplished.
3. We will suffer. We will be hated by the world. The world we live increasingly sees the church as bigoted, hateful, enemies of human flourishing. And they will make us feel the reality of their wrath. They will rejoice when the church is silenced.
4. We will rise, victorious and vindicated on the final day when our Lord returns. We will see Him face to face. We will be caught up in the clouds to dwell with Him forever. He will return.

This morning we have the Table of the Lord. A visible sign and seal - Jesus's witness and testimony to us that He is coming again. There really is a banquet feast in the new heaven and earth – and this table is like the hors d'oeuvres. The meal to remind us that the banquet is almost ready. The meal to sustain us until it's time to enter in. The meal to assure us of all Christ has accomplished, and all He has promised. He is whom He says He is. We are whom He says we are – the invincible, suffering, victorious bride of Christ.