

The Two Courtyards of the Temple
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
May 21, 2023 AM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Revelation 11:1-14

It's Ascension Sunday, and for Ascension Sunday, I thought we would go to the book of Revelation. Revelation is a good Ascension Day book, because Ascension Day is the day we celebrate Jesus ascending into heaven and being seated at the right hand of God; taking his seat in the place of authority and power. Revelation is a book written from the perspective of the King's throne room. It looks at the troubles of the world, not from the perspective of down here in the middle of the struggle; it sees things from the perspective of the Lord of History. From down here our troubles are overwhelming; from the throne room they look a little different. I'm going to do something unusual this morning. When you read Revelation 11 all the way through, all at once, it can sound strange and incomprehensible. So I'm going to read Revelation 11 in sections. I'm going to read each section and explain it as best as I can until the picture emerges fully. By the end hopefully we will see that our ascended Lord has a message for us in these strange words.

First, verses one and two: A temple filled with worshippers, a measurement of that temple and a counting of the worshippers, an inner court of protection. An outer court which is given over to trampling. What do all these images mean? Let's start with the temple. The temple that is being measured is not the literal temple in Jerusalem. By the time Revelation was written that temple didn't exist anymore. It had been flattened by the Romans along with most of the city of Jerusalem. And besides, in the New Testament, when we Christians talk about the temple we are talking about the body of Christ. Jesus and his body, the church, are the new temple of God. The temple used to be a building but now it's a group of people. The whole New Testament talks about the temple that way: I Corinthians 3:16 "Don't you know that you are a temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you?" I Peter 2:5 "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood." Ephesians 2 talks about how the church is a holy temple in the Lord, "A dwelling in which God lives by his spirit. So when John talks about the temple, he's thinking of us, he's thinking of a people, he's thinking of the church, the spiritual house built by the Holy Spirit, with Christ as the cornerstone.

The angel tells John to measure the temple. What's that about? Why is John measuring and counting the people of God? Is this a demographic study? Is John doing a statistical analysis? Does he need to get membership info for the denominational yearbook? No. Here's where you need to know your Old Testament. Listen to what happens in Zechariah 2. In Zechariah 2, God says that Jerusalem will be like a city without walls, and God sends an angel to measure the city and count its inhabitants. Why is the angel sent to measure and count? Because, says the Lord, "I myself will be a wall of fire around it, and I will be its glory within." The measurement is a sign of God's protection. To be measured by God is to be protected by him. Remember Matthew 10:30? "Even the very hairs of your head are numbered, so don't be afraid." Even in modern English we have an idiomatic expression which has the same idea. We say to someone: 'You count for something. You count.' What do we mean by that? We mean to say that you matter. That you are significant and loved. So the measuring is God's protection over his temple, his people.

But only part of the temple is protected. Our inner court is measured, but our outer court of the church isn't measured, it isn't protected. God says, "exclude the outer court! Don't measure it." Instead of being protected, the outer court is trampled by unbelievers for 42 months. You have this image of the inner part of the temple, the holiest part of the temple protected, while the outer part is left wide open to 3 and a half years of trampling.

What's going on here? How does this temple of people have an inner and an outer court? To me, this is an honest description of what life is like in the real world for church people. On the one hand we are protected by God, but on the other hand we are still trampled. The Spirit's presence with us does not stop terrible things from happening to us. We are still trampled by death. We are still trampled by doubt. We are still trampled by temptation. We are still trampled by divisions, but evil is not able to trample us everywhere. On the outside, in the outer courts, we can be pretty weak and vulnerable, but on the inside things are different. No matter how much our outer courts are trampled, at the very heart of the church, at the very heart of each one of us there is a

place that is measured and counted and protected by God. There is a part of us that is vulnerable, and hesitating, and uncertain and fearful; that's our outer courts. But then there is part of us that is strong, eternal, unshakeable. There is nothing in all creation that can lay a finger on that part of us because it is measured by Christ.

It's the same gospel Paul proclaims in Colossians 3. "Set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things, because you died and your life is hidden with God in Christ." There is part of you that lives on this earth with all its trials, tribulations and perplexities. There is part of you, the deep part of you, the real part of you that is already hidden with God in Christ. This life down here is the outer court life and it can get pretty exhausting. You can get trampled here. But the inner courts of our life are measured and redeemed and hidden with God in Christ. Evil can't trample that place. Cancer can't trample that place. Dementia can't trample that place. Divisions can't trample that place. Doubts can't trample that place, because it is held by Jesus and it is our future. So this passage starts out with this wonderful image of grace and hope: a church that is weak and trampled and yet completely protected and safe in God's hands.

So now what about the next verses. Let's read verses 3-8. OK, who are these two witnesses that John talks about? Various possibilities have been advanced. Some have said that they are Paul and Peter the two great leaders of the early church. And that's a reasonable choice. Both these men witnessed to Jesus with great power in the face of danger and opposition. Both ended up killed in Rome, their bodies on display. And so you see how they would fit.

Some have pointed to Zerubbabel and Joshua. That too is a reasonable choice. You need to go back to Zechariah to understand that one. The lampstand and the olive tree references come from Zechariah 4, and there they refer to Zerubbabel and Joshua. These two men were the leaders of Israel after the exile in Babylon. They were leading the effort to rebuild the temple. The rebuilding process was difficult. There were scarce resources. There was resistance from Israel's enemies. But God promised that through Zerubbabel and Joshua the work would get done. He compares them to lampstands and olive trees in the midst of the people. They are the fuel and the fire of God's presence and God will accomplish his purposes through them. So, because of Zechariah 4, many people think that the two witnesses are Joshua and Zerubbabel.

Still others think that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah. And again, there are strong reasons for thinking so. These witnesses will have the power to shut up the sky so it doesn't rain. That sounds like Elijah doesn't it? They will have the power to turn water into blood and bring plagues. That sounds like Moses doesn't it?

So who is it? Who are the real witnesses? Well, the answer is that the real witnesses are all of the above, and ultimately, the real witnesses are you and me. The two witnesses aren't two specific people; their work stands for the work that the people of God have been doing throughout history. The two witnesses are the people of God, at various periods of history, going out and proclaiming the glory of God to the world in the face of opposition. Elijah and Moses, and Joshua and Zerubbabel, and Peter and Paul all did this work. Now this work is ours, and John's vision teaches us that when we witness, we should expect our work to fall into the same pattern as theirs.

How so? Well, what's the common thread that links Joshua and Zerubbabel, Peter and Paul, Moses and Elijah? All of these men witnessed in the face of great opposition. All of them were ants confronting an elephant. Elijah faced King Ahab and his power. Moses faced Pharaoh and his armies. Zerubbabel and Joshua faced the might of Persian power. And Peter and Paul faced the persecution of both Romans and Jews. Revelation 11 teaches us to expect opposition in our work. It prepares us for serious opposition as we do our gospel work. We will feel overwhelmed by the forces against us. Our witness will seem small. But in spite of our fears and despite the odds, we are called to face today's pharaohs and today's Ahabs and speak the truth and live the truth. Revelation 11 tells us that the chief task of the church in the world today is to witness to Jesus' Lordship in a world that doesn't want to acknowledge it.

Notice our uniform for this work? Verse 3 says that we are clothed in sackcloth. Why are we wearing sackcloth? Sackcloth is the clothing of mourning and repentance. So we are wearing the clothes of humility rather than pride. We come to the world proclaiming Jesus is Lord, but we don't do it with condescension, we're not smug, we're not holier than thou, we don't do contempt and ridicule, we are humble. We come not as enlightened saints condescending to help poor sinners. We come wearing the clothes of our own sinfulness, the

clothes of our own repentance. Proclaiming a message about a grace we don't deserve and a hope we didn't earn.

And did you notice the weapons of our work? It's not swords or guns or raw political power. Our weapon is simply the gospel we speak. That's the fire that comes out of our mouth that will eventually overcome God's enemies. We don't need to beat people down by force; the truth is force enough. The truth of the gospel has its own power to bring down rulers from their thrones. In Acts 24:25 Paul, the prisoner, is brought before mighty Felix, the Roman governor. A man in chains standing in front of a commander of the mighty Roman legions. Faced with the great leader, Paul simply spoke about faith in Jesus Christ. Paul stood before Felix and proclaimed the gospel, told him that Jesus was Lord. What was Felix's reaction? Felix was afraid and told Paul to leave. The truth puts fear in the hearts of kings. Fire in the mouth that has the power to overcome enemies.

So, verses 3-6 remind us that our role as Christians in the world is to go out into world and be Christ's witnesses. In humility, in word and in deed, in the face of powerful opposition we proclaim the gospel and the ascended Lord who works out his purposes through us.

Verses 7-13 gives us a sense of what we can expect when we take on this mission. The first few verses aren't so encouraging there are they? Faithful, humble witness does not lead to popularity, and rapid church growth, and invitations to presidential prayer breakfasts. Basically our humble witness meets terrible opposition and we get trampled. To the world it will look like we are defeated, dead, and shamed. And even we will feel like things are dark and hopeless. The evil powers will rejoice in our defeat.

But after a short time the witnesses will be raised up again. Right when things seem darkest, Jesus will return and the dead will be raised and the judgment of the nations will occur and the witnesses' testimony will be proved true. At the last judgment, Jesus will show that he really is Lord.

But not only will our message be proved true, something even more satisfying happens. Something wonderful and graceful comes out of our witness. Look at verse 13. There is a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapses and 7000 are killed. But 90% of the city is spared and so are most of the inhabitants. And what do the survivors do when they realize that they were wrong and Jesus is Lord? They are filled with fear and give glory to God. They repent. They turn to God!

7000 people perishing in judgment sounds terrible I know, but actually this is a tiny number, especially when you compare it to Old Testament predictions of what the last judgment would be like. In Isaiah 6:13 judgment comes and only a tenth remain in the land. Only a tenth survive. In Revelation 11 it's the other way around. Judgment comes and only a tenth perish. In Amos 5:3 the prophet says that when judgment comes a city of a thousand will have only a hundred left, and a city of 100 will have 10; only 10% of the city is spared, but here it is 90%. And in I Kings Elijah bemoans the fact that there are only 7000 who haven't bowed the knee to Baal. A tiny fraction is faithful. But in Revelation 11, only 7000 do not bow the knee, only a tiny fraction is condemned and the majority of people bow their knee and give God glory. We read through Revelation 11 quickly and it sounds like great judgment, but read through it in light of the Old Testament and there is great mercy here. There is grace.

When you read through these words the first time they seem strange and otherworldly, but spend a little time with them and you realize that this is a word for you, for us. Because you all feel trampled. Don't get me wrong, you all look good, you all look very on top of things, but let's just be honest; we all feel trampled.

You, young people, trying to figure yourself out, trying to sort out relationships trying to find your place in the world. You parents trying to manage the insanity of your May schedule, trying to hold it all together. You retirees, sorting out what a meaningful life is supposed to look like. All of us, we get up in the morning determined to get on top of our stuff, and by the middle of the day we often feel like the stuff is on top of us; like we are trampled. In this passage the Ascended Lord says to us. You are measured and protected and totally in my hand. Your work of love and witness seems small, but those little words that you say, those little bits of love that you do, they are fire in this world. And in the end, the fire of that love, the fire of my love, will fill this world. So don't give up. And don't be afraid.

©Rev. Peter Jonker